

Title: *Who Do You Love?*

***The Novel of my Life* (Creative Writing thesis)**

and

***Building Beauty: the Role of Aesthetic
Education in my Teaching and Writing Lives*
(commentary on the Creative Writing thesis)**

**Submitted for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in Creative Writing**

**By Francis Jonathan Gilbert, Goldsmiths,
University of London, August 2015**

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that, except where attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own. To the best of my belief this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any degree, except where due acknowledgement has been made.

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Date:

Francis Gilbert

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Abstract

The first part of the thesis is the autobiographical novel, *Who Do You Love?* It is narrated in the first person by Francis, a fictionalised representation of the author. The novel tells the story of how Francis is sacked as a journalist and then a little later learns that his former-lover, Ellida, has died. These traumatic events prompt Francis to remember his past life with Ellida and induce, in the present day, a crisis in his marriage to Hadley, a school teacher. His failure to get a new job and his grief at Ellida's death result in a crisis of confidence which is exacerbated when Hadley becomes interested in another man. As he discovers more about Ellida's family, his situation grows even more complex and conflicted. Throughout the novel, all the main characters have to address the question posed in its title.

The novel is accompanied by an educational commentary which reflects deeply upon the author's writing processes and the possible application of the lessons learnt in the author's teaching and writing careers. The commentary shows how the author has found it helpful to think of himself primarily as an "aesthetic learner" rather than a writer or teacher. The commentary discusses various issues connected with aesthetic education and then shows what happened when the author put the principles of aesthetic education into practice in his own classroom teaching. Four case studies – the author's own pupils -- are analysed in detail: two eleven-year-olds and two fifteen-year-olds. They were asked to write their own "aesthetic autobiographies" – autobiographical accounts which deploy the devices of fiction – and then were interviewed regarding their thoughts and feelings about this project. The commentary suggests that the case studies reveal some important things about their lives and situations, and shows that there are possible educational and therapeutic benefits in projects such as these.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	3
Abstract.....	4
<i>Who Do You Love?</i> Creative Writing PhD thesis by Francis Gilbert.....	7
Part One	7
Chapter 1: Sacked.....	7
Chapter 2: After the hurricane	10
Chapter 3: Eros.....	23
Chapter 4: The play in the woods.....	26
Chapter 5: Josiah	38
Chapter 6: A Norwegian picnic on Brighton Beach	43
Chapter 7: Hadley.....	50
Chapter 8: The trip to London	54
Part Two.....	61
Chapter 1: You have to tell her.....	61
Chapter 2: North.....	66
Chapter 3: Mercy.....	90
Part Three.....	97
Chapter 1: The Surrealist party.....	97
Chapter 2: The grown-up daughter.....	125
Chapter 3: Baby games.....	136
Chapter 4: Isolde	143
Part Four	151
Chapter 1: Ellida again	151
Chapter 2: One fine summer night	158
Chapter 3: The lady from the sea.....	162
Chapter 4: Ellida’s room	175
<i>Building Beauty: the Role of Aesthetic Education in my Teaching and Writing Lives:</i>	201
The commentary for Francis Gilbert’s PhD in Creative Writing	201
Abstract.....	203
Introduction: research questions and rationale.....	204
Part I: What is “aesthetic education” and why might it be useful for teachers and writers?	206
1.1 Language, narrative and autobiography: towards a theory of aesthetic literacy	206
1.2 Being a teacher and writer	218
1.3 The school matrix	223
1.4 Aesthetic autobiography as a form of escape	227
1.5 From aesthetic appreciation to aesthetic autobiography	229
1.6 What is “aesthetic education”?	235

1.7 Reconfiguring teacher and writer identities within an “aesthetic” context.....	237
Figure 3	240
1.8 From aesthetic learner to aesthetic educator.....	241
1.9 Bringing the threads together: re-visiting teacher and artist identity	244
Figure 4	245
Figure 5	246
Figure 6	251
Part II: What happens when the tenets of “aesthetic education” are put into practice?	253
2.1 My methodological approach: what I did in the classroom and why	253
2.2 The context of the school.....	257
2.3 Exploring multiple identities: George’s fractured selves.....	257
2.4 Ambivalent “feminine” and minority identities: Anita’s story	261
2.5 The alternative self: Eloise’s constructed alter-ego	267
2.5 Emerging “masculinities”: the train enthusiast.....	269
3.1 Conclusions.....	274
Bibliography	277
Appendix:	282
A.1. My writing which inspired students’ responses.....	282
A.2. Interviews	284
A.2a) George interview 28 th May 2012.....	284
A.2b) Anita interview June 2013, a year after they completed the autobiographical project in class	288
A.2c) Eloise interview June 2011	289
A.2d) Albert interview June 2013	295
A.3. Student aesthetic autobiographies.....	300
A.3a) Anita’s aesthetic autobiography	300
A.3b) George’s autobiographies	301
A.3c) Eloise’s aesthetic autobiography	303
A.3d) Albert’s aesthetic autobiography.....	305
A.4. Relevant Field Notes	307

Who Do You Love?

The Novel of my Life

Creative Writing PhD thesis by Francis Gilbert

Part One

Chapter 1: Sacked

So it's Monday morning and I'm just about to get my second coffee of the day when an email comes through from Human Resources, subject line: **Private and Confidential**.

I click it and dart over the words.

It's a long, dense document but I don't have to read it all to see what it is saying.

Fragments stab my mind: "It's with regret...need to have new ideas at *City Beats*...this is not a redundancy...your post will be advertised and a replacement sought..."

I stand up and stagger back from the computer, what used to be *my* computer. Suddenly all the clutter around it – the post-it notes, the unwashed coffee cups, the framed photo of my wife and child, the schedules, the mock-ups of pages – seem poignant.

"Fuck. I've been sacked."

My colleagues stop typing. There's concern in their faces but I can also see they want to check their screens in case they've received a similar notice.

I lurch away. The last thing I want to do is break down in front of them.

Then I'm running, pelting through the office past the screen-heaped desks, the water coolers, the stinky kitchenette -- and the editor's glass office. I glance at it. He's not there. I think for a moment about pushing past his timid PA and going into his room and tearing down all the signed celebrity posters on his wall and the non-ironic notice that reads: "The buck stops here. Belt up."

But I don't trash it. I don't want to waste my time. Bastard.

I push through the exit and run out into Exmouth Market. It's near lunch-time and they're setting up the food stalls. The smell of roasting meat fills the bright air.

I lean back against the wall and phone Hadley.

I know it's a bad time to call -- she's probably teaching a class -- but I have to speak to her. Thank God, she picks up.

"I'm at work," she says.

I can hear the voices of children babbling in the background. Why do I find this reassuring?

"I've been let go. The fucker has fired me," I say. My voice is wavery but I sound calmer than I actually am.

Shocked pause, then: "Oh Francis, oh Francis, I'm sorry..."

A child shouts in the background. Hadley puts her hand over the receiver but, even so, I can hear her sharp American twang admonishing him. When she speaks again, there is quiet. "Look Francis, I'll phone you back as soon as I can...But please darling, don't do anything stupid. Have a walk, clear your head."

A little later, a couple of colleagues phone me. I don't answer. One texts to say that he'll finish off any work I have to do if I want to go home. That feels like a gesture of support. I text back my thanks.

It is April. The cruellest month. The sun glitters on a couple of broken beer bottles lying on the pavement. I look up at the blue sky.

I'll be fine. We'll be fine.

I think about getting a train to New Cross, but decide against it. I'll walk. It will calm me down. *Yes, this could be a positive move.*

Hadley phones. She's already figured out an optimistic plan. She talks in that relentlessly upbeat way of hers about how this will enable me to write the book I've always wanted to write; that it will mean that I can pick up Jack from school; that I can help him with his homework; that I won't be stressed out by being shouted at by that monster. Yes, money will be tight, but we'll be super-efficient; she'll show me how to get all the best deals at the supermarket, how to cook properly, how to do stuff around the house. She'll help me.

Then I think about what Ellida would say: "Fuck it, Francis. That guy can go and fuck his face. Let's just rent the house out and take off. Go travelling. Visit the pyramids, go to Moscow, see the lost kingdoms of the Aztecs, write poetry by the fjords, and take a boat ride around the Arctic!"

I laugh out loud in the street. Yes, Ellida would know what to do.

I get to New Cross just in time to pick up Jack from his primary school. My legs feel like jelly and my shirt is sticking to my back. When I say we could do something, he expresses disappointment that he's not going with his child-minder, Wendy. She has a son in his class and they play *FIFA* on the X-box together.

"Isn't it nice to see your Dad?" I say.

He looks at me like I've gone mad.

“What’s the matter with you, Dad? You look weird,” he says.

His big eyes examine me.

“I...I’m fine...Look, you go and play X-box,” I say. I smile at Wendy, pretending everything is cool.

Hadley cancels her department meeting and comes home. We sit in the front room of our small, terraced house and listen to the traffic noises as we nurse cups of tea. Hadley puts her cup down, and squeezes my hand.

“It’s the best thing, you know. That editor really sucked. He was a bully, Francis, and you were his whipping boy.”

“Yes, but it’s been my job for years... Now I’m forty five and I’ll never get a job like that again. No one’s hiring.”

Hadley pulls a strand of dark hair back over her ear.

“But you’re a good writer. You can write articles and reviews and you could pitch some TV and radio ideas as well.”

“Oh come on, you know people are paying peanuts for that kind of stuff now.”

Her sharp eyes drill into me. “Francis, we need you to be happy. We’ll manage. I’ve been thinking that we really don’t need a new car. We could sell the Nissan. It really is throwing money down the drain. I can easily go to work by bike or on the bus.”

Hadley springs up from the sofa. Normally, she’s tired when she gets home from school. “What we need to do is work out our out-goings and then see just how much money we need to make to keep everything afloat. But we’re going to be fine, totally fine.”

Chapter 2: After the hurricane

“You need to hold the knife like this...”

George’s big hands enfolded mine as he showed me the right grip on the handle. He let go as I chopped the onions.

I couldn’t cook. George never mocked me for this, never even raised it as a topic of conversation. Instead, he showed me how to make pasta, boil rice, knock up a decent tomato sauce and cut, chop, slice and sliver.

My eyes were watering when the lightning struck. George’s blond head peered at the dark sky hanging over Brighton.

“A storm’s coming,” he said.

It was one in the morning by the time we were eating our spaghetti in front of the flickering black and white TV; it wasn’t so unusual for us to be eating then. This was our student schedule.

The storm was so strong that the whole of our basement flat was shaking. The windows trembled in their rotten frames.

“Fuck, this feels serious,” George said. He sucked up a strand of pasta. And stood up. “These windows could shatter. Do you think we should hold them?”

Luke burped. “The BBC weatherman said there was no hurricane.”

“Yes, but a woman phoned in to say that there was.”

“I go with the weatherman any day, not some lady.”

“I think the woman was right: these windows are gonna break!”

“Just enjoy Francis’s excellent pasta!” Luke said, gesturing for George to sit down. “Well done, Francis! It really feels you’ve broken through your bourgeois patriarchal conditioning and adopted a new identity – as a cook!”

“Never mind his fucking patriarchal conditioning, look at these fucking windows! I’m calling the landlady!”

Just as George reached for the phone to call our friendly landlady -- who was always coming round for cups of tea but never fixing anything -- the TV flickered to a halt and the lights went out.

“Oh fuck, that’s really done it. We don’t even have a torch,” George said.

“I’ve got plenty of matches,” Luke said.

He struck a few and held them up comically to our faces. I watched George’s silhouette in the hallway, framed by the wobbly windows, drenched in rain. Outside the wind roared, a freight train, an earthquake; like nothing any of us had ever heard. But the other side of the glass was black: we peered out at the darkness, but couldn’t see anything at all.

“This is serious,” George said. As if on cue, the glass in the conservatory fell out of its frames, shattering in the garden. The shards glittered as the lightning flared.

“This is seriously cool!” Luke said.

“Oh shut up. We need to be careful. This whole flat could collapse on us,” George said. “It’s riddled with damp.”

“Don’t be stupid. Let’s have a spliff and watch the storm. I scored on campus today.”

This news soothed George.

I hadn’t been planning to smoke puff that evening – I had an essay to write -- but the power-cut meant that the decision was made for me. We spent most of the night huddled on Luke’s bed, smoking and talking about familiar topics: the philosophy student – Stuart, he was called, with the row of gold hoops up the side of one ear and the Clash t-shirt he never changed; whether we ought to be more attracted to women who didn’t shave under their arms, but really, we weren’t. We never said it out loud, *when will we get laid?* But it was never not there.

The next day I discovered the trees at the back of the campus had been blown over. They looked like dead bodies with their limbs entwined. I skirted around them and climbed up the hill. Eventually, I found a patch of woodland that was more or less intact; it was a good ten-minute walk from the campus; the only area that had been damaged was a clearing where a few trees had fallen. It was uncanny but they had collapsed in such a way as to suggest a small theatre: one floored tree marked the place where an audience would sit, and another trunk would make a fabulous backdrop for a stage. I began to create some scenarios, playing the different roles: twisting my body this way and that as I became a tree spirit being savaged by the wind; whooshing forward as I transformed into an ogre who was the hurricane. Although the initial impulse to do this was intellectual – I’d been reading about Artaud’s theories of the Theatre of the Absurd – I found that I enjoyed being a child again and feeling the freedom to run around and imagine that I was no longer human.

Later that evening, as we were getting through our worthy bowls of lentil daal and rice, I raised a fork and said: “I’ve got an idea.”

“What?” George leaned back on his futon – no capitalist dining table for us – and cocked an eyebrow, ready for judgment.

“It’s crazy, but I think we should put on a play that symbolizes this hurricane.”

“Go on,” George said.

“We should put on a piece of surrealist Artaudian drama that symbolises the hurricane as a giant, and has tamed nature represented as a painted doll,” I said, and went on to explain my allegorical mime-play; my pile of pulses grew cold as I waved my arms around to convey what I was sure was a compelling vision.

Both Luke and George stared at me. There was silence as my flat-mates processed my scenario. Luke ate more daal. George toyed with his rice.

“I like it,” George said slowly. “The giant is patriarchal capitalism fucking the earth, which is like the painted doll – fake and false -- until she discovers her tree spirit being.”

“God, why do you have to pin it down like that? It’s a weird play – but it sounds cool,” Luke said.

“No, I’m right. The giant is dickhead capitalism fucking the earth mother up the arse,” George said.

“I’ll be your tree-spirit, Francis! I can just see it,” Luke said. “It will be cool if we put this on.”

“I’ll be the ogre. Only someone like me will be able to show the world the full horror of this fucking dickhead capitalistic patriarchal system we’re living in,” George said.

“All we have to do now is find a painted doll...” I said.

“What about Lucy?” Luke said.

George snorted. “So that’s why you want to be in it!”

Luke coloured. “The thought never occurred to me...But I’ll go and ask her if you like.”

George and I laughed. Even though the world had collapsed around us, we had found redemption: Luke was going to get a girlfriend, George was going to fuck capitalism up the arse, and I was going to direct a great play.

I worked hard at the play all over Christmas. I was back in South Woodford with my mother and stepfather; my half-sister Deborah, who was seven years old, brought me cups of coffee on a tray and asked whether I was going to be a great writer. She was an avid reader and wanted me to read the play to her. I avoided doing this but instead, after a day of working on the script, I read her *The Wind in the Willows*. She insisted that I put her to bed and whispered in the darkness of her room that she missed me: “No one reads me stories anymore -- except for you!”

In the evenings, at supper, my mother might ask my stepfather to pass the salt; my stepfather would recount an anecdote about Mrs Thatcher he’d read in *The Daily Telegraph*. That was pretty much the extent of the conversation in the house. I was glad I had a play to write. My brother came home from Cambridge for a day. We didn’t talk about much either.

To my surprise and delight, my proposal to stage the drama on the summer solstice at midnight was warmly received by the student committee of the Drama Society. There was only one girl on the board who was sniffy about the idea of the painted doll, but was talked around by everyone else. So I was given some money to produce it and put in touch with a student composer who might write the accompanying music.

It was a longish cycle ride to Stefan Arnholm’s rooms in a tall terraced house in Hove; once the house had clearly been quite grand, but now the plaster was peeling and the paint

was weathered. And Stefan Arnholm was weathered too – or at least he seemed so to me. He was thirty – thirty! He had a hooked nose and a bushy moustache. His room was full of magical gadgets: an electronic keyboard and an Atari computer which transformed his tapping on the keyboard into notes on a stave on the computer screen. Most remarkable of all, he was contemptuous of his own technology -- it was primitive, according to him.

With a wry smile, he informed me he was a Catalan-Norwegian; his mother was from Barcelona and his father from Norway. Running his hands through his thick hair, he said: “This is what you must understand about me. I have a Catalan spirit and a Norwegian mind. My father worked in the oil fields in the North Sea. He was an exploiter, a polluter, a mechanistic mind. I have inherited this mind-set from him. But I don’t exploit the earth, I exploit sound.”

But what awed me more than his exotic childhood was that he said he “believed in” my mime play. “Yes, you have written a modern fable, a parable for our times,” he said, playing some notes on his keyboard while he spoke. “You have shown how we are working so hard to destroy our beautiful nature. Personally, I have a vision of the bassoon being important in the music -- particularly where the tree spirits are concerned!”

“The bassoon? That’s a deep instrument, isn’t it? Wouldn’t a flute be better?” I asked.

“Oh, the flute is so clichéd and feminine! The bassoon is an ancient instrument, like the didgeridoo, pure wood and earth, unpredictable, melodic, wonderful... I envision the bassoon playing with a drum and a clarinet, giving the whole thing a very earthy atmosphere.”

There was some evidence of a woman living in the room: lipstick and make-up in the bathroom, posters of Aha and The Smiths on the wall, a book of love poems by the bedside, a skirt lying draped over the old sofa. He saw me glancing at the skirt.

“My wife, the silly fool, has taken off! Can you believe it? I got her a place by the sea, and what does she do? Go inland!”

“She did?”

“Yes, she’s gone and rented a room on campus! Well, she won’t last long there. She’ll be back! She and I, you see, are creatures of the sea. We’re both from seaside towns, me from Barcelona, and she’s from Bergen. It is, you know, the most nautical of all Norwegian towns.”

We strolled out onto the seafront and he talked about his wife leaving him. “I came to Brighton because of her. It was she who insisted that I studied music here. I had a perfectly good job in Bergen. We had come to study electronic music with a famous classical composer who was a Music Professor at the university. But my wife is very temperamental, prone to fits of depression. Quite unbalanced, really. She left without having anywhere to go or anything to do. She’s not even a student here.”

As he moaned about her by the ruined pier, its wrecked frame silhouetted against the cloudy morning sky, a plan evolved in his head. “Yes, Francis, my friend, I think we should involve Ellida with this project. This would be good for us. You must go and ask her. She would be perfect. Guess what instrument she plays...”

“The bassoon?”

Arnholm gave me a big hug. “I knew you’d understand.”

A few days later, armed with the address Arnholm had given me, I hopped on my mountain bike -- which I had christened Herzog in honour of the crazy but intrepid German film director -- and cycled to the back of the university campus. It was a dreary day, overcast clouds, warmish and muggy. Park Village always depressed me: its Lego-like blocks of flats were incongruous on the fine stretch of hillside.

I knocked on a plain wooden door in a dingy hallway. A woman, cradling a baby in her arms, answered: she was dressed in bright, floral wrap-around dress and wore some impressive head-gear; she didn’t look like your average student, more like an African matriarch. The baby cooed as the woman asked who I was. Somewhat startled, I blurted out: “Are you Ellida?”

“What’s it to you?” the woman said. The baby said: “Mama, door, mama, door”.

“It’s just that I was supposed to see her. Her husband sent me...”

“Her husband sent you, did he? Oh, so you’re Mr Arnholm’s little boy, are you? The lady you wish to harass is not here!”

She shooed me away with a flick of her wrists, tutting under her breath.

“I came to talk to her about my play,” I said.

“So you’re not his little boy. Yes, perhaps I can see that... But you’d better go now.”

Just then, from the depths of the flat, a faint voice said, “No, don’t send him away. It’s right that I see him.”

The woman released the door. She didn’t make much room for me. The baby tugged on my pony-tail.

“Ooow!” I said.

Two green eyes peeked out in the gloom.

“Come in here,” she said. I walked into a baby’s room: there was a mobile with plastic animals hanging from the ceiling, a cot, and a few soft toys. To the side of the cot was a camp bed, an opened rucksack and a few pillows stacked against the wall. The girl was slumped down on the pillows, fiddling with the cellophane of an unopened packet of cigarettes. The giraffe-patterned curtains were drawn, so it was still difficult to get a look at her, but I could see she was young, much younger than Arnholm. She wore slippers and a long T-shirt that she pulled over her knees. In that light, everything about her seemed soft and small: a round

nose, round cheeks, round chin, round green eyes. Her hair was light brown, fairish, but not blonde – as it would later become. It reached to her shoulders and was lank and unkempt.

“You must not think badly of Mercy. She’s like that. But she is a very good person,” the girl said.

I hovered by the cot, looking down at the contours of the sad face. There was nowhere to sit, except next to the girl on the floor.

“The baby certainly took a liking to my hair,” I said.

“Oh Kem, yes, he likes grabbing things.”

“Look, I’m not sure I should be here, it’s just that your husband said to ask you if you would help with the music he’s doing for my play.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Your name is Ellida, am I correct?”

“You could say it that way but most people call me *El-leader*. That’s the Norwegian way of pronouncing it.”

Ellida tapped her unopened packet of cigarettes against the wall.

“I’ll just tell him you’re not interested,” I said.

I made for the door. Before I could reach it Ellida said in a Scandinavian accent, “Is *transformasjon* possible?”

“Transformation?”

“Yes,” she said, turning her head my way. “In my country, in the very top of the north, there are people, my people really, the Sami, who believe *transformasjon* is possible. They were sorcerers and they believed they could change form. Do you think that’s possible? Or is it just a fairytale? A stupid fairytale no one believes in anymore.”

“What form do you want to take?”

“Someone who can fly, see things from a great height, swoop down and pluck up from the ground what I want and then fly away again.”

I had been reading fairytales from Northern Europe and was interested in the section on ‘Shamanism’ in Joseph Campbell’s *Primitive Mythology*, where the author makes links between fairytales and the beliefs of the “witch-doctors” of the icy tundra.

“The Sami’s beliefs aren’t fairytales. They are living mythology,” I said.

Ellida sat up. “You know of the Sami?”

“Sure. They are a shamanistic culture living on the very tip of Scandinavia, and like all shamanic cultures they believe that sorcerers can shape-shift.”

“So is your play about this?”

“Sort of.”

She got to her feet and pulled down her T-shirt. “I’m sorry, you must think me disgusting for being like this. I will read your play. Give me a copy and I will look at it.”

I handed her the manuscript, which was crumpled from being folded in my pocket. She showed me out.

Back at the flat, I found Luke's door open. Even though it was the late afternoon, he was sitting on his futon in his pajamas, playing with this contraption he'd rigged up called a "Lucid Dream Generator". He'd been reading about a Beat poet-cum-artist called Bryon Gyson who had been a friend of William Burroughs and who claimed that if you created swirling patterns of light on the ceiling using an old record player and some bits of tissue paper you'd have more lucid dreams.

"It didn't work!" he said from behind a paperback. "I was asleep all afternoon and it didn't work!"

"Well, I met Arnholm's wife this afternoon," I said.

"What was she like?"

"She's called Ellida and she's like a vampire fairy."

Luke chuckled. I could tell he was waiting for another one of my stories – about my frozen-stiff mother, my Thatcher-obsessed stepdad, my gloomy brother.

"Maybe, I should find another composer for this project," I said.

"No, don't do that. Just don't get involved with his wife, that's all." He shrugged.

"And this is coming from the man who wants to get to know the leading lady!"

"Have you asked Lucy if she'll do it yet?" he said.

"I thought you were going to ask her."

"It'll look desperate if I ask her..."

"So you've been sitting on your arse all day doing this stupid Lucid Dream Generator."

"I thought I could have a lucid dream about Lucy. If you get the LDG right then you can actually have dreams which are just as real as reality – whatever that is."

"You can't ask her in your dreams! Are you going to ask her or not?"

"Can't you?"

"So I'm your pimp now, am I?"

Luke put his paperback down and snuggled down on the bed.

"Could you be? That would be great..."

As I cycled off to Lucy's house – she shared it with some friends of mine in Pelham Square near the Lanes – I reflected that I was never normally this decisive. But this play had made me actually do stuff.

Lucy was in her room, practising dance moves in her black leotard. Her eyes glinted at me as I entered. It was the opposite of Luke's living space: bare floorboards, a neatly tucked-in bed, a few books on the shelves, a tidy desk. No hint of mess.

I told her about my play. I didn't mention the rape. She said: "That would be very interesting, yes."

“You’ll be playing opposite my flat mate Luke, who is the tree spirit.”

“Ah...I don’t think I know him.”

“He knows you...He’s good, but doesn’t get out much. Been keeping a low profile.”

“An undiscovered talent?” Lucy said, smiling.

“Yes, something like that.”

Luke was going to owe me forever for this.

The day after seeing Ellida, I sailed on Herzog back down to Hove. The morning was still fresh with tiny wisps of mist rising off the placid sea.

Arnholm was humming to himself when he opened the door. I sat on his old sofa, scrutinizing him as he tinkered on his keyboard and Atari. He’d woven a musical poem which, he said, would work with the mime: a mixture of bassoon, drums and a clarinet. Every instrument had a role: the drums represented the tree spirits, the clarinet was the painted doll and the bassoon was the ogre.

“This is great. I’ve got a portable tape player which means we can even rehearse in the woods!” I said.

“Yes. We must all practise in the woods. That is imperative. We must all connect with the essences of nature,” he said, adding: “So, Francis, did you see my wife?”

“Yes.”

“Did she say she would help?”

“She said she would look at the script. I mean, it’s not as though she’s needed now anyway; we can just play the tape.”

Arnholm seized me by the arm: “You think we can play a tape in the woods at midnight on the summer solstice? How do you expect us to resonate with the essences of nature? This play requires live music! Who do you think I wrote the bassoon part for? I shall play the drums, and my wife shall play the bassoon. Ellida is a wonderful bassoon player. And it is a truly wonderful instrument. She and I will complement each other perfectly. You must go and tell her.”

Arnholm let go of me and I backed away from him.

“OK, I’ll tell her that. But we do have the tape as a fallback if she can’t do it.”

Although I could see his point about playing live music, I also was thinking practically: convening all the musicians and actors for rehearsals would be a nightmare. And besides, no one would notice a tape playing in the darkness.

Arnholm peered down at me from the stairs. “You will go and see her, and she will agree. That will happen.”

“Yes, of course.”

Over the coming weeks, I cajoled everyone else connected with the play to do some work.

When the weather was warmer, I took my actors up to the Sussex Downs and rehearsed with the tape: the music really worked its magic there. Suddenly, scepticism was replaced with belief, feet-dragging with enthusiasm, time-watching with extended rehearsals. During the early part of the summer term, we'd all assemble after lectures in the late afternoon and perform in the shade of the clearing, drinking beer and smoking, laughing and joking, and feeling that we were going to put on a great show.

We were lucky that Luke proved talented at making costumes. He was keen to impress Lucy; he might not have got off with her yet but I noticed she laughed at his self-deprecating jokes. He made a tasseled, woody outfit for the tree-spirit, and devised a porcelain-looking costume for Lucy's painted doll. Other props, such as the big suitcase and the ogre's suit, weren't difficult to sort out: a few trips to some charity shops came up with the goods.

Then Luke had an idea. "Hey, do you know what would make this play amazing?"

"What?"

"Truly unforgettable."

"What?"

"A cock."

"A what?"

"A cock, a willy, a dick, a big fat penis."

"What are you talking about?"

Luke's eyes glowed with his vision. "I think the giant should wear an enormous penis hat."

"No! I am not wearing a penis on my head!" George said.

Luke smirked. "But George, this is what the giant is: a big knob-end. What better way of representing this than having him wear a penis on his head!"

"No, no, no! I am not doing that!"

I kind of liked the idea, even if I did have reservations. Later on, away from George, Luke dug out a piece of paper hidden under the books, mouldy coffee cups and wires lying beside his bed, sketching out the plan quickly. "We'll make it with pink foam and use chicken wire or something to prop it all up."

"Cool."

The next day, he and I went shopping in Brighton and got the materials. That evening, Luke made the beginnings of what was to become the penis hat by wrapping some pink foam around a circular tube of chicken wire. We knew it would take some persuading for George to wear the hat but we were confident enough that we would win him around with some bribes of extra dope. Until then, we hid the hat out of his view in the mess of Luke's wardrobe.

Shortly after Luke's inspiration about the penis hat, I bumped into Mercy on campus pushing her baby in a buggy.

"Little boy! Come here now! Little boy!"

"I'm not a little boy!"

Mercy laughed and, linking her arm into mine and pushing the buggy at the same time, explained: "Of course, you're not! You remind me of an innocent that's all."

"An innocent?"

"You still have a child's imagination, a child's energy, I can see that behind your long hair and your ragged clothes."

We were past the Refectory and heading into the depths of Park Village. The rays of the sun flooded from over the top of the hill, outlining the mass of trees on the crest.

"Ellida is interested in your play. She wants to talk to you."

This buoyed my spirits. An attractive woman was interested in my writing!

I helped Mercy carry the buggy up the stairs to the second floor of the apartment block, following her into the flat. Ellida was sitting by the window in the kitchen. She'd washed her hair and tied it up in a bun on her head. She turned around when we entered. She was wearing a dark green smock of unusual design: it was more like an extended scarf which criss-crossed her chest. The smock contrasted with her flared navy-blue pantaloons and Doctor Marten shoes.

"Ellida, your little boy has come back to talk to you about the play!"

Ellida blushed, putting her hand to her face. "Oh Mercy, he is no little boy."

"I'm glad you liked the play," I said, grinning.

"Did Mercy say that?"

"I told him you were interested in it," Mercy said.

I looked at Mercy and then at Ellida.

"Yes, that's right," she said. "I don't like your play at all, but it is interesting."

That wiped the smile off my face. Mercy shrugged and switched on the kettle.

"What's wrong with it?" I asked.

"It's all wrong. You have *transformasjons* in it, but they are all wrong. There has to be more tragedy and love and death. The painted doll should transform into the tree spirit, yes, that's right, but she has to be killed. She has to die. That's the only thing that makes sense."

"I've written a midsummer mime play, I don't want everyone slashing their wrists at the end."

Mercy shot me an evil look. "I have some very nice chamomile tea," she said.

"I fear there is no love in your play," Ellida said. "I never feel the connection of love between the two tree spirits."

"There's plenty of love! They dance together!"

“Your play needs death to make it whole,” Ellida said.

“I think she’s talking good sense,” Mercy said.

“Have you read the play?” I asked.

“No, but she’s good.”

Ellida walked to the window, pulling a packet of cigarettes from her trousers. Mercy said: “Why don’t you and Francis go for a walk and discuss the play some more? I’ve got some paper cups -- you could have your tea in them.”

Ellida lit up as soon as we left the apartment block. I suggested that perhaps we could inspect the area where the play was going to be performed. We reached the top of the campus and climbed off a stile and into the woods, weaving slowly in between uprooted trunks. Our argument about whether the play should have a happy or tragic ending continued. The more I considered Ellida’s alternative ending, the more ridiculous it seemed.

“Look, I’m not changing it, and that’s that,” I said, shaking my paper cup at her.

“But death is the truth. That’s the only true ending.”

We’d reached the clearing where the play was to be performed. Ellida stubbed out her cigarette.

“I would like to study literature, but it’s impossible,” Ellida said. “My English isn’t good enough.”

“Your English is amazing,” I said.

“You think so?”

She was silent as she wandered around the grove, feeling the bark with the tips of her fingers. I wondered what her caresses would feel like on my skin.

“You can leave me now,” she said eventually.

“What?”

“I want to be left alone.”

“So will you play the bassoon for the performance? Your husband composed the music with you in mind.”

“No, I won’t do that but if you’re going to perform the play at midnight, you’ll need some light then, won’t you?”

“I suppose so.”

“I’ll bring the light to your play. I’ll make some lanterns.”

That evening the seafront was full of promenaders as I pedalled Herzog along the concrete path that ran parallel to the beach. Arnholm was at his computer, and scarcely noticed me enter. He told me he was working on another project, a composition called *Flight*.

He stopped tapping when I said I’d seen Ellida.

“Yes, and --?”

“She’s going to make lanterns for the show.”

“Lanterns?” he sneered. “What about the music?”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

He thumped the desk beside his computer.

“Well, I’m going to have to withdraw the music... There’s no question about that. It will have to be live -- or nothing at all. That’s the way it is, I’m afraid. You’ll have to give me back the tape.”

He held out his hand, its long fingernails pointing at me. I flinched.

“She might play. I definitely think she might.”

“She will bloody have to! That’s the whole point.”

I left his flat feeling foolish for believing that he had genuinely been interested in the play, and embarrassed by my thoughts of his wife stroking me. I didn’t fancy trying to convince her that she should play the bassoon. Still, it did give me an excuse to see her again...

When I visited her a few days later, I found her hard at work in the flat making the lanterns. She had bought safety candles, coloured tissue paper, commandeered cardboard boxes and wire coat hangers. Mercy wasn’t around and this made the atmosphere more relaxed.

She twisted the wire of the coat hangers into lantern shapes as I explained that Arnholm really wanted her to play bassoon, and that this was his condition for providing the music. She stopped twisting the wire and reached for her cigarettes.

“You’ve never told me why you wrote the play,” she said. “Why are you so driven to put it on?”

I didn’t know what to say. People had read it and said it would be a cool project to do. Possible motivations: it would make me look cool and hip and it was the ultimate agit-prop, Freudian eco-drama. But no, it was deeper than that. I genuinely felt that the woods were “calling me” to perform a play.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Why does anyone write anything?”

“It’s violent and sexual what you’ve written,” Ellida said. “Why?”

I fiddled with the laces of my scuffed desert boots. Ellida continued: “At the heart of the play is a rape. The ogre rapes the doll and then she transforms into a tree spirit.”

I stopped playing with my shoe-laces and said: “There isn’t a rape – not as I’ve written it.”

“She’s married to an ogre. How does he get his satisfaction? Does she willingly give herself to him?”

Her green eyes punctured me.

“I don’t know.”

“I think it has to be. That would make it much more dramatic. I think you need rape and death in your play.”

“If I do that, will you play the bassoon?”

She twisted the coat hanger wire with some pliers as she said: “Yes, I will play for rape and death. Definitely.”

Chapter 3: Eros

Ellida is dead.

It's still weird to think she's not here, there, anywhere.

It's Saturday morning and I am sitting on the sofa, looking on my laptop at all the jobs I haven't got a hope in hell of getting, when an email pings into my in-tray. It has been forwarded from my now defunct work address.

From: m.ademola@sussexuni.ac.uk
To: f.gilbert@citybeats.co.uk
Subject: from an old friend

Hi Francis, it's Mercy!

How are you? I hope all is well and this email gets to you. I haven't spoken to you in a while, but I assume you're still working at *City Beats* and you'll read this.

Sad news I'm afraid, Ellida died a few months ago from skin cancer. I'm not sure if you knew so I thought I would tell you. Maybe we could have a chat about it sometime. It's all been very upsetting, but I'd prefer to talk on the phone or in person, so why don't you call me?

I blink. Blink again. Re-read the words: "Sad news..."

I stand up, shock pulsing through me. Then I bend double, feeling dizzy.

Later on, I'm in the kitchen watching Hadley make pancakes. It's a Saturday morning ritual; I flick through the *Guardian* as she makes brunch. When I was working, the atmosphere was always relaxed but since I've lost my job it's become tense because Hadley tries to involve me with the cooking. She has been constantly telling me to help around the house by saying: "You'll feel much better about yourself if you're making a contribution!"

I watch her pouring the coffee beans into the top of the grinder. Just as she starts the processing, I spit it out: "Got a bit of a shock. Ellida died."

She takes her palm off the top of the grinder, waiting for the blades to whirr to a stop, and says: "What?"

"Ellida died."

Surprise undulates through her. For the briefest of seconds, she seems lopsided. I can see thoughts scamper through her mind. Then she composes herself. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

But it's obvious she isn't sorry at all.

I hang my head as she revs up the coffee blender again and switches on the kettle. The rain is pattering against the patio doors. Scooping the sweet smelling coffee powder into the filter paper with a plastic blue spoon, Hadley asks: "So how did she die?"

There's more than a note of victory in her voice.

“Skin cancer.”

“How did you find out?”

Her eyes laser on me. I watch the scalding water leak through the coffee and into the pot.
“I got an email out of the blue from Mercy.”

“Mercy? Who is she?”

“She was a friend of Ellida’s from Sussex,” I say in a voice which implies that she should know who Mercy is -- although I’m perfectly aware she’s never heard of her. It’s a trick I’ve learnt from Hadley herself: make out that you’ve told someone something a thousand times and put the ignorant on the back foot.

“Where did she die?”

“I don’t know. I need to call Mercy.”

Hadley hands me a cup of steaming coffee. I sip the drink.

“I was thinking that perhaps you could pick Jack up from the music school,” I say.

Hadley looks at me sympathetically and says of course she will. This means I’m free this morning.

A few days after I got sacked, encouraged by Hadley who wants me to lose weight and cut down on travel expenses, I buy a cheap bike and start cycling again. I haven’t cycled since I was a student. The first ride from Halfords down Kingsland Road is completely terrifying but then I begin to enjoy myself. I really like the sensation of gliding you get on a bike and find it gives me room to think. I need that feeling of liberty on this lugubrious morning. I pedal down Old Street; my head is full of Ellida. I’m hardly bothered where I’m going, I just keep moving, the traffic pouring by my right shoulder. I remember a blue day from years ago: the clackety train, Aquavit and dried fish, sitting on Ellida’s lap, her fresh cheeks and her exuberance.

A green light. I sail past Cambridge Circus and down to Piccadilly where Eros stands above his basin; groups of students are standing by the basin, shouting and posing, having their photos taken.

I look up at the lithe boy with his bow. His legs are taut and outstretched, his wings overarching and buoyant, and his bow has released its arrow. The sight of the statue is enough to trigger her words: “Is *transformasjon* possible?”

“*Transformasjon*, Ellida? Is that what’s happened to you?” I ask the statue.

“Yes,” she says, staring at me with her big green eyes. “In my country, in the very top of the north, there are people, my people really, the Sami, who believe *transformasjon* is possible. They were sorcerers and they believed they could change form. Do you think that’s possible? Or is it just a fairytale?”

Later that afternoon, I can't stop myself. I should be applying for jobs, but I find that I'm surfing the net for any sign of Ellida: Googling her name, trawling FaceBook and Twitter. There's nothing new to be found.

Using our folding ladder, I climb into the attic, carrying a torch in my pocket. Braving the fibre-glass lagging and dodgy joists, I retrieve all my diaries and letters from the era of Ellida. Sitting on a roof beam, I shine the torch onto the mildewed pages, searching for her again.

Chapter 4: The play in the woods

George shook me awake on the morning of the summer solstice. He was unshaven and unhappy.

“I can’t do it,” he said.

“What?”

“Wear the penis hat.”

I tumbled out of bed and snatched on my clothes. “George, it will make the play. And, as we talked about, Luke and I will pay for the dope for the next two months.”

“Three months,” he said.

“OK, three months!”

With that, he disappeared. I felt anxious: we didn’t even have a proper helmet for the penis hat; the trunk of it looked good but how would the tip turn out? I made Luke a cup of tea and roused him out of bed. Then, with a roll-up hanging out of his mouth, he applied his pliers to the chicken wire and twisted it to fit inside the gigantic pink foam penis he’d made. After that, he cut some more bits of foam and then folded them together so expertly that it looked like the head of a penis. He and I laughed that he’d made a magnificent helmet!

George was astonished by its size. He tried it on and seemed happy, parading up and down the flat like a predatory ogre. Unfortunately, the hat fell off his head when he did anything other than walk at a snail’s pace. To solve this, Luke found an old sheet, ripped it up, and attached it to the chicken wire supporting the bottom of the penis and then looped the sheet underneath George’s chin. The hat held fast but George complained that the chicken wire dug into his head. We had to promise him another month’s supply of dope.

“And it’s all mine?” he said. “I can smoke it all if I want to?”

“OK.”

After we made the hat more comfortable for George, we agreed I would be its custodian until the performance. George felt it would be bad luck if he had to look after it.

So I strapped the huge penis hat onto my back and cycled on Herzog up the hill, past net-curtained terraced houses and clumpy council estates, and into the modernist precincts of the campus. I could feel people staring as I sped by.

It was a glorious day; the sunlight poured over the Sussex Downs and the university shone in its snug nook. I met Arnholm at the Refectory. He was laden with musical instruments and paraphernalia: his portable stereo, lots of wires, a clarinet and some drums. Unlike everyone else on campus, who had pointed and laughed at the sight of the penis hat, Arnholm didn’t notice it. He explained that he had been practising the music in the clearing to check the acoustics. It had been difficult carrying all the instruments up to the wood, but it had been worth it because he now knew that the music would work perfectly there.

I was pleased he was so keen, but was even happier when he handed me a wodge of posters he'd made. Using his new-fangled printer, he'd produced a fantastic advertisement, making it look like the kind of thing a circus troupe would pin to trees.

"Wow! This is brilliant!" I said.

Arnholm replied by saying he wanted to go to Ellida's place.

"Are you certain that's good idea?" I said.

He grimaced. "This girl needs a good talking to."

His snare drum rattled as he hurried along the concrete path. Most of the time he was a calm and deliberate man, but he was uncontrolled when he saw her leaving Mercy's flat.

"Ellida!" he shouted, and yelled some Norwegian phrases.

She turned around, putting her hands on her hips. She was wearing a denim skirt, black leggings, and striped T-shirt: her hair was tied back in a pony-tail. She was different from before: less hippyish, more funky. She smiled when she saw the hat.

"Oh my oh my! What a lovely hat!" she said. "Can I try it on?"

I clapped as she pranced around with it on her head. "Oh God, it is heavy, isn't it? It's quite a weight having a penis, isn't it?"

"Enough of this," Arnholm said. "Are you going to play tonight?"

Ellida handed me back the hat. Her humour evaporated.

"You know I never play the bassoon unless I really know the music well," she said in English.

Arnholm sneered. "It isn't very difficult. You could sight-read it with no problems."

Ellida shrugged. "It's not really my thing -- but I'll do it for Francis. Oh and the lanterns are ready. You will need them in the dark."

"Thanks," I said. "Do you think you could help me hang them? Maybe at ten thirty?"

"OK," Ellida said, smiling faintly.

"It is irritating that you haven't practiced the music some more!" Arnholm said.

Then he gabbed at her furiously in Norwegian, but she replied in English: "This is the last night I am playing your music. After that, I'm studying literature here."

Arnholm swiped the air with his hand.

"Oh, you silly girl!" he said.

"I've had enough of being a slave to your music and all the dead great men you love!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Arnholm said, his moustache wobbling.

"I've changed."

Arnholm stalked away. As I hurried after him, carrying the penis hat, I glanced back at Ellida. Although I felt torn about it, I was pleased that she had rejected him. When I caught up with him there were tears in his eyes. By the time we reached the library his moustache was wet, and when we passed the Students' Union building, his chin was dripping. At the ticket

barrier, I said: “Why are we taking these drums back all the way to Brighton when we will need them tonight?”

Arnholm didn’t reply, but handed me the drums. I returned to Ellida’s flat, hoping to drop them off there. As I walked through the campus, I met Luke and George. They were going to have a run-through in the woods. To my relief, George took the penis hat off me. It had been quite embarrassing carrying it around on campus. George put it on his head and ran off laughing. I gave Luke a look. “He took some shrooms,” Luke said, shrugging his shoulders.

“What the fuck? Will he be able to act?”

“He’ll be fine.”

“You’d better get after him,” I said. “I can’t. I’m carrying all of Arnholm’s fucking instruments.”

I picked up my load again as I watched Luke disappear in pursuit of the bobbing penis hat.

Later, I met Mercy outside the campus shop.

“Oh it’s my little boy!” Mercy said, jiggling Kem in his baby buggy. “So you saw my Ellida give it to that stupid man, did you? You don’t know what he’s like, do you? He likes men. That’s why she couldn’t put up with it anymore.”

I took a step away from Mercy. “But he seems so in love with her.”

“In love with being in control...”

Ellida appeared with her head bowed. I asked both women if I could leave the instruments at the flat and collect them later with the lanterns.

“Of course!” Mercy said. “Ellida and Kem-baby are going to have a little picnic, would you like to join us? Ellida brought us a lovely Norwegian salami.”

The three of us found a patch of grass near the shop, where we ate the salami. Mercy cut it up into little slices with her penknife. We washed it down with cranberry juice from Kem’s cup. Mercy chatted to me while Ellida lay back, her head pillowed in the grass.

Luke appeared, looking worried.

“I’ve lost George – and the penis hat!”

Both Mercy and Ellida laughed, but I jumped up.

“Oh fuck,” I said.

Luke and I ran off in search of the missing member, leaving Ellida and Mercy at their picnic. We checked in George’s usual hang-outs: the library café, the Culture and Communities’ common room, and the Crypt, but he wasn’t there. Then Luke had an idea. “Maybe he’s gone to see Elaine?”

I thought this was unlikely. He hardly knew Elaine.

“Since he’s been seeing me with Lucy, he’s started visiting her,” he said. “There’s a sort of unspoken contest between us about who will get a shag first.”

Sure enough, we found George in Park Slope sitting with Elaine.

“He doesn’t like your hat!” Elaine said, bustling towards us and wagging her finger with mock disapproval. She was wearing a Queen T-shirt with a picture of Freddie Mercury below the band’s name. “But I think it’s great.”

Elaine was from Bolton; you didn’t hear a lot of voices like hers on campus.

“Where is the hat?” I asked, scanning the flat.

“It’s under Elaine’s bed!” George said. “I can’t wear it. I just can’t.”

Elaine took us to one side, away from George.

“Is he all right?” Elaine said. “He seems proper weird today.”

“He’s taken some magic mushrooms. He was skipping about all over the place a few minutes ago,” Luke said.

“What are you whispering about?” George asked.

“Nothing!” Elaine said.

“I can’t stay here! I can’t! I’m going to bed!” George said, getting up and running into Elaine’s bedroom.

Luke tipped his eyes in my direction. “You’d better go and see how he is.”

“Why me?” I asked.

“You’re the director of this play, aren’t you?”

Elaine smiled. She didn’t mind this invasion at all; it was A-grade entertainment. “You go ahead. I’ve been talking to him for the past half-an-hour.”

The curtains were drawn when I knocked and entered. The penis hat was lying underneath the unmade bed, its helmet still intact. George buried his face in a pillow.

“What’s the matter George?”

“It hurts Francis. It bloody hurts! That fucking chicken wire digs into my head!”

He groaned, lifting up his head a little from the pillow. “And more to the point, you’re making me wear a fucking three-foot penis!”

I walked to the drawn curtains, the bright daylight outside illuminating the orange fabric.

“George, I can’t say how much it means to me that you’re acting in this play,” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder. “I have a feeling something magnificent is going to happen tonight.”

George’s eyes flickered with hope.

“Do you think so?” he said.

“Something between you and Elaine.”

George didn’t reply.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that,” I said.

“It’s all right. I don’t mind.”

“That’s what you want, isn’t it?” I said.

George raised his chin. “I don’t know. Elaine likes me, but I’m not sure.”

He got up and drew back the curtains. Light flooded the room. Students were lounging on the steep lawn outside: smoking, picnicking, and throwing Frisbees around.

“Look, I’ll take the penis hat for safe-keeping, and you can have a rest here. You look tired,” I said. “Then you’ll be ready for the play tonight. I’m sure Elaine doesn’t mind you staying here.”

“The thing is Francis, I like it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I like wearing the hat.”

“OK.”

“I like the pain.”

“But just a minute ago, you were saying…”

“You don’t think I’m gay, do you?”

“I don’t know. Are you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, it’s OK if you are.”

George lay down on the bed again, huddling himself up into a foetal position. “I’m going to sleep now. I’m glad I told you.”

Leaving him sleeping, I retrieved the penis hat from under the bed, left the room and asked Elaine if I could come back and fetch George later.

She laughed. “Sure, that’s fine. He seems to have taken over my room.”

I handed her the penis hat. “Could you hide this somewhere so that George can’t get his hands on it?” I said.

She said that she’d find a safe place for it.

I spent the rest of the day finalizing arrangements for the play and putting Arnholm’s posters everywhere. Eventually, I went back to Elaine’s and retrieved the penis hat. Elaine appeared to have done a good job of calming George down. He was happily drinking a cup of tea and seemed fine about performing.

Saying a quick hello and goodbye, I proceeded on to Ellida’s where I found her surrounded by paper lanterns. We gathered them in bunches in our hands and hastened out into the gloaming. Worried about everything running on time, I hurried on ahead, dumped the lanterns in the deserted clearing and then ran back, meeting Ellida coming up. She said, “Relax Francis, we’re going to be fine!”

“Yes, but there’s other things I’ve got to do!” I said.

Ellida handed me the keys to her flat. I grabbed them and ran off, feeling the intimacy of her giving me her keys. Once there, I gathered up all the remaining lanterns, the penis hat and the two drums.

The only way I was able to carry the hat was by strapping it to my head. Ellida didn't laugh when she saw me in the clearing; she was too busy lighting the safety candles in the lanterns. I took off the hat and lit the lanterns. This was a difficult task with a cigarette lighter or a match because the flame looped upwards and burned your fingers as you waited for the wick to catch fire. She didn't complain but I did, yelling as I burned my thumb again and again.

"Don't be soft. Be a woman, not a man!" Ellida said.

"What do you mean?"

"Women are so much tougher than men."

"Are you sure?"

"They can handle the most extreme pain known to anyone: child-birth."

"Not something either of us knows much about though," I said.

I think a lot now about those moments as Ellida and I lit the lanterns in the wood. I remember images of her. The way she kicked off her plimsolls and walked barefoot in the grass, saying that it felt so fresh; the way she stooped down to light the candles in her striped sailor's top; the way she stretched to place the lanterns on the tallest branches around the stage area; her feet tiptoeing on the bark of the fallen trees; her bare arms reaching in the faint candlelight and me gawping anxiously up at her; warning her to be careful as she balanced precariously on the trunks.

The variegated light gave the clearing a rustic psychedelic quality. I realized that without these lanterns the play would have been totally sunk: you simply wouldn't have been able to see it! The stage area was just bright enough to see all of the action properly, but not too bright, while the other areas had been made sensual with the lanterns dotted here and there in sylvan nooks and crannies.

"Wow!" I said, clapping my hands together. "This is beautiful."

Ellida brightened.

"Do you think so? Have I transformed it all?"

I grabbed her and kissed her on the cheek. "It's wonderful! Really terrific!"

I felt her in my arms for a second and then let go.

"I'm sorry," I said, looking at the back of my hands.

Ellida smoothed down her T-shirt. "It's all right."

"I better get my bassoon," she said, putting her feet back into her plimsolls.

I checked my watch. It was now eleven. Then I realized that the candles would burn out well before the performance! What had we been thinking, lighting them so early?

“Fuck! What are we going to do?”

“It’s all right, I thought of that. We’ve got loads of spares. I’ll put in new candles nearer the time. If you get my bassoon, I don’t mind sitting here.”

“That’s brilliant. Look, I’ll go down and get the actors and your bassoon, and we’ll be up here soon.”

I launched myself down from the clearing on the top of the hill; I could almost imagine I was on horseback, galloping through the avenues of trees which still stood despite the storm which had done its best to destroy them; past the still pond, gleaming silver in the dark. I was barely out of breath when I turned my key in Ellida’s door and grabbed her bassoon; back at the Refectory the actors and musicians were waiting, milling around, excited; George had assumed the leading role, commanding the other performers to “sojourn” to the clearing and “prepare themselves” for the play. “I can feel the power of solstice!” he cried, raising his arms high above his head. Elaine had done a magnificent job on him.

The plan was that I would wait for the audience to arrive at the Refectory, while the actors went on ahead to the clearing: they streamed out up the hill, a rag-tag parade. But would we have an audience? I didn’t have to worry long – there was a trickle in the first few minutes I stood there, anxiously waiting, but then there was a flood, a crowd of nearly two hundred students.

I was like the captain of some wild army. People I didn’t even know slapped me on the back, high-fived me, following me in the dark. A few people had brought large torches and they assisted me in leading everyone by shining them into the air. Soon we were on our way, tramping through the campus and into the fields, towards the woods. We gathered more people as we processed through Park Slope.

While I didn’t know most of the crowd, there was a knot of students I was familiar with: cool-dude slackers with spliffs hanging out of their mouths and bottles of wine in their hands. Some organized students had brought picnic baskets and rugs, intending to make a night of it. A few knew about the work I’d put into the play and freely offered me puffs on their joints and slugs of their poison. Luke, now dressed in his spooky tree-spirit costume and looking like an eldritch warrior, approached me secretively, and whispered that I should eat a dollop of the honeyed magic mushrooms that he’d brought from home. I knew about this jar. It was paranormal; I’d had one amazing night when I’d tripped out on its contents a few months back. We’d talked afterwards about how it would be great to try the mushrooms in a natural environment and speculated that the night of the play would be a good occasion, although we hadn’t made any promises.

I ate three or four spoonfuls of the blackened, chopped mushroom honey. It was disgusting, but a gulp of wine helped get it down my throat. Emboldened by the alcohol but not feeling the effects of the mushrooms, I shouted for some order. This had the result of

making my actors ready themselves behind their tree stump but didn't stop the chatter emanating from the audience.

But then, Arnholm struck decisively on his drums. The rabble fell silent. There was a moment when everyone could hear the noises of the wood -- the rustlings, the hoots, the distant howls -- and then I spoke: "Welcome to the *Song Of The Falling Trees*, my mime play about the devastation of the 1987 hurricane. We are gathered together on this summer solstice to pay homage to Mother Earth and curse all those who would destroy her."

There was a burst of applause. Arnholm waved his arms about, and just then Ellida's bassoon gave out a low note, guttural and throbbing, and a fast rising scale before the rest of the band joined in. The music was modern, jagged and edgy, making the hairs stand up on the back my neck.

The play began. In the flickering lantern light, with the drums' beats rising up out of the fallen trees, Luke looked both sinister and bucolic as a tree-spirit, jumping this way and that through the undergrowth. The painted doll, announced by the clarinet, flittered into view, forcing the tree spirit retreat. She was pursued by George wearing a three-foot penis hat and carrying a large suitcase. The bassoon rumbled ominously as the ogre entered.

Ellida's playing was compelling: the audience was agog as the bassoon's rumble developed into a loud, menacing melody: the ogre dropped his suitcase and raped the painted doll. George stood over her with the penis hat strapped to his groin, grunting and growling as he thrust the helmet into the iridescent air in time to the stabbing notes of Ellida's bassoon: you really felt like the doll had been violated. The rape scene no longer seemed metaphorical; it was an act of palpable violence when combined with Ellida's accompaniment.

After this cruelty, the tree spirit surfaced and performed a medicinal dance, accompanied by the drums, around the doll. Brought to life again by the clarinet, she shed her doll clothes to reveal a female tree spirit underneath. There was an audible intake of breath from the crowd when the ogre (and Ellida's melody) returned. He was distressed to see all that remained of the painted doll was her mask and dress. However, when the ogre discovered that the tree spirit had turned his *amour* into a kindred fairy of the wood, he chased after the tree spirit and beat him up savagely. The bassoon thumped its notes out wildly. Some of the audience booed at this point, but roared in approbation and laughter when the transformed doll stole his penis hat. They clapped when they saw the giant wilt to the ground, stripped of his power. He crawled away miserably, the bassoon's melody withering with him, leaving behind the suitcase. I could feel that the audience wanted to jeer at this point, believing it to be the end of the play, but their hands remained in their laps as they watched the tree spirits open the trunk. The bassoon joined forces with the drums and clarinet and swelled into a ferocious hurricane as the spirits were whirled around the stage like leaves in a storm. Luke and Lucy's dance was frenetic as they were battered down by the hurricane and left for dead.

Lucy was brilliant as the painted doll; she was so delicate and refined at the beginning, and then so traumatized when she was raped by George. But George and Luke excelled themselves too. George was genuinely threatening as the ogre, exuding comedic menace throughout: the part when he was robbed of his penis hat and he drooped away was priceless. And Luke held everything together, dancing like Puck through every scene. However, the mime wouldn't have had its emotional punch without the music and Ellida's passionate playing.

The end of the play was greeted with silence – and then applause. Exhilarated by his efforts, George walked onto the stage and expostulated about the true meaning behind the symbolism; explaining that this was a feminist play which explored how patriarchy was destroying our ecology. I joined him, shouting over the crowd. We must have been chuntering on too much because Luke dragged us both off the stage. He shouted that we should all build a fire in the clearing and have a ceremony in which all the costumes, and most particularly the penis hat, were burned.

I glanced at George in the flickering light. This was news to me and him – Luke hadn't said anything earlier about burning the hat before. I wondered if George would be upset. I wouldn't have wanted my penis hat burned, especially after all the trauma he'd gone through to wear it.

But he didn't seem bothered at all. He took it off and chucked it into the middle of the stage. The sight of the hat flying through the lantern-lit air was greeted with hysteria. The crowd invaded the stage space. Kindling and wood were hurled into the clearing; soon a large fire was crackling and nearly everyone had gathered round the flames. A few people rushed back to campus to get provisions, returning later with more alcohol and various musical instruments: castanets, maracas, guitars and African drums.

Arnholm jammed with them, playing along as best he could with the chaotic ensemble but Ellida didn't. I wanted to say how amazing I thought she was but I couldn't find her anywhere.

I wandered into the crowd, hoping to be praised but everyone was immersed in their own thing: couples were snogging in shadowy recesses, lads were playing cards and games like "Pass The Pigs", and the musicians had splintered off into separate groups. I felt lonely. I didn't have a girlfriend and was no good at jamming. My mother, who had taught me piano, always said I had a very poor sense of rhythm, and I believed her.

I wandered into the woods, looking for Ellida. The mushrooms were finally working their magic. In the darkness between those trees, with the firelight lambent behind me, I felt as if I was stepping through a door into another world, where the trees were people and the branches were limbs and the leaves had mouths.

“Francis, I need a word with you, sunshine,” a voice said. The word “sunshine” turned my stomach: “sunshine” was what my mother and stepfather dubbed me when they punished me. The voice went on: *“You are a very selfish boy, do you know that? In fact, you are quite despicable...What you do truly disgusts me... You are a foul boy who plays with his bits, aren’t you? We know what you do in your bedroom. I have to clean the stains off your underpants. Do you remember that time when you tried to throw your underpants in the rubbish bin and I found you, do you remember that? You can never escape from me, do you know that?”*

I started to run through the wood, trying to escape. My chest was burning and I was sweating. I fell over, unable to walk straight.

Voices echoed through my head, fragmented and inchoate at first -- but then congealing into a clear tune: “Pilky and his handbag! Pilky and his handbag!” The melted faces of school-boys pounced at me, chanting: “Pilky and his handbag!” I tripped over the roots of the trees. Fortunately, I managed to extricate my feet from them, and found sanctuary behind a dark stump, which was like the bottom of a stair. I thought I was safe. Twigs snapped. Doors slammed. The voice of a child shouted. “Mummy, mummy! Don’t go! Mummy, Mummy, don’t!”

“Hal?” I inquired, wondering if it was my brother. “Hal, are you there?”

My heart was sandwiched between two metal sheets, attached by some fiendishly complicated means to a lever in my groin. In order to get it to beat I had to pull on the lever to keep the metal sheets banging together so that my heart would continue pumping.

A voice filtered through the pain. “Francis, it is OK, you are a bird, you can fly away from it all. Just remember you have wings and can fly away from the pain.”

Amazingly, an image of a bird came into my mind and I felt myself lifting away from the darkness, up into the night. Soon I was high above my own body; I looked like a disused factory but I could see my heart still there.

When I woke my head was in someone’s lap and a cup of water was being put to my lips.

“Are you OK, Francis?”

It was still dark and I couldn’t see properly, but I could tell it was Ellida by her accent and her scent. My head hurt appallingly, but as I sipped the water I knew I was OK. I vowed I would never take magic mushrooms again.

My head remained on her lap. I wanted it to stay there.

Then somehow I was getting up.

“I think I’m OK,” I said, wobbling to my feet.

“You had a bad trip,” Ellida said.

"I did?" I said, wondering what on earth she had seen or heard. I looked down at my trousers. Thank God, they were still on.

"I found you on the ground, moaning and groaning," she said.

Together we hobbled down to her flat, the warmth of her body pressing against me. Fortunately, Mercy didn't hear us come in. Ellida directed me to her room. My clothes were cold and wet from the dew.

"Take them off," she said.

I hesitated.

"Don't be stupid, you think I haven't seen a man's body before," she said.

She left the room to fetch me a glass of water. I ripped off my clothes and crawled underneath the covers. Sheets had never felt so good. When she returned, I said: "It's not that I'm after anything, you know."

"Don't be stupid!" Ellida said. As she began to get undressed, I caught a glimpse of her pale breasts. Feeling an erection coming on, I curled into a ball against the wall. She put on a T-shirt and climbed into the bed beside me.

Although I was aware of the oddity of the situation, I was too tired to care.

"You know, Francis, I used to have my doubts about you, but now I can see you are a victim," Ellida said, stroking my back with her fingers. My body tingled. I would have liked to respond but I was so exhausted that I fell into a pained, drugged sleep.

When I awoke I was alone in the bed. I sat up, feeling my brain clunk against my skull. I could hear the noises of Kem-baby in the next room, cooing and babbling to Mercy. I got up and looked for my clothes but they weren't around. "Fuck it!" I thought and went back to sleep.

"Oh Mister Big Man, are you OK there?" a voice asked, hours later.

I could tell from the light it was the afternoon. Mercy's queenly eyes shone down on me.

"I think so," I said.

"I've got your clothes for you! They certainly did need a wash, now, didn't they?"

She pointed to the chest of drawers where she had put the folded, washed clothes.

"Thanks," I said.

"Oh don't thank me! Do you think I would do your dirty washing when I have Kem-baby to look after? Ellida did them for you. I told her not to, but she said she thinks you're very funny and all comedians need clean clothes."

"Where's Ellida?"

"She's on campus. She's sorting out changing courses," Mercy said.

I got dressed quickly, enjoying the sensation of my trousers crisp and warm against my skin.

In the living room, Mercy was playing with Kem-baby. She didn't look up when I hovered by the sofa but said: "Sounds like you made quite an exhibition of yourself last night! Ellida had quite a big job keeping your trousers on!"

"Oh those mushrooms!" I said, turning crimson.

"What I can't work out is why Ellida let you stay in her bed? The girl has gone mad!"

I didn't want to know anymore. It was too embarrassing. But one important thought did occur to me. "Did anyone else see?"

Mercy chuckled. "What, do you mean the police? I think they may well be coming for you, boy!"

I fled from the flat. How could I ever look Ellida – or Mercy for that matter -- in the face again? Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. What should have been the greatest night of my life had turned out to be my worst! With hands shaking I opened the door to the damp basement flat and found Luke fiddling with the bust-up TV in the hall. His face looked chewed up from the night before.

"All right mate? Where have you been?" he said.

"I...I..." I stumbled.

Luke continued adjusting the coat-hanger aerial of the TV as he shouted, "Luce! I think I've got it to work!"

The picture flickered into life as Lucy emerged looking dishevelled in Luke's T-shirt and shorts. She grinned at me. George also opened his door. I could hear a northern female voice talking behind him.

"Hey, have you got any spliff for me and Elaine?" he asked.

"No, mate, ran out last night," I said.

At this George pointed a big finger at my chest. "Well, you better go right back onto campus and score for me again because you owe me big-time!"

"Oh fuck, do I have to?" I said.

"Of course, you do. You promised me!"

Chapter 5: Josiah

“Do you think it’s wise?” Hadley says as she puts a cup of tea on my bedside table. I prop myself up with pillows. I used to make the tea when I was working but that’s fallen by the wayside recently. “There will be a lot of people there wanting to hear what happened to you.”

“It’ll be fine,” I say, sipping the tea.

We’ve been invited to a wedding anniversary party hosted by my former feature writer and reviewer, Deirdre McCartney. She was one of my first appointments as Arts editor at *City Beats*. In many ways a lovely woman -- but nosey. Hadley knows exactly what she’s like.

“Are you sure?”

“I can handle Deirdre.”

But the moment I step into the smartly furnished house and see the champagne glasses and canapés laid out in rows and feel Deirdre’s eyes upon me, I know I have made a mistake. All through the week, I have been perfecting this patter about how my sacking is for the best. With every recitation the story has grown stronger, but now I can feel my confidence collapsing.

Deirdre enfolds me in a long hug. I can smell her perfumed hair and feel the smooth fabric of her anniversary dress. Behind her, her husband, a very successful barrister, smiles mournfully at me. We disengage but Deirdre continues holding my hands, examining my face as she says: “Oh Francis! What a nightmarish thing to happen! You must have a drink.”

Her partner, still maintaining his sad grin, gives me a glass of champagne.

“No, no. It’s all for the best. I really want to write anyway. It was more or less agreed,” I say.

“That wasn’t what I heard,” Deirdre says, a look of concern that she might have got her facts wrong sweeping over her face. “I was told it was completely out of the blue.”

“I suppose it was unexpected.”

Deirdre realises the rumours are true. “And you’ve been at the magazine so long.”

“Yes.”

“Oh dear! We must do our best to cheer you up.”

But the party doesn’t. As it swells, I think that more or less every one of Deirdre’s friends – writers, editors, programme makers, artists, playwrights, arts-in-education people – have some connection to *City Beats*: they either know people who work there, or, even worse, they actually read it. I neck the champagne and trot out my story again and again, doing my best to be positive but becoming less convincing the more I drink. Hadley stays with me for a bit, but then gets distracted by one of Deirdre’s friends, Josiah, who runs an educational charity, Learning for Life. Josiah is trying to head-hunt Hadley, who told me she has been holding him off because she’s happy teaching.

She sits out in the garden arbour and smiles at Josiah. It's a warm evening and the fairy-lights look magical, entwined around the ivy-covered trellis and rose-bushes. Everyone is having a great time.

I tap my wife on the shoulder. "I think the child-minder will want us to be home soon."

She tries to introduce me to the group of people assembled around the avuncular Josiah. He shakes my hand heartily: he's a slim, handsome man in his fifties, dapper in a linen suit and open-necked shirt. He's married but has sparkly eyes.

"No. We've got a little while yet," Hadley says, checking her watch and turning back to Josiah.

I wander away and do battle with more people: once again, I have to talk to about how wonderful my new life is going to be. Surviving this without snapping, I return to Hadley. "I really think the child-minder will want us back now."

She says I should talk to Josiah. He pats the empty chair next to him. I sit down and then almost immediately get up. I'm sweating. The champagne has made my head fizz.

"I have to go now. Sorry," I say to Josiah. I don't look at Hadley. I don't want to see her disappointed expression.

And so I leave. Except for Josiah and Hadley, no one really notices me go, not even Deirdre who is immersed in conversation with the Arts editor of a national paper.

I slump down on Deirdre's front steps and wonder if Hadley will appear. I feel a little consoled when she does.

"Francis, are you all right?"

She crouches down beside me and examines my face like a doctor.

"I just need to go home."

"OK."

We catch the train from Camden Road and sit in silence for a bit. At Canonbury station, Hadley comments on how the new Overground line makes it easy to get to Deirdre's house.

"Yes, it's great," I say.

"Deirdre's all right," she says.

"It was just hard, that's all. Trying to be cheerful. To pretend that it's the best thing that happened."

"Yes, it must have been."

But her tone is not as sympathetic as before and is slivered with frostiness.

"I *was* talking to Josiah," she says.

"You can talk to him some other time."

"We hadn't quite finished what we were saying."

"I'm sorry that I broke up your conversation but I really had to go."

We say nothing more on the way to the child-minder's. We pick up Jack and learn that he's been playing computer games.

"Do you have to play X-box all the time?" I say. "Can't you play a proper game like chess or Scrabble or something?"

"Scrabble, that's for old women!" Jack says.

"Let's not denigrate old women, eh?" I ruffle his hair. "Maybe you could play tennis or real football. Get some exercise," I say.

"Their garden is the size of a micro-chip."

"There's room to kick a ball in it."

"Not really. I playing X-Box. I do PE. I have tennis on Tuesdays. It's fine."

Jack is nine going on twenty-four. I blame Hadley for reading too many intellectual books to him. Later on, she reads him *Alice Through The Looking-Glass*, his bed-time story: I hear them laughing about Humpty Dumpty explaining what the Jabberwocky poem means. I go downstairs. Pouring a whiskey, I sit in the kitchen, ruminating about whether I was out of order to leave the party so early.

I feel trapped in my own head. The only way of escaping this claustrophobic feeling is to apologise to Hadley. But when she does emerge, the words come out wrong. "We should have left when I gave you the signal. That was out of order!"

She glances at the empty whiskey glass -- and then at me.

"I thought you'd gone to bed."

"It was out of order, Hadley. You should have left right then."

"Josiah was on the verge of offering me a job."

This news disorients me but I maintain my self-righteous tone: "If he really wants you, he'll go about it in the proper way."

I grip my hands into fists and whack the table so hard the whole table jumps. Hadley backs away and stares at me.

"I'm sorry. They fucking sacked me because I was bloody shit! There's nothing else I can do."

I want her to tell me that I'm not shit but she doesn't say anything.

"What a fabulous opportunity for the children to play!" Josiah says to me as we watch our kids chuck plastic balls at each other. It's a week on from the party and we're at a "casual meet-up" that Hadley has arranged with Josiah and his family at the Museum of Docklands. I am reluctant to go: I've had a difficult week trying to figure out future career options.

"Do I have to come?" I say that morning. "There's still some work I want to do on my CV."

“It’ll be good for you. It was weird at the party and it’ll good for him to see you in a better mood. And the museum is interesting too.”

Josiah gives me an even warmer handshake in the soft play area of the museum, Mudlarks. We stand together observing his three children – who are eight, six and four – muck around on the climbing frame and ball-pit. After having some fun throwing the harmless balls at Josiah’s kids, Jack grows bored by all the giggling and silliness and retires to another corner where he dams a river. Josiah seems even happier and healthier than he did at the party, decked out in an expensive golfing shirt, nice jeans and Nike sneakers. Hadley has paired off with his wife, Geraldine, a good-looking woman in her early forties who is carrying a designer handbag and sporting a cashmere sweater.

Josiah and I compare London’s museums and galleries with those in New York, Paris and Berlin – all of which we’ve visited. However, I concede defeat when Josiah analyses the merits of the attractions in Madrid.

“Never been there,” I say.

“You should really visit. It’s got a mixed reputation, but I think you and Hadley would love it: great cuisine, amazing weather, and absolutely fabulous culture. Theatre, film, museums, galleries, street-art, music. You name it, it’s got it.”

“There’s a cash-flow problem at the moment so I don’t think it will be any time soon.”

“Oh yes, of course. But I’m sure you’ll be back on track soon,” he says, winking. It makes me wonder if Hadley has accepted his job offer behind my back. He claps his hands together and marshals everyone to look at the exhibits. As we wander around, I notice how he glues himself to Hadley. Geraldine, who I hang back with, stresses out about her small children running amok amidst what are largely adult exhibits. Josiah intermittently notices them and sometimes scoops up his two youngest into his arms as Hadley and he talk avidly about targets, curricula, budgets, and new government educational initiatives. I had no idea she was so well informed.

As I turn away from looking at them, I catch a glimpse of Geraldine looking at me looking at them. She stops gawking at Hadley but in that split second I can tell she’s jealous of Hadley.

That night, after supper and Jack’s bedtime dose of Lewis Carroll, as I am massaging her thighs in front of the TV, I tell Hadley that I’m not sure Josiah’s wife likes her.

“Rubbish! We had a great chat.”

“You should have seen the evils she was giving you.”

“You’re imagining it. We’re all friends.”

“I think Josiah wants to be more than that.”

“That is just your insecurity talking, Francis.”

I drop the matter and carry on rubbing her legs. I take comfort in the fact that Josiah's wife feels the most threatened of all.

Chapter 6: A Norwegian picnic on Brighton Beach

“What do you want little boy?” Mercy said, her face peeping through the crack in the front door.

“I was wondering if Ellida was around.”

“She isn’t home. You might find her in the refectory.”

My unzipped bomber jacket billowed behind my back as I jogged down the breezy hill. As I was pausing to zip it up and catch my breath, Ellida glided up behind me. She was wearing her flared blue trousers and her green top; the bright colours echoed sunlight on the sea. When she saw me, she smiled. "Francis, what are you doing here?"

I blushed. "I was looking for you actually. I wanted to say sorry, and to thank you... You know, all that stuff in the woods. I wasn't in control."

I fiddled with my long, greasy pony-tail.

She touched the back of my hand, almost stroking it. "Let's go down to the sea and talk there."

I had a seminar in an hour or so. Going to the coast would mean missing it, and I couldn't afford to bunk it; it was the last one of the term. But, to my relief, Ellida promised to wait for me. Sitting through the seminar was agony. After it, I met her by the library steps. She was carrying a big black rucksack. "I decided to go back to the flat and get my swimming stuff. I want to swim in the sea!"

“Won't it be cold?”

“Francis, I'm Norwegian! Do you think the warm puddle of your sea will chill me?”

I stuffed my hands into my pockets, feeling the chill of the wind as it swooped down from the grey sky through the brick colonnades of the campus. I told her that my tutorial was really boring and was about to tell her why when she said, "Let's just be quiet until we get there."

I wondered if I would ever find anything interesting to say to her as we waited in silence on the station platform. All the other students were chattering away to each other. I felt even more foolish as we remained mute on the train. I didn't know where to look. I glanced at her green top every now and then but then gazed out of the window as soon as she caught my eye. Bits of blue were beginning to poke through the grey. Maybe things would brighten up? Once we alighted, Ellida led the way like a centurion as we pushed through the bustling Brighton's lanes; people were nosing around the jewellery, knick-knack and organic food stores. Because it was still blustery, there weren't that many people on the promenade and even fewer on the beach. Polystyrene cups, crisp packets and torn bits of newspapers eddied over the pebbles as we picked our way towards the waves. She bent down and scooped some wet shingle into her hand, flattening it against her palm as she said: "Arnholm wants me to move back in."

"And what did you say?" I said, bending down and delving my hand into the cool shingle myself.

"Let's not talk about my boring-smoring husband."

She smiled and brushed the shingle off her hand. I did the same with my pebbles. I noticed for the first time how her beam affected my insides. She said: "I've got a few questions. And considering you did sleep in my bed, I think you owe me some answers."

She slid down the shingle to the sea and I followed.

"Who is Pilky?"

"How do you know about Pilky?"

"You were singing a song, 'Pilky and his handbag!'"

"I was saying that?"

I plonked myself down front-forwards on the shingle, taking off my glasses. She sat beside me: "So who is this Pilky?"

"Why do you want to know?"

Ellida sighed. "Francis, I spent hours with you in those woods. Your eyes were shut and you were saying things."

"Why didn't you get help?"

"I checked your pulse, your breathing, I know about First Aid. You were OK. I had some water and kept giving you a little. I knew it was just a question of sitting with you until it was over. I know about bad trips."

"You do? You've had a few?"

"We're not here to talk about me, we're talking about you."

"What if I don't want to talk about me?"

"But I know you need to."

"So you're my therapist now?"

"No, I'm just curious."

"Why?"

"Because of your play, and the way you came rushing up the hill – and you're funny."

"I'm funny?"

"You're funny, because I can feel in my bones you end happily. All comedies end happily."

I lifted myself off my front and ran to the waves. Ellida followed me, taking off her shoes and socks and strolling in the foaming surf.

"It's full of stones but it's nice! Come on in!" she shouted, beckoning me with her white arms. I didn't move. She rushed out of the water and tried to pull me in. I felt bad because she looked happier than I'd ever seen her and yet, for once, I was sulky.

"Careful! I've got my shoes on!" I said.

Her fingers curled into mine and my mood lightened. She seemed to have forgotten about Pilk. I shed my shoes and socks and she peeled off her green top and blue trousers, the bottoms of which were now quite wet, to reveal a slightly faded one-piece swim suit underneath. She had a strong body: I glanced quickly at her plump breasts and then looked away. Before I knew it, she was diving into the sea. Seeing her swim so effortlessly made me feel more hopeless: I couldn't swim like that; I couldn't talk about my past; and I couldn't allow myself to fall in love with her.

When she emerged dripping from the sea, sweeping her hair back, I poked my toes tentatively into the water. It was freezing so I quickly withdrew. I fantasized about pulling her into a kiss, but it was too late: she had reached for her rucksack on the shingle, retrieved a white towel and wrapped herself in it.

She patted the pebbles beside her, gesturing for me to sit.

"I have just the thing for us! A Norwegian picnic. Flatbread, pickled herring, dried fish, goat's cheese and Aquavit! What could be better?"

I winced.

"Dried fish? That sounds foul!"

"Don't knock my favourite snack in the world!" she said, punching my shoulder playfully.

It smelt foul too, but I tentatively tasted it and it was actually quite good. She explained it was an aromatic spirit. "It's got angelica, star anise, paradise corn and wormwood in it and it's travelled over the equator!" she said.

"Wormwood?"

"Oh wormwood is great! Very bitter but very good for you!"

Grabbing my hand, she said: "Do you know what a friend of mine used to say, as we ate fish and drank Aquavit, 'This is our holy communion. We are eating the body of the sea, and drinking its blood. We give thanks, O sea, for enabling us to live, and curse God because we are not fish or birds.' That's what he used to say."

"Who was he?"

"He was my first boyfriend," she said, her eyes lighted by the sea.

"Not Arnholm?"

"No."

"Where is he now?"

"He's dead."

"What happened to him?"

"He disappeared at sea. He was a sailor. He went away on a voyage and never came back. But it doesn't matter, what counts is that this is our holy communion, and that we are drinking the blood of the sea."

The liquid burned in my throat. I decided that I didn't want to hear any more about a

previous boyfriend – even if he was dead. Feeling Ellida’s hand on mine, I leant over and tried to kiss her.

“No!” she said. “First Pilky!”

“Pilky! Fucking Pilky! Why are you so interested in fucking Pilky?”

“Because it feels important.”

“Give me more of that!” I said, pointing at the bottle of Aquavit. She poured a generous measure. I swallowed a shot and coughed.

“Pilk is me. I’m Pilk.”

“It was a name for you?”

She tightened her towel over her chest.

“Yes, it was just a nasty nickname, kids bullied me by shouting it. That’s all there is to the story really.”

“No, that’s not the story; that tells me *ingen ting*, nothing. Pilk is nothing like your name so I can’t understand why even stupid English kids would call you it.”

“They did.”

I turned away with tears in my eyes. Suddenly she seized my wrists.

“This stuff is buried deep in you. The mushrooms said you must let it out. Think of me as a mushroom.”

Her seriousness morphed into laughter.

“You’re a mushroom?” I said.

“Yes, I am!”

She made a silly hand gesture over her head like she was.

Finally, I accounted for myself: “It’s a long story. My parents divorced, my Dad left us to live in America. So my mother decided to change my name at school to Simpkin, which was my stepfather’s surname. It didn’t matter so much at primary school, but then I went to a school where you got called by your surname. So I was called Simpkin. But then my Dad came back and insisted I was called by *his* surname, Gilbert, and it was decided I would be called Gilbert-Simpkin. Then there was some another argument between my parents about which order the name should go in: should it be Simpkin-Gilbert, or Gilbert-Simpkin? Lots of teachers got mixed up. In the end, the kids gave me a nickname -- ‘Pilk’ – totally unlike both names.”

Ellida slapped her hand on her forehead. “Well, that was mean. But what happened after that?”

“Things got worse because my Adidas sports bag broke and I didn’t have the money to get a new one, and so I put all my books and stuff in a handbag my mother was given by my stepfather. At first the other kids didn’t notice, but one day a boy started up this chant ‘Pilky and his handbag! Pilky and his handbag!’ and everyone joined in. Later on, one of the worst

of the chanters, a real thug called John, snatched a tennis ball off me and I whacked him in the mouth with my fist. Because I put my thumb inside my fist, I broke it. I had to go to hospital and have it set.”

I wondered if this violence would put her off, but it didn't: her eyes brimmed with sympathy.

“Come here,” she said, and enveloped me in her sturdy white arms. “It's over now. Now you've said it, it's finished.”

By now we'd eaten all the dried fish and polished off half the bottle of Aquavit.

She took my thumb in her hand. “Is it still weak?”

“I haven't punched anyone in the mouth recently so I don't know.”

She kissed the base of the thumb tenderly.

“It feels much better now,” I said.

I wanted to kiss her but she shifted out of the way.

“But you've got to admit, it is funny,” she said. “I mean, it's so bad, so sad, it's funny.”

And then, before we knew where we were, we were both laughing as if ‘Pilky and his handbag’ was one of the funniest things to happen in the entire history of the earth.

“Enough of me!” I said. “Why don't you tell me about you?”

She shrugged off her towel and rolled on her back. Her nipples were sharply defined underneath the thin swimsuit. “What do you want to know?”

“Why do you like the sea so much?”

“Oh, that's a long story. I don't want to tell it now.”

“But I take it you grew up by the sea,” I said.

“Yes, in Bergen. In the summers, we would stay on an isle called Skjoldvik, a very remote place. That was my real home. It is my real home.”

She explained that her father worked in the oil industry and her mother was a nurse. “But I don't want to talk about them now,” she said, waving her hand above the crest of wave.

“So why did you marry Arnholm?”

“That's a long story too. Not now,” she said.

“Why did you come to England?”

“I always wanted to return. I was born here. In Coventry. I spoke English when I was young. My Dad was a scientist, he specialized in the properties of oil and petrol. He worked for some car company in Coventry.”

“He was a Norwegian working in England?”

“Yes, he knew about fuel, the Brits wanted a piece of him, and then Norway wanted him back. He was a good scientist.”

“So he's dead now?”

“He's gone away.”

I thought about asking more about him, but I could tell he made her tense.

“So you moved to Bergen?”

“Yes, when I was five or so.”

“And your parents got divorced after that?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not going to tell me anymore?”

“No.”

I didn’t resent her for not revealing all. I liked her being mysterious.

“OK, what birds do you like?” I asked, remembering that she told me how I became a bird in the wood.

“I like skuas and great gulls and albatrosses and cormorants and great big white wings stretching over the water. If I could be reincarnated, I would be a skua.”

“What’s a skua?”

“You don’t know?” she said, holding two bits of dried fish in her fingers like the wings of a bird. She flapped them near my nose. Her eyes were hungry. I had no idea what she was going to do.

“A huge, majestic bird, vast, that dive bombs its prey!”

She fell upon me. Her fingers gripped my cheeks, digging into them. Suddenly we were kissing. I had never kissed anyone so passionately. Her mouth tasted of dried fish and Aquavit.

“Pilky, Gilbert-Simpkin, Simpkin-Gilbert, Gilbert, Francis, Francis Gilbert I love you!” she whispered in my ear.

“I love you too,” I gasped, deliberately avoiding her name. Somehow I felt if I said it she would swallow me whole -- great big skua bird that she was.

A little later in the train station as we were waiting to go back to the campus, Ellida bought some Bubblelicious gum from the kiosk and placed a dusty pink hunk in my mouth. We sat down on the wooden bench underneath the station clock, blowing bubbles and kissing.

“You know what, I’d really like to go to London,” she said. “Wouldn’t that be good? Perhaps you could think of some places to show me. Maybe we’ll do it next Saturday.”

That seemed a long way off.

“OK, but can’t we see each other before then?” I said.

“Let’s take this easy, heh?” she said, patting me affectionately on the arm. “Trust me, this is right. Love is like bubble gum, it loses its taste if you chew on it too much: *Du er som boble tyggegummi. Söt, smaker godt.*”

I asked her what this meant and she translated:

You are like bubble gum.

Sweet, taste good.

It's by a Norwegian poet, Agnethe Mehn-Andersens."

She gave me a last kiss before she got on the train and said, "Goodbye, my *smaker boble tyggegummi gutt!*"

"What does that mean?"

"Come on, work it out," she said.

"I can't."

"It means my sweet bubble gum boy!"

Chapter 7: Hadley

Now that I am unemployed, I have become implicated in the whole production of supper. Hadley gives me vegetables to chop, potatoes to mash, or pasta to watch over. She reminds me that this is what we used to do before Jack was born. After his birth, it wasn't so much that I opted out of helping but more that some strong maternal instinct in Hadley pushed me to one side; it was almost as if she didn't quite trust me to provide edible nourishment for her son. I was all too happy to let her do this, frequently working late anyway.

Now we seem to be a family unit again. Jack sits at the kitchen table, usually reading his film magazines or doing his homework, watching his parents cook together.

"It's much better now you're home more," he says. "The food is better quality."

There are tender moments. Hadley is like George in the way she puts her hands over mine in order to guide my chopping: she's concerned that I don't hold knives properly. "You'll cut yourself."

"Don't patronize me, I know how to hold a knife," I say. But I'm not annoyed; I like the way she babies me.

Jack grins. "Yeah, mum don't treat Dad like a child."

Over supper, she'll tell us about her day. She always has a funny story to tell about some kid or other who has got into trouble: she's in charge of "inclusion" in a large inner-city secondary school. This effectively means that she deals with all the naughty boys. She takes her work very seriously: even though she might joke about her pupils' silly haircuts, funny ways of walking, their blatant obtuseness or their ridiculous excuses, she is never dismissive.

For Hadley, life is about "inner confidence": if you have it, you'll be fine, no matter how thick you are. It's a topic that she frequently returns to. She'll talk about some pupil who has been kicked out of a lesson for swearing at the teacher or fighting with another kid, and she'll say: "He needs to learn some inner confidence."

Jack and I will often wind her up by saying that the kid sounds plenty confident if he's done something like cuss the teacher or beaten some other child to a pulp. Never quite realizing that we're taking the piss, Hadley will patiently explain why this isn't real "inner confidence". She says: "Actually it's a manifestation of fear, fear that they will fail if they try at the work. It's a diversionary tactic. What we need to do is to help him feel like he can succeed."

Before becoming a teacher, Hadley had been a journalist like me: I first met her when she was a feature writer for *City Beats* back in the early nineties. We didn't get together properly until the very end of her tenure at the mag, despite the fact that we worked right next to each other in the office and talked loads. A few years before, she had come over from New York, having done an English degree at NYU, hoping to become a top-flight journalist, but

somehow she ended up sitting next to me.

One evening, she asked me out for a drink in Clerkenwell and told me how fed up she was with being a hack. Even though I had heard her speak sourly about the crap she had to write, I hadn't thought she was serious: we all talked like that. She was good. I reckoned she'd be a staff writer with a big publication in a few years' time.

I'll never forget the affectionate way she touched my cheek when I told her I thought she was mad to give it all up.

"I just feel I need to help people more. I've decided to train to be an English teacher," she said.

"An English teacher, in London? You must be fucking mad!" I said.

Hadley laughed. "I thought you'd say that!"

"It's hell. Trust me, I know friends from university who are teachers and they hate it." I was thinking of George, who was, at that time, having a really rough ride at a rural comprehensive in Dorset, where he'd moved to with Elaine.

"I know this is what I need to do," she said.

Back in her tidy flat in Islington – a framed Rothko print on the wall by the front door; a book of Cartier-Bresson photographs on the table by the sofa – she kissed me, and took me to bed. She hadn't drunk much but I'd had a few. She was nothing like Ellida. Where Ellida was bewildering, Hadley was reassuring; where Ellida was out of hand, Hadley was always in control; where Ellida chopped and changed, Hadley remained straight and true. We were married within six months, at the registry office in King's Cross, which was still awash with junkies and lunatics in those days. I thought Hadley would mind; but she didn't. That's how I knew she loved me.

After a tricky start, Hadley became a great teacher; but since losing my job, I wonder if I have become another one of her children. Another one of her projects. I quite like it: I enjoy having her talk through how I should be structuring my days and take her "action points" seriously. And I pretend to be following her guidance when actually I'm not. I do try on and off. I apply for jobs, I pitch ideas to editors, I consider setting up a few blogs and I devise some book ideas which I think are great: *A History of Stupidity*, *Radical Laziness*, *How To Avoid Hangovers*, *Writers and Prostitutes* and *Why Violent Films Are Good for You*. I envision these as long books, but I do have some shorter "bog book" ideas which are apparently where all the money is: *Do Caterpillars Have Vaginas?*, *101 ways To Take a Dump*, *The Art of Seduction for Ugly People*, *How to Become a Psychopath* and, most controversially as far as Hadley is concerned, *How Adultery Can Save Your Marriage*.

One evening, after Jack has gone to bed, I refresh my wine glass and sit on the sofa with Hadley. She takes her top and bra off and I massage her shoulders, discussing my ideas with her. I knead her back and she makes approving noises. Then she turns over and I stroke her

breasts and chest. She loves all of my ideas except the last one. She pushes my hand off her skin and sits up. “Francis, how can you write a book like that when you’ve never committed adultery?”

“I thought I might do some research,” I said, with a grin, reaching again for her tits.

“You don’t actually intend...?” Hadley says, swatting my hands away.

“Of course not. But I thought it might draw in the punters. I’m trying to make a living here.”

She takes my hands again and places them on her shoulders. “I’m sorry Francis, but I still think it’s a damn awful title. Adultery is the last thing any marriage needs. I don’t know what I’d do if I thought...”

“Would you divorce me?”

“I’d think very hard about it.”

“I’m sorry,” I say.

She puts on her bra. “I...I...I’m going to leave my job, and work for Josiah.”

“Oh.”

I was going to unhook her bra but I decide not to.

“It’s going to mean a lot more money for us.”

I lie back on the sofa and drink my wine. “You think I’m not going to make any money, don’t you?”

“No. I didn’t say that.”

I finish my wine. “Don’t you worry that he’s got ulterior motives?”

“Josiah is a friend, nothing more.”

“He’s in love with you!”

Hadley dons her black top and says: “We can get a new car. We can shop at Waitrose. We can buy some new furniture. And you can relax, you can find a job in your own time.”

Hadley watches me anxiously as I stride around the room.

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“I know how you feel about Josiah.”

“There must have been a big interview.”

“There was. Last week. I had to take two days off.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“You can trust me. You know you can.”

“I find all these academy chains creepy. It’s the corporatization of education and all of that stuff.”

“Maybe, but I can do my bit to stop that.”

I fetch the wine bottle from the kitchen and get a refill. Why am I complaining? This is good news for me: the extra money will mean I can be a kept man.

“Yes, maybe you’re right. Publishing a book on the benefits of adultery is probably not a great idea,” I say, sinking down beside her with my brimming glass of wine.

Chapter 8: The trip to London

A breeze wafted through the tall windows of Winnie Mandela House. Twenty men were sitting in a circle in the lofty, bleak student union.

“But the thing is: what does it mean to be a man?” George asked. He was wearing a dhoti, which looked like a skirt to me, flip flops and a loose white shirt.

The other guys thought for a moment.

“Do you have to have a girlfriend to be a proper man?” he said.

“I think you do,” Luke said.

“But what if you’re gay? What if you’re asexual?” George said.

The other men in the circle agreed that if you were going to be seen as cool on campus then you had to have a girlfriend. Performing in the play and acquiring girlfriends had boosted George and Luke’s status on campus to such an extent that they had become *de facto* leaders of the Men’s Group, which now became the one-stop shop for losers who wanted to get laid. George was excellent at giving advice, telling everyone how to dress, how to walk, how to talk, and, most importantly, how to love.

“If you can cook well, you can shag well,” he would say. “Being a couple is more than about being boyfriend and girlfriend, it’s about the sharing of food *and* minds.”

“So I should invite my target around for a meal?” one forlorn student asked.

“Yes but always ask for their dietary requirements. That will make you seem sensitive,” George said.

“But what should I cook?”

“Is she a vegetarian? A lot of them are, you know. Can’t go wrong with risotto; looks elegant. Looks like you know your stuff.”

I didn’t know my stuff. I had no confidence in my ability to cook risotto. But George was adamant this was the way to go.

After the sessions, we would all go for a drink in the crypt, where Luke and George would meet up with their other halves.

One afternoon, I joined the merry couples for lunch. I looked jealously at the way in which Luke seemed so bright with Lucy, and how masterful George was with Elaine: he finally had found someone who never argued with his pretentious pronouncements. I wondered if any woman would ever look so adoringly at me.

These two girls, even though they lived in much nicer digs, were now permanent fixtures in the damp basement flat. It meant that the bathroom was occupied a lot more -- but I enjoyed having them around.

“Would I be more fun if I had a girlfriend?” I asked the couples after we’d finished the kedgeriee and George was rolling a spliff. He frowned intensely as his big fingers expertly

finished joining the Rizla papers together. He smoothed the joint a little, holding it up to the air.

“Now that’s what I call a great spliff,” he said.

“A work of art, an exquisite articulation of the Western soul taking the form of an illegal substance but actually revealing the inner-most spirituality of man,” Luke pronounced in his posh, art-connoisseur voice. George smiled when he saw Elaine was laughing.

“Yes, Francis, I think you’d definitely benefit from a love affair,” he said.

Elaine giggled. “That’s what Francis needs -- a good shag!”

“But stay away from the married ladies, mate.” Luke said, and waved his beer bottle in my direction.

I washed the dishes with Elaine. Although she was quite stoned, she remained lucid and positive. She put her hand on the back of mine, leaving a trail of soap suds on my wrist.

“You should trust your instincts Francis. If it feels right then it’ll be fine,” she said. “You see, I had my doubts about George at first – you know what with him being so stern and clever – but I knew deep down inside he was right for me. And now I’ve never been happier.”

Not long after, I flopped into bed, my head all muzzy with Ellida and dope – and fell into a sleep where my dreams were clear and vivid, almost as if Luke’s Lucid Dream Generator had been whirring in my head. It was like I had an entirely different life. I was middle-aged and living with Ellida in my grandparents’ house in Northumberland, Christon Bank. We had children. We were happy. Every morning, I would go out into the forest, which wasn’t anything like the small woods in Northumberland but more like a Norwegian forest, and chop up logs, bringing them home to put on the fire.

The giant with the penis hat also lived in the house, and the painted doll too. But we didn’t mind as they flittered about the corridors. Our children ran with them laughing. But mainly, Ellida and I just kissed. Then one day, she took me to her bed. It was the first time I’d ever made love to her – I realized that the children were just figments of my imagination. I was in the room where I always slept as a child in Christon Bank, and I was watching her reveal her breasts to me. She told me that she had never wanted anyone as much as she wanted me. I exploded inside her. I woke feeling that this was the best dream I’d ever had – but realizing that I’d have to wash my boxer shorts.

Ellida proved elusive all week. Every time I knocked on the Park Slope flat, I got Mercy, who would chuckle and say that Ellida was out for the day – and, no, she hadn’t a clue when she was coming back. The term was winding down and I had work to do. I settled into a corner of the library and finished two essays that were due for submission. Ironically, it was when I wasn’t looking for her that I found her in the basement café of the library. She was tapping the wall and then putting her ear to it.

“What are you doing?”

She beamed. “Oh just checking to see if there’s anyone there.”

“In the wall?”

She giggled. “Sometimes there is, you know. There’s more in the gaps between things than you think.”

I considered her point.

“Oh my *smaker boble tyggegummi gutt!*” she said playfully.

I rummaged in my bag for a mix tape I’d taken ages to make her: “I got you this!”

I held up the tape box, with the tracks written on the cover.

Ellida snatched the tape. “You’ll have to tell me the story associated with each track.”

“I could tell you now if you like.”

“No, some other time.”

Saturday eventually came. She was waiting by the railway clock, wearing a blooming blouse, her legs shining underneath her pale blue shorts. She waved crazily at me when I saw her, rushing up to me and taking my hand.

“It is here. Our Saturday. Your Saturday. Everyone’s Saturday!” she said as she kissed me. I breathed a sigh of relief: she was clearly picking up from where we’d left off.

We bought day return tickets to London and found ourselves our own compartment. She showed me the contents of her Norwegian rucksack. “I’ve brought the vitals we need: two packets of dried fish, pickled herring and flatbread. It’s lucky I’m going back to Norway soon, I’ll need to stock up.”

“You’re going back? When?”

Ellida waved her hand. “Oh I’m sailing from Newcastle back to Bergen in two weeks.”

“Doesn’t that take ages? Wouldn’t you be better off flying?”

“I could never fly when I have the choice to sail. I love standing out on deck and feeling the sea all around me. That is one of the best feelings in the world. Especially in a storm! It’s like the elements are inside you, that you are part of the swirl and fury of the earth. The dark patches of the sea, and the light rippling parts of it. Rain on the sea. Light on the sea. I love it.”

“Aren’t you frightened?”

“If the sea takes me, it takes me.”

“Don’t you get seasick?”

“I’ve never been seasick in my life.”

Later on she said that she had gained a place on an English Literature course for next year and had found somewhere to live in Brighton when the new term started. She was particularly pleased with herself because she had got on a course which would be accredited by her

Norwegian university. It had taken quite a few phone calls from the School of English and American studies' office to Bergen University, but it was all sorted.

“So my next year is fine. And I’ve got a room by the sea. A room of my own.”

She had escaped from the grip of Arnholm and established herself as a real person.

“I’m not his *leketøy*, his plaything, anymore. Can you believe that I was actually his pupil in some classes?”

She went on to explain that because Arnholm was doing a PhD, he taught some of the electronic music courses on the undergraduate degree course, which she’d been doing. “It was *uutholdelig!*”

I didn’t know what this word meant, but I understood. Besides which, I didn’t want to talk about Arnholm.

The train was now shuddering through Gatwick and Three Bridges. Jumbo jets sailed in the blue sky above us. Ellida slapped her lap and told me to sit on it.

“Aren’t I too big?” I said.

“Too big? You’re my prey! I need to eat you up! Do you know in north Norway, the sailors use redheads as bait for *haier*, sharks? You’d be great bait with your lovely long hair. You’d attract a thousand sharks, I bet.”

I sat awkwardly on her as she nuzzled her head behind my pony-tail, kissing the inside of my neck. This was all right.

After pushing through the crowds at Victoria, we crossed Pall Mall and enjoyed lying down holding hands on the dappled grass of Green Park. After that we ambled about for a bit, looking in Fortnum’s and window-shopping on the Burlington Arcade.

Eventually, we reached our destination: Piccadilly Circus. It was a blue day and Eros looked lithe and lean. We sat down on the edge of the basin that supported the love god and pressed our bodies against each other, kissing passionately. I shut my eyes and pulled Ellida’s body close to mine, exploring underneath her shirt – something I hadn’t dared to do in the park. She let me feel her back and bulging bra.

I didn’t care who saw. When finally we broke off, she examined the statue, shielding her green eyes from the sun.

“So Francis, you’re telling me that your great-great grandfather made this thing!”

I was glad to be distracted. I needed to cool down.

“He did. He was asked to make a memorial for Lord Shaftesbury, who’d been a great Victorian philanthropist. He decided to make something amazing and unique, a symbol of charity -- *agape*, which means charitable love in Greek. But the public decided that it wasn’t *Agape* at all but *Eros* because it’s a beautiful boy with a bow. The statue got him into trouble because he borrowed so much money in order to finish it; he was given £3000 by the

government, but it cost £7000 to make. He was £4000 out of pocket.”

“You know a lot about it.”

“I like the fact that my ancestor created the most famous statue in England – and a really homo-erotic one at that.”

“Was he gay?”

“Oh no, he just was good at doing erotic works of art – men and women.”

“You never know.”

“He was married and had, I think, quite a few affairs with women.”

We looked again at the sun shining on Eros’s sensual, moving skin. After a pause, Ellida said: “It’s magnificent. In fact, I think Eros is probably my favourite god -- the only God who really exists. Your great-great grandfather made the only god who really exists!”

“Eros was invented by the Greeks. He’s been around thousands of years.”

“Yes, but no one made him so real as your great-great grandfather.”

I didn’t know whether to be flattered or jealous. I was conscious that I would probably never make a piece of art as important or as brilliantly crafted as the sculpture before me – but I was young and naïve enough to hope it might be possible. In terms of impressing Ellida, my ancestor had won hands down. Still, some of the glory rubbed off on me. We chatted a lot about Gilbert, Eros and love as we meandered around the area: we admired Gilbert’s other sculpture of Princess Alexandra on Marlborough Street; we walked arm-in-arm past all the fancy London clubs; we sang the Sex Pistols’ *God Save The Queen* outside Buckingham Palace, we snogged in St. James’s Park and took a pedal boat around the Serpentine. Ellida loved this, pedalling furiously and splashing me with water. We got off the boat completely drenched, and lay down in crucifixion poses on the grass to dry off in the sun. I’d never felt happier in the whole of my life.

On the way home, as the slam-door train rattled and joggled about, we kept kissing and laughing and kissing some more. Then she pulled away from me and got out her notebook. It was only as we neared Brighton that she stopped writing and handed me her notebook to read:

Imagine for some minutes Eros was the God who ruled heaven and that it was this boy who controlled the keys to the pearly gates. Imagine for some minutes the true God is a God of Love, and to get into heaven you MUST answer Eros's questions...

Have you ever been hit in the heart by my arrow? Have you ever fallen in love?

Who do you love?

Would you shift your work, your car, your family, your house, your garden before your true love?

Have you been so drunken by love that you'd throw up everything in your life for it?

Are you still in love? Who do you love?

You can only gain entry if you answer yes to all these questions...

Somewhat ungraciously, I spent the next few minutes picking holes in her English and her awkward colloquialisms. She hit me playfully on the head with her notebook. “Don’t be so boring-smoring! I can speak five languages, you only know one!”

“Boring-smoring?”

“Yes, I can do whatever I like to the English language! If I say ‘boring-smoring’, it is ‘boring-smoring’!”

I kissed her on both flushed cheeks.

“But how am I supposed to answer these questions? I mean it’s not like I’ve got any house, garden or kids to ‘throw up’. Do I have to answer them?”

“Yes!” she said, nuzzling into my neck. I could feel her warm, fast breaths against my skin.

“If I died now, I’d get into heaven,” I said.

“Shall we kill ourselves?” she said, her eyes glinting.

We both laughed again and sang a bad rendition of the Smiths’ song *There is a light that never goes out* which extols the virtues of being crushed by a ten-ton bus with your lover at your side. After we disembarked from the train, we sat down on a bench in Brighton station.

“Maybe you could come home with me?” I said.

“You haven’t told me about your girlfriends yet, I need to know everything first,” she said. “There’s no fun otherwise.”

“I have to tell you about all my girlfriends before I can sleep with you?”

“Yes.”

“But what if I don’t have any?”

“Women have been throwing themselves at you, I can tell!”

“They haven’t.”

“So you’re still a virgin?”

“Well – not exactly.”

“There you go then!”

“I could tell you all there is to know in two minutes,” I said, seeing that Ellida’s train was due to leave. She kissed me at the barrier.

“Look, it’s been a great day, let’s not spoil it, eh?” she said. “Thank you for showing me Eros. I shall never forget that.”

I was in a frenzy of sexual frustration when I got back to the flat, but masturbation offered little release. I needed that dream of fucking her in Christon Bank again. What did I have to do to prove myself to her? There were only a few days of term left and she was going back to Norway soon.

There was only one thing for it, I realised at five in the morning: I would invite her to stay

for a few days in Christon Bank, my grandparents' draughty old farmhouse in Northumberland. I had never invited a girlfriend to stay there before. My grandparents were eccentrics but they were old-fashioned and 'respectable' too: I wasn't even sure that they approved of sex before marriage. Furthermore, Christon Bank was very much a place of sanctuary for me. But Ellida was different. And after all, she was due to sail from Newcastle to Norway so it would be handy.

Without thinking more about it, I cycled feverishly on Herzog through the deserted dawn streets out to the campus and I knocked on the door to the Park Slope flat. Wonderfully, Ellida answered. Before she could say anything, I said, "I want you to come to Northumberland with me!"

"Are you drunk?"

"You have to come north with me!"

"You are drunk!" she said, pulling me into the flat. Holding my hand, she guided me to the kitchen and put on the kettle.

"Have you slept at all? Your hair looks mad!" she said, stroking my hair, which was not in its customary pony-tail, but tangled up messily around my shoulders and back.

"I want you to meet my grandparents. They live in this massive farmhouse, with loads of rooms. We'd have the place virtually to ourselves, and they're right by the sea, and the dunes, and we could cycle around, play croquet on the lawn, and drink Aquavit in the mountains. There's this amazing mountain pool I know we could swim in. You'll love it. It's a really ancient, remote part of England. And you could take the boat back from Newcastle afterwards."

She thought about this for a few agonizing seconds. Then her face lit up: "All right, I'll come! But first I must give your hair a proper brush."

She sat down on the sofa with me and combed my hair.

"How long is it since you washed it?" she said.

"Two years."

"Two years! You are crazy?" she said, working on some knots.

I explained that I had a theory that the natural oils in the hair were self-cleaning if left uncontaminated by shampoo. She laughed.

"Do your grandparents have a big bath?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Well, maybe we'll take a bath together and I'll wash it properly for you. The Norwegian way."

"What's that?"

"I'll show you. Just wait."

Part Two

Chapter 1: You have to tell her

“You really need to tell her.”

George and I are ensconced in a dark corner of the Three Mariners in Dorchester. The music isn't playing too loud, the local beer tastes good, and our families are happily watching a movie at George's house. A rare moment to ourselves.

“It wouldn't really mean anything to her,” I say.

“She knows Ellida was your girlfriend though?”

“Yes, of course.”

“When did you last talk to her about Ellida?”

“I told her when I learnt about her death.”

“But when did you last properly talk to her about Ellida?”

“Oh, I don't know. Years ago.”

George crunches some crisps and considers. “So you've been thinking about Ellida a lot and not sharing anything of those thoughts with Hadley?”

“I can't.”

“This is a major part of your mind you're not sharing with her.”

George puts his meaty hand over mine in much the same way he used to when he was showing me how to chop up vegetables: “What do you want Francis?”

This feels intrusive. But it's George. And this is how we talk to each other.

“It's scary George,” I say, squeezing his hand. “I keep thinking about how things would have been different if I had gone with her: I'd have written books, I'd have travelled and seen the world. I'd have been more true to who I was. Who I really am deep down. Instead I worked at *City Beats* for far too long, got fired and have nothing to show for my life. Let's face it, I've become a mediocrity.”

“Haven't we all become mediocre?”

“Ellida didn't!”

George plays with his beer mat. “You've got Jack, Hadley, all that experience.”

I groan. “Yes, I know.”

“But you still haven't answered my question. What do you want now?”

“Get some more drinks in and I'll tell you.”

He lets go of my hand and buys us another round, bringing two whiskeys as well. I point at them. “What are these for?”

“I thought we might celebrate!”

“For what?”

“For telling the truth -- for once.”

“OK.”

We down the chasers and feel the whiskey burn in our heads.

“So what are you scared about?” he says.

The alcohol works its therapeutic magic. “How much I think about fucking Ellida. Her cunt. Her breasts. Her mouth as we kissed. How much she loved being fucked by me. How much I loved fucking her.”

George grins. “The fuck-promise?”

I say nothing.

He chuckles. “I seem to remember there was more to her than that.”

“I think about those days with her as well. The play in the woods. Do you remember that?”

“How could I forget? You made me wear that ridiculous hat, didn’t you?”

“And nothing seemed to be decided. We were all so inchoate. Nothing was settled about any of us. You even told me you thought you were gay.”

George stops laughing. “I told you that?”

“Yes, you did.”

He falls silent and rips the beer mat in half. Time to change the subject. I ask him about his job. Having worked as a secondary teacher for a few years, he gave it up and did a PhD in comparative religions, which enabled him to become a lecturer at a new university near Dorchester. He used to love it: teaching engaged students, researching topics he loves, and generally living an intellectual life. However, the work has lost its sheen recently and he’s been stressing about it: in particular, he’s had several rows with the management who are introducing new and pointless layers of bureaucracy. It’s quite boring stuff but I listen carefully as he trawls through every detail.

At closing time he and I wander drunkenly up the High Street, past the Dorchester Museum with its Thomas Hardy and Dinosaur exhibit, past the old law courts and then head down a passageway which takes us towards the river. I feel engulfed by the other-worldly hush of the town.

“I love visiting you here,” I say. “It’s so *not* New Cross!”

George and Elaine live in a 19th century town house just beside the old Dorchester county jail and the remains of a Roman temple. It’s a nice road and their house is big, with a large kitchen overlooking the river and its tree-lined walks.

Hadley and Elaine are drinking peppermint tea in the kitchen. The kids have gone to bed. The lights are low and the room feels spacious but snug.

“So girls, did you have a good time without us?” George says, rubbing his hands together.

“We did. We’ve been having a good chat,” Elaine says. She scans us suspiciously, like

we've just returned from a warehouse.

"Elaine was telling me about your affair with Ellida at university," Hadley says. Her tone is steely. "I didn't know it was quite so involved."

"That was years ago," I say, frowning.

"But you were really in love with her, weren't you? I thought you guys would run away together or something," Elaine says.

"You were thinking of running away with her?" Hadley says.

Then Elaine swivels her head in George's direction, pointing her tea spoon at him.

"Why didn't you tell me she died George?" she says. George and I look at each other; the aggression emanating from our wives is unexpected – and inexplicable. George says: "Hey girls, what is this? The inquisition?"

Elaine says: "I knew Ellida! You could have at least paid me the courtesy of telling me she died."

"I wasn't aware you knew her that well," George says, shrugging impatiently.

Elaine returns her focus to me.

"Are you grieving for her, Francis?" Elaine says. Again, her tone doesn't feel sympathetic.

"I...I don't know. What is grief?" I say, walking to the window and staring at the silhouettes of the trees in the garden.

"It was a big deal that she died Francis. She had skin cancer. That's a big deal," Elaine says.

She is trembling. I can understand now that the news of Ellida's death has upset her. It makes me wonder why George didn't tell her. What's going on between him and Elaine? While he questions me about my marital problems, I rarely ask him about his. Why? Is it because I am so self-obsessed?

Hadley touches Elaine's shoulder and then puts her arm around her.

"And yours is all in remission?" I say.

"Yes: it wasn't skin cancer though, it was cervical and it's all completely fine. I'm going to live a little longer than I thought. Not like poor Ellida," Elaine says, tears leaking out of her eyes.

Later on as we are getting into the bed in George and Elaine's spare room, Hadley says: "I'm sorry about that earlier. I think the two of us worked ourselves up somehow. Elaine felt that your thing with Ellida at university was very serious."

I dive underneath the duvet and say: "I think Elaine's over-blowing it personally. It was just a crazy student thing."

"Oh, OK."

We are both tired and go to sleep without discussing it anymore.

On the train back on Sunday afternoon, while Jack is listening to his iPod, Hadley says that Elaine isn't happy with George.

"Apparently, he's been doing some strange things. Staying out late a lot. Drinking too much. He's even started smoking dope again."

"He didn't offer me any."

"Don't be facetious!"

"Smoking a bit of dope is hardly the end of the world."

"Promise me you won't have any if he offers?"

"Yes, of course."

After some customary domestic chit-chat about getting a couple of lights replaced, we don't speak for the rest of the journey. I try to read the Roberto Bolaño novel I've brought along with me, but I can't: I'm dreading the thought of the coming week. What the fuck am I going to do?

Since I've got nothing but rejections for my book and article ideas I decide to start afresh on Monday morning and look for courses to take. I surf around and opt to do *How To Make Great Websites* and *Setting Up Your Own Magazine*. Hadley is more than happy to fund them. The courses are useful but they make me aware that if you're going to do something properly you need a lot of know-how, quite a bit of cash, and real nerve. I'm not sure whether I have the first and the last; as for the second, since nearly six months have passed, the cash is dwindling.

But I've established a routine; I can almost imagine that it's my job. As soon as Hadley and Jack are gone, I sit on the sofa and stare into space, listening to the sounds of the traffic outside, thinking about the strangeness of being alive, of being in this particular place at this particular time. I hear the rumblings and creaks of the houses next door; they give me a strange sense of freedom. Then I get up and go for a walk: I like walking to the top of Telegraph Hill, wending my way in and out of the little squares, the parks, and the tall Victorian houses. Sometimes I see people I know – parents from Jack's school, a figure from the past, a neighbour – but I do my best to avoid them. Winter is coming on. I find myself enjoying the changing weather: the low slanting sun in the morning; the rimy frost on the park railings; the louring clouds scudding over the huddled houses in the late afternoon; the outbursts of rain and wind and the choppy waters of the Thames.

I have nothing to do and nowhere in particular to go; if Hadley's handed me a shopping list in the morning that gives me a sense of purpose; I learn what I like to buy from Tesco, or Sainsbury's; when I can slip into the strip-lit halls of Aldi for cheap German ham. I thought I'd hate this, but I don't. I find it gives me time to think about Ellida. Fragments of the times we had together haunt me: her body outlined by the flickering lanterns in the wood; her

glistening form on Brighton Beach; her green eyes looking up at Eros; her face when she talked about the sea; her laughter; her smile.

I find her voice encouraging me. My thoughts merge with hers until I find her saying to me: “Francis, you need to set up a magazine which celebrates the elements. Your first issue should be all about the sea! The wild, ungovernable sea! You must get the best writers to write their hymns to it, commission the greatest photographers to show it in its glory, review the best books about the sea! Commission a new set of illustrations to go with *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner!*”

Yes, yes, yes, I say to myself, punching the blue air.

Chapter 2: North

“Your life is a classic text, Francis, and I must analyse it!”

Ellida and I were travelling north on the London coach to Newcastle. My memory of the M1 and A1 is still coloured by the conversation we had that day: the endless tarmac textured with our words, the hard shoulder infused with our feelings, the mundane service stations permeated with our confessions and the underbellies of bridges sprayed with our laughter.

“So... you’ve got to tell me all about your girlfriends!” she said.

“Why are you so interested?”

“I think I will find it very restful.”

“Huh?”

“Maybe that’s the wrong word,” she said. “The word in Norwegian is *beroligende*. It sort of means restful in a curing kind of way.”

“Soothing?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“Well, I guess if I am truthful, it all starts with puberty, doesn’t it?”

“So, what’s your first memory of puberty?” she said.

“Blimey!” I said. I felt her gaze sweep over me like a lighthouse beam. “That’s quite a question... You’ve got to tell me about yours.”

Ellida tugged on a strand of her hair, twirling it around her finger.

“I remember shopping for bras with my mother. The smallest kind, size A. We did it in silence.”

“What about your first pubic hair, how about that?”

“Now, that’s a good question. I think I can remember being disgusted by it, ashamed of it.”

“I thought Norwegians were supposed to be cool about all that stuff.”

“I’m not Norwegian.”

“What are you then?”

“Someone from the sea.”

“One of Neptune’s daughters?”

“Definitely, with my own trident.”

“What about your first period?”

Ellida wasn’t fazed. “I was in my nightdress. I was about to go to bed when all this blood and stuff came out. I ran out into the kitchen where my mother was making meatballs. I shouted that there’d been a terrible accident. Then I noticed she had a male friend with her, a blond man sitting smiling at the table. Someone I didn’t know. Somehow I felt he was connected with the blood. A sort of figure of death. A harbinger. I screamed. There I was, a

hysterical child, in my bloody nightdress, screaming. My mother scooped me out of the room. I remember being surprised she was so calm. Normally, she wasn't. But I suppose she was a nurse – and used to cleaning up stuff. Yes, I suppose that was partly it, and also because she was, for once, sympathetic. She actually apologized and said she should have told me earlier; that it was nothing to be ashamed about; that it was natural.”

Ellida rested her head against the window of the coach. The hard shoulder trundled by as she continued: “Oh, and I remember our teacher taking us into the cold girls’ toilets one dark winter day and showing us how to use sanitary towels. That was back in the days when you had to use safety pins and all sorts. It was a real procedure. Then, you had to put the towel into the incinerator. I remember the way you’d open the flap and this flaming heat would come out at you. Like it was from the volcanic bowels of the earth. Sent from Satan himself who was enticing you down into the fiery pit with all your bloody towels!”

Her eyes dazzled me.

“Oh Francis, I’m scaring you now, aren’t I?” she said.

“No. Not at all.”

“I am!” she said, kissing me on the cheek. “But enough of me and Satan! It’s your turn!”

I envied how freely she was able to speak about her life; I was already aware that the people sitting in front of us were becoming interested in the conversation; a blonde young woman, a little older than we were, kept pretending she wasn’t turning her head to peer between the seats. “There was this German woman I met on a VSO camp last summer,” I said. “Florence. Everything in Florence is so beautiful, except where we were staying – which was a shit-hole. We hardly even spoke to each other. I don’t even remember how we ended up there, in the bed. It wasn’t --” God, I wanted to shut up, I hated telling Ellida this, the memory of how Klara stank of smoke, the way she went about fucking like it was an obligation, a chore, like cleaning a toilet. Her skin was dry. Everything about her was dry. I couldn’t tell Ellida this. I certainly couldn’t tell the blond woman in the seat in front of us this. “It wasn’t very nice.”

“So you’ve only slept with one person?” Ellida said, scrutinizing my eyes closely. “A German woman – not a girl?”

“She was older than me.”

“No one else?”

“No.”

“That’s amazing. A good-looking guy like you. No trips to Amsterdam, anything like that?”

“No. What about you? Who have you slept with?”

“We’ll get to me in good time,” she said.

Because I was bringing a girl with me, my grandparents met us at the station. The last time they'd done that was some years back, when I was thirteen. Since then I'd always made my own way by Metro to their suburban house in Benton, just off the road that led to the coast.

But today, my grandmother was hovering by the station cafe, looking around for us. My grandfather was tucked behind her smoking his pipe, with a large dog-lead in his hand. Granny, her white hair like a halo, waved when we emerged from the coach. Seeing that we were carrying quite a bit of luggage, she shouted in her piercing, posh voice: "Cecil, fetch a trolley!"

And so we followed them to their car, an ancient, rusted 2CV, where we sat in the back with their two Labradors, Sandy and Goldy. Ellida talked to Goldy for a bit, nuzzling her nose against the friendly dog. Then once we got going, Granny began to question Ellida. No one escaped my grandmother's inquisitions.

"Now tell me, what's your full name?"

"Ellida Hilde Arnholm."

"That, I take it, is a Norwegian name?"

"Yes."

I noticed Ellida didn't say that it was her husband's name.

"But tell me: why are you studying in England?"

"I came to study music, but I've changed courses now."

"So you're a musician?"

"Yes. I was."

"But why have you changed courses?"

"I was sick of it. I want to learn about English Literature. After all, I am in England."

"So you'll be doing the same English course as Francis?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

Granny fell silent. I could tell she was going to ask more and would undoubtedly find out about Ellida's marriage. Uh-oh.

Leaving the main road, we turned down a quaint tree-lined street and reached 5 The Grove, a tall, semi-detached Edwardian house with a red garage, a yard and a hedge-fringed front garden. This was my grandparents' Newcastle home, where my father and his siblings had grown up. We didn't linger because the plan was that we would drive straight up that night to Christon Bank, the antique farmhouse which was my grandparents' second home. But since Ellida was taking the boat from Newcastle, she decided to leave two of her bags in the Grove.

She and I took a walk as Granny and Grandpa collected together the three cats and put them in the basket for the journey.

"Does your grandfather ever speak?" Ellida asked as we wandered down the Grove and

stood on the railway bridge by Blacks, the newsagent.

“No, not really,” I said. “His head is full of maths. You’ll see. He spends hours sitting on old chairs, with cats lying on him, scribbling formulas, trying to work out the secrets of the universe. He’s working on an all-encompassing model which ties together Einstein’s Theory of Relativity and Quantum Mechanics.”

“And your grandmother is quite interested in knowing about everyone?” Ellida said. “Particularly everyone connected with you. I sense that she’s very keen on you.”

“I suppose so.”

“What about Arnholm? Do I tell her?”

I hesitated for a moment. “Yes, be honest with her. She can take it. My grandmother may be old-fashioned, but she’s also open-minded in a funny kind of fusty way.”

Ellida and I returned to the house. We lay down in the garden, not touching, soaking up the sun as Granny and Grandpa got everything ready for the expedition. They were taking two cars: both Citroens. Grandpa would take all the animals -- the cats, the dogs and their appurtenances -- and Ellida and I would go with Granny.

Eventually, we set off in the evening: Granny urged both of us to sit in the back because she felt it was safer. She was not a happy driver but concentrated solely upon the road, only occasionally talking to us about all the accidents that had happened at various junctures on the A1. She had an encyclopaedic mind for bloody collisions.

Ellida and I didn’t talk but held hands in the gathering twilight, feeling the north enter our blood: the smoky fields, the serene rivers, the dark forests. Finally, we reached the old farmhouse at the end of a tiny, pot-holed lane.

It was a cloudy night and not much was visible. Ellida shivered when she entered the house; I could see that the sheer echoing size of it alarmed her. Granny and Grandpa busied themselves making the place habitable, switching on the water, putting the provisions in the fridge and cupboards, while we ambled through the corridors and rooms of the house.

“Francis, this place is huge!” Ellida said, her breath pluming by the garden door.

“And cold. Even in summer,” I said.

Unlocking the door, we stepped out onto the lawn. The night had cleared and the moon peeped through some sailing clouds, illuminating the three tall skeletal beech trees which stood on top of a tumulus two fields away from the house. The overgrown lawn stretched wide and magnificent before us. We held hands and Ellida kissed me.

“It’s incredible here,” she said. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Ellida had seen my world. My secret Northumbrian heartland. And she understood.

I awoke to the sound of house martins diving into the nest at my window. The blue air beyond them was endless. Inside my room, the sunlight reflected crazily on the mirrors of the

theatrical dresser. I had left the curtains deliberately undrawn the night before so that I would get up at this hour – which was always the best time at Christon Bank. I loved the way the light flecked the mottled wallpaper and exposed stonework. I loved the smell of the country in the corridors. I loved the antique safety of the house.

I got up, dressed quickly and left my room, crept past the closed door of my grandparents' bedroom and entered the vast bathroom, where I lifted the window and smelt the country air: the fresh grass, the hay, the flowers, the sea. Now the Christon Bank trees were magnificent; large-winged rooks and squawking crows were flapping about in their high branches. Below me the long lawn glistened in the light. I could see my grandfather's telescope in the walled garden; his gooseberry and raspberry bushes; the copse beyond that; then yellow, swaying fields of corn and wheat and finally the distant village of Rock.

In the kitchen, after greeting Sandy and Goldy's wagging tails and breathy nuzzlings with pats on their heads, I jiggled around the old kettle and got it working. Then nursing my cup of tea, I took the dogs down the country lane, walking along the Rock path as far as the old blacksmiths in the village. I'd come a long way, but Sandy and Goldy didn't mind.

My mind was full of Ellida: what would happen today?

When I returned, my grandparents were both up and about. My grandfather had driven to the village shop to get the newspaper and milk, and my grandmother was bustling about: fetching coal for the fires, lighting the Aga, feeding the cats, reading a biography of Trollope, making toast and fruit cake. She greeted me warmly, thanking me for taking the dogs out.

"They always love it when you come because it means they get such good walks," she said. "Now, what can I get you for breakfast?"

She laid out the table swiftly, putting down the cereal boxes, toast, jam, butter with an alacrity that only a grandmother with four children and twelve grandchildren can have. I waited to be fed.

"So tell me a little more about your friend, she seems very interesting," she said. "The Norwegians are a very resourceful race. I can see that with her. Very tough I suspect."

"She goes swimming in the sea without a second thought."

"Newton is a good spot, there are no currents there."

I felt now was the time to get the worst over with. "She's married too, to a composer at the university. He wrote the music for my play."

"So why didn't he come?"

"She moved out of his flat," I said, looking at the lime marmalade I was spreading over my toast.

"I see. So she's seeking a divorce?"

"I don't know."

"And I take it Arnholm is her married name?"

“Yes.”

“So what’s her maiden name?”

My grandmother had a real thing about names. They were very important to her. When my mother changed my name to Simpkin, Granny was instrumental in pushing my father to take her to court to get it changed back to the sturdier Gilbert.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Lineage is important,” she said.

“I’m not sure it is.”

As she always did when someone disagreed with her, Granny simply ignored my remark. She had to attend to her cake. Putting the baking tray in the oven, she said: “You’d better take a cup of tea to your friend and then bring her down. We should plan out your day.”

As I carried the cup of tea to Ellida along the corridor, I realized that I didn’t actually know whether she liked cups of tea in the morning. Was that a Norwegian thing? The query felt a little academic when I discovered that Ellida’s bed was empty. The only sign of her was a hair-brush on the dresser.

I found her on the lawn, out beside the yew tree. She was wearing a big yellow jumper, jeans and boots. She was set up for Northumberland all right. Previous friends who’d come up here had always dressed inappropriately, wearing their fashionable shoes and nice clothes, which inevitably got covered in dog hair, mud, sand and grass.

Her arms were folded and her big green eyes stared at the Christon Bank trees.

“So where’s the sea?” she said.

“I’ll show you.”

She took her cup of tea and sipped at it as we pushed our way through the dewy corn, getting our clothes covered in chaff. After a short walk, we were standing at the foot of the great trees. From this elevated tumulus, the sea was visible; it rippled blue on the lip of the horizon.

“Let’s walk to it!” Ellida said.

“What, now?”

“Why not?”

“No, we can’t. We need to check in with Granny first,” I said.

Ellida conceded this and we went back indoors. Grandpa greeted us with his biggest, crinkly smile. He and Ellida chatted about Norway for a bit: this was unusual for my grandfather who was normally quite reticent.

“Yes, I’ve always wanted to go to Norway,” he said. “I bet in a place like Tromso you get the most magnificently clear nights. Perfect for seeing the stars.”

“The night exists for six months a year there. It is endless night. There are some very clear

places, where the stars are like beacons.”

“Tonight promises to be good. I’ll show you Jupiter and the North Star if you like,” Grandpa said.

Ellida did a little dance for joy. “Yes, I’d like that so much!”

Grandpa had never had such an appreciative stargazer before. He and Ellida continued talking about the stars. She knew all about how sailors used them to guide their ships. Grandpa was impressed.

After Ellida had eaten some toast, Granny said that she would drive us to the sea.

“But I’d love to walk to the sea,” Ellida said.

“It’s a long walk,” Granny said. “And not that pleasant. I think you’d prefer to use your energy walking along the coast, rather than to it.”

Before we went, Ellida looked at the kitchen window where Granny had encouraged her grand-children to write and draw things in an illuminated paint. A year back I’d written out some of the lyrics to the Beatles’ song *Rain*, two of my cousins had spelt out their names, and my brother, Hal, had written “slob”. Ellida found his negative comment quite amusing but wanted to counter-act it. The paints were still on the window sill below. Most of them were dried up, but the red was still working. Ellida wrote out: “Here comes the sun...” and then drew a radiant solar symbol.

Granny drove through Christon Bank village, past the Methodist chapel, over the railway line, past the Blink Bonny pub, past the little shop, through Embleton, over the high ridge and down the winding hedge-rowed lane which led to the Dunstanburgh golf-course car park.

Agreeing to meet us at lunch-time at the Jolly Fisherman in Craster, she left us with the dogs. We were free to roam across the sweeping plains of the golf-course, over the great sand dunes and down to the beach.

The tide was out and the sands stretched boundless and bare by the sea. There wasn’t a soul around. It was in complete contrast to Brighton. Ellida stretched out her arms and exclaimed: “This is the best place ever! Oh Francis, I see now why I needed you.”

We embraced in the chilly warmth of the sea-blown morning.

“Come on, let’s go in here!” Ellida said, pulling me into an alcove created by a declivity in a sand dune. It was a sheltered spot, fringed by marram grass, with a bed of sand at the bottom. The sea peeped at a far corner of it, but other than that nothing else but the sky was visible.

Ellida and I kissed passionately, our mouths tasting of lime marmalade and toast. We were both fully clothed, but we managed to disrobe pretty quickly. I was worried that someone would see us but she didn’t seem bothered in the slightest.

“Take me now,” she said. “Now!”

This wasn't quite how I imagined our first time would be. The cold was biting and I felt incompetent and shy. She took my hands and made me feel her cunt. Its wetness perplexed me. Then she guided my cock into her with her chilly fingers. Conscious after a while I was doing something I shouldn't – having unprotected sex – I pulled out, jittery with nerves.

Ellida lay on the sand, her lower half naked, but still wearing her yellow jumper.

"I'm worried about the dogs," I said.

Ellida suppressed a giggle. "They are not lost, I hope."

I pulled on my trousers quickly, saying: "We should look for the dogs."

"It's OK. Don't worry," she said. "We'll find them. Just relax."

"Aren't you worried that...?"

"I've just had my period, it should be OK," she said in a matter-of-fact way. She reached into her rucksack and produced the bottle of Aquavit, took a slug, offered me some which I refused, and then took off her yellow jumper and bra. She was now completely naked. She stretched out her arms, showing off her swimmer's body: her sturdy legs and arms, her full hips, her plump breasts and toned shoulders. I couldn't resist -- grabbing the bottle off her, I swigged from it and stripped off naked too.

This time it was better. Much better. Fantastic, in fact. The cold didn't matter. Having unprotected sex didn't matter. In fact, the danger, the sense of going down the long slide to happiness endlessly was magnificent.

When the dogs descended on us, wagging their tails, there was a split second when I believed this had really fucked things up. But then I thought: God, they're only dogs, what do they know about anything? They couldn't tell Granny, could they? I looked down at Ellida, who stared at me as the dogs nosed around us. We burst out laughing as we felt their hot breaths and wet noses nuzzling our goose-pimpled skin. It didn't matter! Nothing could stop us.

Afterwards, Ellida changed into her swimsuit. With the dogs traipsing behind me, I followed her in my underpants and watched as she plunged into the waves. Because the tide was out, the water was shallow and she had to walk a long way to swim. Placing the Aquavit bottle into the wet sand, I ran after her, then when it was deep enough, I dived in. The cold nearly annihilated me. The landscape eddied about me; the ruined teeth of Dunstanburgh castle, the voluptuous mounds of the dunes, the black skin of the Emblestones and the majestic sweep of the sands. I was a poor swimmer, floundering in Ellida's wake. I couldn't see her.

Then suddenly she was upon me, grappling me in the water. It was a strange moment. A moment I have reflected a lot on since. Was she embracing me or was she pulling me under? My mouth filled with salt water and shot up my nostrils. One hand seized my wrist and the other pushed down my face. Was she trying to drown me? Just as I thought I was going to

die, I felt her hands lifting me up from underneath my armpits.

We both surfaced, gasping for air.

“What were you doing? You nearly drowned me!” I shouted.

She laughed. “I wanted to see how far you could go!”

“You were fucking pushing me under!”

“But then I rescued you!” she giggled.

I raced back to the shore, badly shaken. I swigged the Aquavit, dried myself on her towel, and waited for her to return. I was blue with cold, but she appeared impervious to it.

“Yes, you can tell this sea is Norwegian! It’s our sea!” she said, her eyes burning. “I feel like I’ve woken up finally. I’m alert at last. It’s not like the sluggish sea in Brighton or in the swimming pool. This water is really...”

“Cold?”

“Yes!”

“Is that why you tried to drown me, to make me feel part of it?”

“I wasn’t trying to drown you. I just wanted you to feel part of the sea, that’s all!”

“Next time, you can spare me that experience,” I said.

“That’s the price you pay if you come inside me!”

She took my chin in her hands and kissed me. I wanted to protest but I couldn’t because we were wrapped up in each other again.

Once we finished kissing, we dressed and resumed our walk along the coast, picking our way over the volcanic formations by Saddle Rock, and then climbing up into Dunstanburgh castle. This was back in the days when you could still sneak through the fence at the back without paying. With the dogs now on the lead, we watched the seagulls breasting the wind by the castle’s cliff-edge. Then we climbed to the top of the broken tower and surveyed the landscape. From there, we ambled to the quaint fishing village of Craster. By then, we were dry.

We stopped holding hands when we went through the stile and headed down to the harbour. The tide was beginning to come in and water curdled around the fishing boats. My grandparents met us at the Jolly Fisherman where Grandpa bought us half-pints of beer and crab sandwiches, while Granny watched the dogs out in the beer garden overlooking the sea.

Granny expressed her admiration that we’d been swimming but warned us of the currents in the bay. Then she asked: “But tell me Ellida, you must have got married awfully young. How old are you now?”

“Twenty,” she said.

“When did you marry?”

“I was eighteen,” Ellida said, draining her beer glass.

I looked at Granny’s sharp hawk eyes which were so different from Ellida’s big dreamy

green ones.

“In my time, it was common to marry at that age, but now, getting married that young is rare.”

“Even rarer in Norway,” Ellida said.

“So why did you?”

“Granny, can you stop this interrogation!” I said.

Ellida coloured and then said, “Because I was pregnant. I felt it was the right thing.”

Oh.

“And what happened to the child?” Granny asked.

Ellida gazed out to sea dreamily for a moment, and then bowed her head. Not looking into my eyes, she said: “She was born. Two years ago.”

Fuck. Christ. This was the last thing I expected. The absolutely last thing in the fucking world. I scrutinised Ellida but she looked right through me.

“You have a child who is two years old,” Granny said in a maddeningly neutral tone of voice.

“Yes,” Ellida said very quietly.

“Well, isn’t that nice? What’s her name?” Granny said, brightening. Of course, as far as she was concerned, I wasn’t in a relationship with Ellida, I was simply her friend. I, on the other hand, was thrashing around in my mind to make sense of it all. I clutched my stomach, trying to hide my shock. And not be sick.

“She’s called Isolde,” Ellida said.

So, Ellida had a kid and the kid had a name! Fuck, fuck, fuck. This was heavy. I was not involved with a girlfriend but with a mother who had a real child with a real name!

“Isolde Arnholm,” Granny said.

“Yes.”

Ellida hadn’t looked me in the eye since this confession.

“After Tristan and Isolde, possibly?” Granny ventured.

“Yes,” came back the monotone reply.

“So where is she now?”

“She’s in Norway, being looked after by my mother.”

“So why did you come to England if your child is in Norway?” Granny said.

It was the obvious question, but, even in my shock, I could see it was a brutal one.

“I needed to be away from her to get on with my studies. I found it impossible to work around her.”

Tears dropped down Ellida’s sea-freshened cheeks. Her crying softened my astonishment – but only a little.

“I know what that’s like!” Granny said, chuckling. I thought: how can she laugh about

this? “Children do have an amazing capacity to inhibit one’s thought processes! Do you know I gained a First Class Degree in Mathematics at St. Andrews’ University? I don’t think I would have done that with any children around!”

We drove on to Bamburgh sands. Ellida and I didn’t speak -- or look at each other. Now that my panic was dissipating, I felt numb.

At Bamburgh, Granny and Grandpa took the dogs through the village, while Ellida and I paced down to the sea. With her rucksack hooked on her back, Ellida announced that she was going to swim. Without looking at her, I said, with my head bowed, that I wanted to have a look at the white deer painted by the small lighthouse.

“So you’re not coming swimming?” Ellida spat at me.

“Not with you!” I said.

“Why?”

“Last time you nearly drowned me!”

“*Svekling! Feiging!*”

I didn’t know what she was saying but I could guess.

Ellida headed for the sea. I veered to the left, picking my way over the rocks and the pools. The sea anemones and bladder-wracks waved and winked at me.

How was I going to last another four days with her after this revelation?

How could I have taken up with a woman who had a two-year-old child?

How could she have concealed it from me?

I strode further out onto the rocks, nearer where the sea surged against the frozen magma. After sitting there for a while, watching the waves smash against the talons of rock, I returned to the beach where I saw Ellida far away in the water, waving frantically. God -- I thought with a lurch of the stomach -- what is it now? She was doing the crawl towards the shore. I ran towards her and found her running through the waves and grabbing her rucksack – which I’d only just noticed was floating on the surf of the incoming tide.

“Francis! Where were you?! I was shouting!” she said. Dripping wet, she shivered violently. Although it was a warm afternoon, there was a wicked breeze on the beach.

“I was on the rocks, like I said.”

“I was shouting! I thought it was you down here! I was far out when I saw the tide coming in and taking my bag, and I shouted, but you ignored my bag floating on the water.”

“So everything in it is soaked?” I said.

“Even my towel!”

Sandy and Goldy emerged, wagging their tails frantically. Where had they come from? Granny and Grandpa must be near. I didn’t want them to see us rowing like this.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled.

“And you weren’t there! You weren’t bloody well there! I don’t know why I didn’t just try and swim for Norway and drown myself!”

She buried her head in her hands. I thought about patting her on the back but resisted.

“And you’re not even going to offer me your jacket!”

I tore it off and put it on her. This soothed her a little. Picking up her rucksack, I guided her towards the rocks which the lighthouse overlooked, away from the dogs and away from the figures of my grandparents, whose outlines I could see in the distance.

I had an idea that we might be able to dry some of her clothes if we stretched them out on the sun-bathed stone. With my arm around her, Ellida’s sobs died down. By the time we reached the rocks she had recovered her composure. Still draped in my jacket, she sat with her legs pulled up against her breasts as I laid out her shirt, trousers, and towel on the rock. Although I was sorry for her, I was still mightily pissed off.

“Don’t you think you should be with your kid? I mean, instead of with me?” I said.

Ellida’s teeth chattered as she chewed over my words: “Should I be with my kid? This is the question you ask me when I’m shivering to death in my wet clothes. Yes, yes, yes. I suppose you’re not going to bother with me now you know I’ve got a child. I suppose I’m just søppel – rubbish – flotsam – jetsam -- now that you know I’m not the free spirit you thought I was. I suppose you just want to pack me off on the next boat out of here and have done with me. I suppose you wouldn’t have minded if I’d drowned. If all my clothes had been washed away and there was nothing left of me! Once you lost this image of me as a sexy young thing who you could fuck by the seashore, you just thought I was nothing! And do you know what? You’ve got a point. I’d like to be nothing! Just to disappear. To fall underneath those waves and suck in that water and disappear completely and die, die, die!!”

During this monologue, I tried my best to wring the water out of her shirt, twisting it within an inch of its life and then spreading it out on the rock, stretching it as far as I could.

“I don’t think that at all,” I said, my eyes pricking with tears. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said it, it just came out.”

“Shit! Fuck!” she said. “That’s shit! I could see you in that car. I could see your face, and I could read it. Don’t forget I know you Francis. I know you. And you don’t know me. You don’t know me at all. You know fuck all about me.”

I wrung out her socks, laid them on the rock and stood up. “Can you not shout at me, please? I really don’t like it,” I said.

“You don’t like it! Well, how do you think I like it when you fuck me and then fucking reject me! How do you think I like it with all your fucking semen inside me and you fucking walk away like that!”

I couldn’t take this anymore. I decided to run. The dogs galloped off with me.

Having sprinted into the dunes, I stuck my face in the sandy marram grass, feeling the

spiky tendrils against my cheeks and smelling the sea in the hollow.

Granny's voice pierced the wind. "Francis! Francis! We have to go back now!"

She was hoarse. I recognized a degree of concern in her cry. I lifted up my head and saw Ellida and my grandparents walking back to the car on the main sandy path. My grandfather was carrying Ellida's rucksack, and Ellida, still wearing my jacket and in her swimming costume, was holding Goldie on the lead. Granny had grabbed Sandy by the collar. I realised that Granny had given Ellida Goldie as a sort of consolation: she always used to do that if any of her grandchildren got upset.

I trudged over to them. Ellida didn't look up, but Granny did.

"Oh dear, Francis, there was I getting worried about you. I thought you'd done something stupid like gone swimming. I was just warning Ellida about that. The currents here are very treacherous you know."

I agreed. Ellida continued to blank me.

We climbed into the car as Granny carried on: "And to think Ellida had her clothes and rucksack nearly swept away by the sea and that no one was there at all! How terribly upsetting!"

"If a lady goes swimming one should keep a good look out for her," Grandpa said as he started up the car. My grandfather generally said very little, but I realized now that he had a soft spot for Ellida.

Back at Christon Bank, Ellida disappeared into her room. Granny took her wet things and hung them to dry in the garden.

I wandered into the copse next to the house and then through the fields towards the village, Rock. It was a relief not to be by the sea. I liked the solidity of the country ground, the waving corn, the tree-lined footpath, and the intense Englishness of Rock: its cricket pitch overlooking the patchworked countryside, its old blacksmith's forge, its chunky drystone wall, and its Norman chapel and graveyard. Helen Sutherland, a patron of the artists such as David Jones and Kathleen Raine, is buried there. Her gravestone is a place of pilgrimage for me with its Art Deco inscription which reads:

Truth flashing down like the sun, or splashing up at my feet like a fountain.

The words made me think: what was the truth about Ellida and me? Was the child an insuperable obstacle?

When I returned to the old farmhouse, Granny looked up from her biography of Trollope in the dining room and said, "Your friend has told us that she wants to leave."

"When?"

"Now," Granny said.

“Where is she?”

“I’m not sure.”

“But what about her boat? She’s booked it for five days’ time.”

“What can I say? She wants to go now. I am very happy to drive her to Newcastle. She can collect her things at the Grove and then I’ll drive her to the boat. I’m sure she’ll get one soon.”

I looked at the room: the bust-up harmonium, the curled-up poster of the Solar System with its arid pre-Apollo vision of the earth, the piles of books, and the snouts of the dogs underneath the table. Their melting eyes gawked at me as I walked to the window.

“She can’t go just yet,” I said under my breath softly. My grandmother was deaf in one ear so I doubted very much whether she would hear this remark. But she did. Maily, Granny’s elderly cat, creaked up onto her lap as she said, “I do think it’s for the best.”

“She’s not out to get me, if that’s what you mean...”

“If she doesn’t pester you at university, you’ll be free to get on with your work there.”

Granny stroked Maily tenderly, gazing out at the garden.

“I had no idea she had a child.”

I tested the latch to the room called “the Witches’ Cave” – a dark room stuffed full of bric-a-brac, including a moth-eaten moose’s head.

“My goodness me! That explains a few things!” she laughed.

“It’s not funny,” I said.

“What a thing to keep from you! How could she?”

“I don’t know!”

“And perhaps more pertinently, *why* did she?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think I can guess,” she said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I suppose she’s a bit of a pathetic creature, saddled with a child and a husband -- neither of which she wants. She’s probably got some miserable feminist ideas in her head that women should somehow be free of these things – just like your mother did when she divorced your father. You’re best off out of it, Francis. You can come with us to Newcastle, put her on the boat and then forget about the whole thing.”

“You have no understanding of her at all,” I said.

Granny pretended not to hear. I left the kitchen, wended my way down the cool, long corridor, past the grandfather clock and the croquet sets, and stepped out onto the lawn. To my relief, I saw Ellida in the distance. She was wearing a Norwegian smock and gazing at the Christon Bank trees. Her hair had dried and the breeze blew through it, making it rise off her shoulders. She was a picture of loneliness, framed by the blue sky, the old broken wall and

the waving, golden wheat.

“Ellida! Ellida!” I shouted out. She turned around and saw me vaulting over the iron fence. As I hurried across the field in the long grass, the wind seemed to pick up, making it look like the clouds were rushing behind her and the whole country was tilting in her direction.

Her big green eyes narrowed as I approached. Panting, I said, “It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters. I want you to stay.”

Ellida paused.

“I have to go home. I have to go back to Isolde. You’re right. I should have gone back straight after term finished. That was the original plan.”

“And then I came along?”

“Yes.”

“But I want you to stay. We can’t leave things like this, we can’t.”

Ellida walked back to the house. “I need to get my stuff together.”

I could not endure Ellida abandoning me. I remembered when I was eight, after my parents’ divorce, I’d dropped a milk bottle and it had smashed on the floor, catapulting my mother into a furious rage about my selfishness. She’d said that she was far better off without me and my brother, Hal, and that she was leaving. Then she walked out of the house. I remember the blue twilight seeping into the house. Since it was near our bedtime both of us went up to our rooms. I walked up and down my room, my heart thumping painfully. Then I visited my brother and found him lying in bed with his clothes on: his socks were poking out of the bed. He told me to go away.

“Nothing’s happened,” he said.

I went back to my room and continued walking up and down. After what seemed like an eternity, I heard the front door click open. I didn’t dare open my bedroom door but listened as my mother climbed the stairs. A little later, she ran herself a bath. In the guise of pretending to go to the toilet, I stole into the bathroom. My mother was immersed in the water. I told her I needed a wee-wee. Then she said, “Look I’m sorry, but you and Hal can be impossible sometimes.”

That was all I can remember her saying. But in the field, I felt in some obscure way that Ellida’s going home early was similar to my mother’s abandonment.

“You can’t go!” I said, grabbing her arm to stop her. “It’s too much for my grandparents to drive you to Newcastle, and you haven’t booked the boat. You’ll be waiting by the docks for days. You must wait and stay until the boat leaves! We can read books together to help you with your course. I can read *Paradise Lost* to you, and William Blake, and whatever... We can get our heads together.”

Ellida stood before me, unemotional but with a serious face. I could tell she was

computing a lot of things: me, her daughter and the tiresome implications of changing her ticket.

“OK, I’ll stay,” she said.

I leant forward and kissed her; we wandered back to the house, holding hands. My grandfather emerged from the house after some familiar jostling with the stiff door, saying that the car was all ready and that we’d better get moving because Granny wanted to make a move.

“It’s all right Grandpa, can you tell her that Ellida is not going home just yet? And that we’re going for a walk to Rock instead?” I said.

Given the conversation we’d just had, I couldn’t handle telling Granny face-to-face. Grandpa raised his eyebrows but took this in his stride, returning indoors. With a grin, I said to Ellida, “We’d better get going before Granny comes after us!”

We ran across the lawn giggling and then climbed the fence. After we passed through the garden gate at the very end of the fruit-garden, we joined the footpath to Rock. It was my second trip to the ancient village that day, but this time I was going with Ellida. I told her that there was something I wanted to show her, and we walked the rest of the way in silence, holding hands.

Ellida was entranced by Helen Sutherland’s gravestone. Sunlight and shadow dappled her face as she read the inscription to me:

Truth flashing down like the sun, or splashing up at my feet like a fountain.

“This is where I realised the truth,” I said.

“What truth?” Ellida asked, turning to me, her red lips gleaming like berries in the shadow of the yew tree.

“That I love you, that I will love you no matter what, that nothing else matters,” I said.

She let go of my hands and turned back to read the inscription again, this time more slowly.

“This is the place where people know the truth, isn’t it?” she said.

“So what truth do you know?”

I shivered, not because I was spooked but because I was scared that she would say she didn’t love me. Her answer surprised me.

“I had a brother, did you know that?”

“I’m not sure I did.”

Ellida looked at the dark green foliage of the yew tree, swallowing deeply.

“He died. We were living in Oslo. I must have been about nine years old. He was five. I was supposed to be looking after him, but he ran across the road and I saw him run over. I saw him die. Under the wheels of a lorry. I remember the sight of his blood mixing with the

oil. My mother went mad after that. She blamed me. She had to go to an asylum. My parents divorced. We moved to Bergen, away from the place it happened. Nothing was the same afterwards. That's the truth, Francis. That's the truth that is always there in my life, no matter how hard I try, I can't really get away from that truth."

I touched her arm lightly. I thought she was going to cry, but she didn't.

"No. This is the place of truth. I have to tell you it," she said.

While she was telling me about her brother, she hadn't looked me in the eye, fixing her gaze on the yew tree instead, but now she was looking at me.

"I've slept with lots of men, Francis. So many that I don't know how many. When I was a teenager, I was very unhappy. I tried to kill myself twice. I was on medication. I wanted to run away from myself. Not know myself. I had a psychiatrist who I talked to about everything. Then I went to read music at university. At first it was the same thing as at school, I slept with any man who wanted me, then I met Arnholm. I fell in love with him. His power. His compositions. I stopped taking the pill. I wanted his child. I wanted to escape into a life with him. To follow him absolutely. I was very good at music. And he loved me for that. But he wanted to control me. Then Isolde was born. My depression came back again. I was a very bad mother. I couldn't cope with Isolde crying all the time, demanding my attention. Arnholm was no good. He didn't know how to deal with a child either. He is obsessed by his music. Nothing else, except perhaps me, matters to him. My mother loved Isolde. She looks like Tor, my brother. She became the real mother of Isolde. And I needed to get away from her. Arnholm was offered this funded research position at Sussex, doing a PhD. We arranged things so that I could continue my degree at Sussex as well. The plan was that we would go to England to help me recover, to feel myself again, to stop the depression. I would still see my psychiatrist in Norway during the holidays and take the medication.

"But the trouble was the bad feelings didn't go away in Brighton. In fact they got worse. In Bergen, I had loved Arnholm partly because there were so many other people around – my mother, Isolde, my friends at the university, from school, even my father. In that flat in Hove, there was only him, and his obsession with the music. And his belief that music would make me well again. His driving me to practise the bassoon and the piano. We started to have rows about my practising, my studies. I just wasn't motivated to do it. One day on campus, we had a furious row. He accused me of ruining myself through laziness, through lack of commitment. He grabbed me by the arm, trying to pull me home to practise. Mercy saw me. She got into an argument with him immediately, and told me that I should come with her. I formed a friendship with her, which Arnholm hated of course. That's how I came to live with Mercy. But the depression didn't go away. I told Mercy about Isolde. I told her everything. But I didn't want her to tell anyone else. I wanted to reinvent myself. Pretend I wasn't married, or with a child.

“That’s when you came along. With your crazy play and penis hats. I could tell you were damaged like me, but like me I could tell you had this spirit. This power to rise above all the crap. Perhaps even greater powers than me. But I also thought you were an arrogant jerk. Then the night of the play, I watched you get more and more off your face, and saw the way your friends just let you wander off into the woods. I know about drugs. I felt protective of you. And so, I followed you into those woods. I saw you scream and shout about Pilky and his handbag. I saw you sweat. And somehow I felt in control. I felt like I could heal you. Make you better. Felt like I understood you. That I wanted to fall into you. And so that’s what I did. I became you in my head, I questioned and questioned you, falling more and more into you. And it was so liberating! It was so great! Just not to be myself. It was amazing. For the first time since Tor’s death, I actually felt normal. Not normal-normal, but myself. Because I wasn’t thinking about myself. I was thinking about you. And that continued until your grandmother sliced me open today. Somehow I fell out of you with a big crash.”

“Does that mean you don’t love me anymore?”

Ellida considered this for a minute. “I’m not sure what love is. Not sure that I’m capable of it. The people I should love, my parents, my child, my husband, I don’t. I just don’t. I have this cold, neutral feeling for them. Perhaps that’s unfair on myself. Too harsh. But you. You. It’s like I know you very well -- and I don’t know you at all. I know all this stuff you’ve told me, but it’s the stories that have absorbed me, not the actual person. I still feel that I haven’t reached right down. But I want to. And that scares me.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re not the kind of man I’m normally attracted to. Usually, I like men like Arnholm, control-freaks, people who consume other people. You’re not like that at all. You don’t want to turn me into someone I’m not. Your reaction to Isolde tells me that. I mean, you were shocked. Who wouldn’t be? But you still say you love me. And that confuses me. It’s like you might actually really love me, not an image of me.”

We embraced. What had seemed impossible on Bamburgh sands, just a few hours ago, was now happening; I kissed her, and it felt like nothing mattered -- our social identities, our psychological flaws, our family histories – only that our bodies were together again. We leapt over the stile of the graveyard and ran along the deserted route that skirted the old Rock Hall into the woods. It was an area I knew well; I found us a secluded spot and we made love again.

Back at Christon Bank, we found Granny on her knees in the garden pulling up weeds in the shrubbery. She stopped when she saw us approach and stood up.

“So you’ve decided to stay,” she said.

“Of course she has, Granny!” I said. “It was all just a misunderstanding.”

“Grandpa took some time getting the car ready. It’s all been a dashed inconvenience, you know.”

“I’m sure Grandpa doesn’t mind at all. Ellida and I are going to look through his telescope when there’s a properly clear night.”

This mollified her somewhat and she admitted that Grandpa would be pleased about that. Then Ellida offered to do some gardening.

“You’re wearing that pretty dress, you can’t do gardening in that,” Granny said.

“It’s a rural Norwegian dress, designed for hard labour,” Ellida returned, adding with a grin aimed at me. “Besides, it’s all dirty anyway.”

“Well, I’ll get you some gloves then,” Granny said.

I’d never done much of gardening at Christon Bank, preferring to read or go for walks. But Ellida’s desire to help out shamed me into assisting. She was strong, pulling up weeds easily and tossing them onto the lawn. By the early evening, we’d weeded the whole of the back garden’s shrubberies; no mean feat.

Granny was delighted. “It’s never been done this quickly before.”

Covered in soil and dripping sweat, Ellida and I escaped into the huge bathroom. She queried the ridiculous brown water that came out of the ancient taps, but it didn’t stop her stripping off and climbing into the tub. There were all sorts of antique green bath brushes laid across a wire bridge at the front of the bath. After we’d washed for a bit, she got a plastic cup at the side of the bath and poured it over my head. I yelled out. But she carried on soaking my hair. Finding some old shampoo, she massaged my scalp.

“But my hair hasn’t been washed in years!”

“Exactly! If you’re going to share my bed, I can’t have your hair stinking like a filthy bull.”

And so the process of washing my long hair began. Once it was clean, we went to her room and she used her brush to comb it out. It took ages; there were a lot of tangles.

Granny called us down for dinner before it was all finished. She must have heard us mucking around in the bathroom but she made no mention of it, preferring to talk about her Trollope biography instead. Ellida and I made comical faces at each other over our steaming plates of beef stew.

After dinner, Grandpa lit the coal fire for us in the drawing room at the far end of the house, and, once he’d gone, Ellida continued to comb out my hair as we watched the roses pressing their petals against the window.

During the next few days, Ellida discovered her favourite writer was Coleridge. She had never heard of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and so when we read it together the following evening, the poem was entirely new to her. I envied her coming fresh to the poem

in the way she did: I'd hated studying it at school.

After we'd finished reading it on the bench in Christon Bank's garden, she wanted to read it again. I handed the book to her. She sat on the bench by herself as she trawled through the lines again and again, mouthing some of her favourite lines to herself. Eventually, after I'd gone away and come back again, she looked up in the late evening light.

"That is the greatest piece of writing ever!" she said.

"Some people say it is," I said.

We spent a lot of time talking about the poem's possible interpretations and its incredible characters: the Ancient Mariner, the sailors, the albatross, Death-in-Life, Life-in-Death, the hermit, and the wedding guest. By now I was familiar with Ellida's bizarre way of twisting every piece of art she liked into an allegory about love.

"Francis, I've got it! It's about love!"

"Ellida, everything you like is about love! There is no way that the Ancient Mariner is about love!"

"The Mariner is the lover, a lover of the sea. He shoots the albatross because he wants to stay at sea – he is willing to sacrifice everything -- everyone's lives, his own -- for his love of the sea. And then he's punished. And has to tell the story of his love to anyone who will listen!"

"But it doesn't hang together. The sea isn't the Mariner's lover. He doesn't make love to it, he doesn't speak to it; he doesn't have any real interaction with it."

Ellida stomped over to the iron fence that demarcated the end of the croquet lawn. She held the fat tome of the *Oxford Book of English Verse* in her hands, with one finger wedged in the place where the poem was.

"I'm sorry," I said, following and putting my hands on her shoulders.

She shrugged me off.

"What do you know with your boy ways and your boy cock and your boy words!"

I stepped back. Ellida held the poem close to her eyes because the light was fading fast. Then she looked up triumphantly.

"Here! I knew you were wrong! Completely wrong. This is it. Listen to this, you SUCKER!"

O happy living things ! no tongue
Their beauty might declare :
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware :
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware.

"If that isn't a love hymn to the sea, what is!?!"

“You and the fucking sea,” I said. “Can’t you see there’s more to life than the sea?”

“Yes, love!” she said, approaching me with a big smile because she felt she’d won the argument. She kissed my irritable mouth, sliding her tongue against my teeth like one of Coleridge’s water snakes. I found myself sucked into her again. *The Oxford Book of English Verse* dropped out of her hand as we maneuvered ourselves into the long grass beyond the croquet lawn.

We leapt apart because we were interrupted by my grandfather who spoke in his soft, kind voice above us. Had he seen anything? If so, he wasn’t letting on.

“Would either of you two be interested in seeing Jupiter? He’s marvellously clear tonight.”

Smoothing down her hair, Ellida declared a real interest. Reluctantly, I followed my grandfather across the lawn, past the great green bush and through the old stone threshold in the fruit and vegetable garden. My grandfather kept his telescopes there. Tonight, he’d opened up his biggest telescope, pulling back the old tin roof and angling the huge refractor lens at the emerging night sky. Ellida examined the Heath Robinson set-up with all its wires, tubes and funnels as my grandfather explained that he’d got the mirror for the telescope from a Second World War reconnaissance plane in Newcastle, which had been left abandoned in a rubbish tip.

“Just look at the quality of the light! Clear as crystal tonight! Marvellous!” my grandfather said.

I peered through the lens after Ellida and looked at the bright dot. Then Grandpa presented us Mars, Venus and Saturn. By now it was dark enough for him to show us the North Star as well. Ellida was knowledgeable about the constellations, talking about them in a way that I didn’t understand.

After we’d finished, I asked her how she knew all that stuff.

“All mariners have to know that stuff!” she said. I remembered the sailor boyfriend who had disappeared at sea and thought about asking whether he’d taught her. But I didn’t want to talk about old boyfriends tonight.

The moon was nearly full. It shone gloriously upon the dunes as we walked hand in hand towards the broken, black teeth of the castle.

Ellida began to sing in German. I had never heard the song before but followed it intensely, picking out phrases “Mein vater! Mein vater” and “ich liebe dich”. It filled the moonlit air, shivering over the sea in a ghost-like fashion.

We were pretty close to the castle when she finished.

“God, you’ve got an amazing voice!”

Ellida kissed me on the cheek.

“That was my audition piece for getting onto the music degree at Bergen.”

“What is it?”

“It’s called the Erl King. It’s about a father and son rushing through the night, and the son realizing that there is this evil fairy, the Erl King, trying to snatch him away. In the end the son dies because his father doesn’t believe the Erl King is there.”

“God, how horrible!”

Ellida giggled. “The person I love is the Erl King. He has the best melody.”

Ellida sang the Erl King’s melody again, “Ich liebe dich” and I saw what she meant. Although I was unnerved by her love of the song, I joined in, and soon was singing “ich liebe dich” quite merrily as we jaunted past the gorse bushes and the bleating sheep towards what I now thought of as the “Erl King’s castle”. Once we reached the grounds, we climbed over the gate, ascended to the top of the tower and peered over the coast holding hands.

We sipped from the hip flask I’d brought along. We were tipsy but not drunk.

“Fuck me here,” Ellida said, gripping my hand quickly. Her green eyes glowed like a cat’s in the darkness. “Ich liebe dich!”

We took all our clothes off: it was chilly but we didn’t care. I took her from behind as she gripped onto the stony wall that separated off the tower from the night. Her cunt was very wet. As I thrust into her, she said, “Promise me here, on this broken tower, that you are mine forever.”

“What like, you want me to marry you?”

“Kind of. Not properly, not stupidly, but to make a promise that you’ll never go back on.”

“What kind of promise?”

“A fuck promise so that you’ll always fuck me whenever I ask you to.”

“I’ll sign up for that one,” I said, picking up the pace now.

Faster, faster and faster.

She howled at the moonlit sky making the sea shiver and ripple silver light. I knew I loved her more than myself.

My orgasm was like nothing I’ve felt before or since. When I withdrew, Ellida rested her back against the wall, opened her legs wide, grabbed my hand and made me massage her clitoris.

“Ugh! Your finger nails are too long!” she said, slapping me on the face playfully. “I’ll have to do it myself!”

So she masturbated in front of me, laughing when she felt my semen dribbling out of her cunt. With her other hand, she took my semen and licked it off her fingers. Soon, I was back inside her again.

When we got back to Christon Bank, I lay in her arms all night. We spent our time fucking whenever we could for the rest of her stay. We would fuck before breakfast, and then after

breakfast disappear into the nearby woods and fuck some more. On most afternoons, Granny would drive us to coast and we'd go for a walk in the deserted dunes, where, of course, we'd fuck. We'd return home for supper and usually fuck before going to sleep. It was one amazing fuck-fest. Although some of the time, our fucking was unprotected, we found a chemist in Alnwick and bought a big box of condoms. From then on, I was more careful. Ellida didn't seem that worried.

"We'll deal with it," she said, shrugging her shoulders.

The house was very big and so it didn't matter how much noise you made in her bedroom, which was on the opposite wing to my grandparents. During our whole stay, they rarely ventured to 'our' side of the house. Was this deliberate? Possibly. There were times when I wondered how much Granny knew.

In the early hours of the morning that she was due to leave, Ellida got up and pulled back the curtains and meditated upon the trees in the moonlight. I held her by the window. Her lips were trembling.

"I don't want to go back, Francis," she said. "I really don't want to go back."

"Why?"

"I don't know if I can tell you. It's too terrible to think of. To say."

"You can tell me. You can tell me anything."

"And you won't judge me. You won't think me a terrible person?"

"No. I promise."

She buried her head in my chest.

"I don't want to see her. I'm frightened of seeing her."

"Who?"

"My daughter."

Granny and Grandpa waited in the Citroen as I walked with her into the ferry terminal by the Tyne. I was teary-eyed as I said goodbye but Ellida was cheerful. "Goodbye Francis," she said at the departure gate. She leaned towards me: "Don't forget our promise now, will you?"

She pulled me into the women's toilets and we found a cubicle. We kissed again. I pulled down her shirt and kissed her right breast. Then I felt horribly self-conscious. I said she had to go. She looked down at other breast. "You have to kiss that first."

I obliged, plunging my face into her chest. She leant back and moaned.

At the gate, she seized my hands like a sea captain and hugged me.

"Remember I won't look behind me! And you're not to either! It's very bad luck!" she said.

With that, we walked our separate ways.

Back at The Grove, after I'd emerged from listening to the Smiths in my room, Granny said that Grandpa wanted a word with me. This was unprecedented. Never in my entire life had Grandpa had a "word" with me.

I was told to sit down underneath the portrait of his father, the Naval Commander, also named Francis Gilbert. Granny hovered in the background, prompting him.

"I think we need to remind Francis about marriage vows," she said, with her arms folded.

"Yes," my grandfather said, adjusting the pipe in his mouth. He looked me seriously in the eye and said: "Now, it is my sincere advice that you should resist any more contact with Ellida until she is properly divorced. As it stands, I suspect you may be cited in any divorce proceedings, which would be difficult for you."

"You don't know the situation. She's separated from her husband."

"Nevertheless, she is still married, am I correct?"

"Yes, as far as I know."

"Cecil, please remind him about the child issue," my grandmother said.

"Furthermore," my grandfather said, now lighting his pipe. "There is the matter of her child to consider. You are very young Francis. I wouldn't advise you to become a stepfather at your age."

"I'm not going to get married to her!" I exclaimed.

"I am merely stressing to you the dangers of becoming entangled with this woman."

Granny's eyes dissected me. I turned away.

Chapter 3: Mercy

“So, I’ve worked out that I want to publish a series of magazines that will be so good, they’ll also be proper books. They’ll focus upon the elements: the first issue will be on the wind, the next water, then earth and fire. I want to commission the best photographers and writers to meditate upon these subjects in the modern context. The magazine will be called Element! What do you think?”

Hadley and I are sitting in Café Crema by a stack of gluten-free chocolate brownies. It is early January and frost laces the windows. One of the perks of Hadley’s new job is that she doesn’t have to get into the office until 10am and can have a cappuccino with me after Jack has gone off to school.

I have decided to keep my magazine plans from her until now for a few reasons. First, I’ve needed the psychic space to dream about it all. Second, there’s been Christmas and loads of family stuff to deal with. Third, I’m frightened of Hadley’s possible reaction: after my discussion with her about my book ideas went so badly wrong, I determined that this must go right. It won’t be late at night after I’ve drunk too much wine, it won’t be when she’s really tired, and it won’t be badly thought-through. It will be a proper pitch.

I scan her face and see her hesitating before she says: “It sounds very interesting... Maybe you could explain it to me a bit more?”

“If you insist. The first issue is going to be about wind. I’m going to get some poets, short story writers and historians to write about the hurricane of 1987; to use this as a focal point for a more general meditation on the implications of wind both at a physical and metaphorical level. I want to have some great photography and pictures in there dealing with wind. I want to give people a free rein over this. I want to commission a set of illustrations to Shelley’s poem *Ode To The West Wind*, but I don’t want be too prescriptive. The second issue is going to be water. I want to have a set of new illustrations for *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which we will print in full. I want poems, stories, meditations on water in its myriad forms...”

“Sounds amazing.”

“Do you think so?”

“You’re really onto something!”

I reach for one of the gluten-free brownies and bite into its moist, chocolatey centre, feeling flushed with my success. I offer Hadley a bite, but she refuses. “I feel proud that you’re having such creative ideas.”

“All I need to do now is to get someone to fund the whole thing.”

“Yes.”

Perfect. Now I take the plunge.

“I was thinking that Josiah might be a good person to approach.”

“Josiah?”

“After all, my whole idea is educational as well as artistic, it’s exactly the kind of thing Learning for Life should be sponsoring, and they have the resources to do it properly.”

“Budgets are tight at the moment.”

“You’re on £80K, and Josiah is on double that, and the charity has a turn-over of millions. Come on, Learning for Life is not strapped for cash.” God knows where that cash comes from; but with the Government banging on about “closing the attainment gap” I’m not surprised they’ve got all this dosh.

“He’s very busy at the moment.”

“But you could ask him, couldn’t you?”

“He’s away on a business trip.”

“Video-conference him?”

“It might be better for you to look at other funding streams as well.”

Hadley glances at her watch and tells me that she has to go. She pecks me on the cheek and flies out of the door without finishing her coffee.

Taking my customary walk that day, I climb to the top of Telegraph Hill and look at the smiling mothers in the playground, and think that they seem so straight-forward. Why didn’t I marry someone like them?

Later on I do all the things I’m expected to do: the shopping, the laundry, the washing-up, picking up Jack from school, helping him with his homework, and the preparation for the evening meal. I’ve made chicken, legs and thighs roasted in the oven; Jack always loves them. But of course when Hadley gets home she fusses over what I’ve done; more salt, another grind of pepper; “This just needs a squeeze of lemon,” I hear her say, not quite to herself. She doesn’t take me seriously; she’s never going to ask Josiah; she thinks my idea is a joke. As soon as Jack’s gone to bed, and we’re getting ready to watch *Borgen*, I let rip: “You’re not going to ask him, are you? You think my magazine is a stupid joke, don’t you?”

Hadley nearly drops her glass of Chablis. “What are you talking about?”

“You haven’t asked him, have you?”

She composes herself and then says: “I have thought about it and I’ve worked out a plan which involves you getting to know him better. We should invite him and his wife over for dinner, and you should talk to him properly. That way, when you do put your proposal to him, you’ll feel comfortable and do a good job at selling your idea.”

“That won’t work.”

“Why not?”

“He doesn’t like me. He likes you.”

“That’s not true.”

“He’ll do what you say. That’s the truth.”

“I’m sure he’ll be interested if you talk to him, you’ll do a much better sales-job than I ever could.”

* * *

The wind has shoed away most people: the beach is deserted. Although the sun is shining, it’s cold for the early summer. My eyes water. Jack and I find a place on the shingle very close to the spot where Ellida and I sat all those years ago; sitting here on Brighton beach it’s as if I’ve slipped through a wormhole; those days with Ellida seem so close.

I open the packet of Percy Pigs and hand it to Jack.

“Dad, can I have all of this?”

I take off my shoes and socks. “Why not?”

“But will mum mind?”

“She’s not here.”

I wink at him and, after spending far too much time ripping open the packaging of the salmon I bought in M&S, put a sliver of the raw fish on a cracker. Then I open my little bottle of whiskey, and take a swig straight from the bottle.

“Dad, should you be drinking that?”

“Every now and then it’s fine.”

“But Dad, it’s alcohol!”

He reads out aloud that it’s 40% proof.

I swallow my salmon cracker, pour some whiskey into a paper cap, sip at it and lie back on the pebbles, staring up at the sky, feeling the fiery liquid.

Jack puts down his packet of sweets and rests on the pebbles too.

I eat another salmon-topped cracker and say before eating it: “This is our holy communion. We are eating the body of the sea, and drinking its blood. We give thanks to sea for enabling us to live, and curse it because we are not fish or birds.”

“Dad, what are you talking about?”

“Nothing really. Just remembering.”

I lean to one side and kiss his forehead, smelling his child’s hair, feeling his child’s skin. Scooping his bundled form into my chest, I say: “I came here a long, long time ago. And talked about something that happened when I was older than you. It was the first time I’d ever talked about it.”

“About what?”

“About my unhappy childhood.”

He takes another Percy Pig and snuggles into me.

“So what happened?”

“When?”

“What happened in the story you told on the beach?”

“I was trying to explain to this person why I was once called ‘Pilk’”

“What person?”

“The person I was on the beach with.”

“What was his name?”

“Her name...”

“Her name, then.”

The gender is immaterial to Jack. He just needs a name.

I drink more whiskey.

“She was called Ellida.”

Jack rummages about for more sweets as he thinks. “Why did she want to know about ‘Pilk’?”

“Because she was interested.”

He presses a Percy Pig between his fingers.

“Was she your girlfriend?”

“I suppose so.”

“Did mum know her?”

“It was before I met mum.”

I dig my elbows back into the pebbles. I can imagine Ellida enjoying Jack’s interrogation.

“So Dad, why were you called Pilk?”

“It was just silly nickname. Just a random one.”

Jack puts his small hand on my wrist.

I stand up and flex my arms. “Do you know what? I think I’m going to go for a swim!

Will you sit here with my stuff?”

“But Dad you haven’t got your trunks -- and you’ll die!”

“Alright... Besides, I think it’s time we visited an old friend of mine...”

“Who?”

“You’ll see!”

Mercy lives in a house in Hove overlooking the sea. The seagulls caw over her roof-top; reflections of grey clouds scud in her windows. When she opens the door, she appears both different and the same. Her dress is no longer Nigerian: she’s wearing a floral top and jeans. Her hair is shorter. But her face is as I remember it: broad and warm and knowing.

She hugs me and then makes a fuss over Jack. I explain briefly to him that I was at college with Mercy, but neither of us mention Ellida. We sit on a comfy sofa in Mercy’s front room,

which is a proper professor's study: shelves of books reach to the ceiling, and there's a huge bureau covered with papers. Beside the sofa, on top of the desk is a big photograph of a handsome young man in his graduation robes.

"Kem-baby?" I say, incredulous.

"Yes!"

After chatting for a bit, Mercy opens some double wooden doors at the far end of the room and we follow her into the kitchen, where she makes me coffee and Jack a hot chocolate. She explains proudly that Kem is doing a Masters' degree in Chemistry in the US. She talks for some time about how she had to fight him for him to get a good education in Brighton, teaching him herself; it was hard for him being an only child of a single mother. And a black kid. But they both pulled through. Now she's a professor at Sussex, and he's on course to achieving a promising career as a scientist. She asks Jack how he is getting on at school and he says he likes drawing things. She listens sympathetically. Her attention to him impresses me because I find concentrating difficult: the whiskey has made me feel tired and headachey.

Jack sips his hot chocolate in front of the TV mounted on a shelf in front of the kitchen table. Mercy switches it on for him.

"Now then, Jack, will you watch telly while we have a chat in the front room?"

Jack is eager. He never gets the chance to watch TV on Saturdays because he's usually at his Music School. Mercy leads me into the front room.

I sit down on her sofa again.

"Are you OK, Francis?" Mercy says, sitting beside me on the sofa. She squeezes my knee. She's very tactile – I remember that – but it isn't a come-on, just friendliness. She sniffs.

"Have you been drinking?"

My first instinct is to say no, but then I say yes.

"What's going on, you silly man?"

"Your email..."

"You got a shock?"

I bite my lip. "I just can't believe she didn't want to say goodbye."

"She knew you had your own life."

"She did?"

"Yes, I think she did, and she really didn't stay in touch with many people. I only visited her a few times when she was sick. What I know mostly comes from Arnholm. He's teaching music at the university. I see quite a lot of him. We get on better now. Ellida had been working abroad for an NGO and lived in Africa and the Far East for a few years. And that she wasn't very careful about putting on sun-cream. She got skin cancer, and it wasn't picked up soon enough. She bought a big house here in Brighton so that she and Isolde could live in it. I think finally mother and daughter bonded. But he told me the end was bad. She died in the

house. Isolde nursed her during the final stages and had a breakdown after Ellida's death. She was in a mental hospital for a while. She's out now and is back in the house where her mum died. Ellida left her everything and Ellida's parents have helped her too. She's a wealthy young woman, but I'm not sure that's good. It means she hasn't got anything to work for. And now Arnholm has moved in with her. Although he does OK with his soundtracks and lecturing, I don't think he's very well off."

"So Arnholm and Isolde are living together in Brighton in the house where Ellida died?"

"Yes."

I puff out my cheeks. "That's weird."

"I've got his email if you want to contact him."

I walk to the window: the gun-metal sea ripples at the end of the street. "Do you think that would be a good idea?"

"It might help you...He's nicer. He helped Ellida when she was dying."

These words slice into me. "He was always trying to help."

Jack and I leave shortly after that. We wander around the Brighton lanes, looking in the knick-knack shops. It starts to rain. We shelter under an awning. I think about Ellida dying in Brighton and wonder why she never contacted me. It would have been so easy for me to see her. But perhaps she didn't want me to see her like that? I am curious about Isolde and Arnholm living in the house. I would like to see them.

When it becomes obvious the weather is getting worse, we decide to head home. As we trudge through the downpour up the hill to the station, I remember walking arm in arm along exactly the same route with Ellida on a much sunnier day. Half-remembered lines and images from Thomas Hardy's poem, "At Castle Boterel", come back to me. Hardy was visiting Boscastle in Cornwall after the death of his first wife, Emma, and remembering his courtship in the same place many years before. He cogitates upon the primeval rocks of the landscape there and queries whether a place ever saw a moment of such quality as their love brought to it. I ask myself the same question: did these shops ever see a moment of such quality as that time when Ellida and I walked hand in hand up to the station?

I become conscious of my son's smaller hand in mine as we run up the hill. He's laughing! This escape from the rain is fun! What a fool I am! This moment as I hold my son's hand is just as important – no, much more important -- than that one all those years ago!

When we reach the station, I buy a packet of pink bubble gum. As the train pulls out of grey old Brighton, Jack and I blow bubbles. I wonder whether I should contact Arnholm. I have his mobile phone number and email address on a post-it note. I crumple it up and put it in a bin in the train toilet.

As we're trundling past Gatwick, Jack says: "Do you like being unemployed?"

“I’m not unemployed.”

“That’s what mum says you are.”

“She doesn’t.”

“She does to Josiah.”

“When?”

“On the phone, she talks to him a lot.”

“When?”

“When you’re out.”

Pause.

“Just a sec, I need to go to the toilet!” I say.

I run back to the bin where I dumped Arnholm’s contact details and retrieve the post-it note, feeling sick as my hand picks past a rotten apple core and an old pasty.

Part Three

Chapter 1: The Surrealist party

The golden leaves swirled around Herzog's wheels as I cycled down to the seafront. My legs were skittish against the pedals, my stomach was churning. After what had seemed like centuries, I was about to see Ellida again. The summer had gone: its blue light, Norwegian picnics and promises had become the autumn.

I turned onto the promenade and cycled towards Hove. During the two months we'd been apart, she had written me four long letters: not many compared with the tons I'd scribbled to her. But how I treasured each one! I had liked her letters because they were full of comments about Norwegian myths, her interpretations of the English Literature she was reading, and her walks in the Norwegian countryside. She didn't mention her daughter.

She was lodging in the bottom floor of a large Victorian house in a road just off the seafront in Hove. The garden was overgrown with a big bush shrouding the portico entrance to the flat. As I pulled Herzog into the garden, I heard noises from behind the bush. Suddenly, a small blonde-haired girl tumbled out at me, shouting at the top of her voice. It was hard to tell whether she was laughing or crying.

The little girl stopped shouting and looked at the bike quizzically. I knew who she was immediately. Her green eyes were Ellida's but she was unmistakably Arnholm's child: bold chin, big nose, solemn expression.

"*Bestemor, sykkelen er ødelagt!*" she said, pointing at the spinning wheels of Herzog lying on the ground.

Ellida, Arnholm and a tanned, wrinkly woman emerged from behind the bush. I froze. The last person I wanted to see was Arnholm.

"Francis, it's so good to see you! *Bestemor*, this is the writer I was telling you about. Francis, this is Hilde, Ellida's mother," he said, turning to the wrinkly woman wedged against his arm and shoulder. She was dressed in a smart black puffer jacket and green slacks. You could tell that she was well-off from her clothes – but looking older than her years because of her exposure to the sun. Behind her appearance, I could see Ellida.

I squirmed as Arnholm put his arm around me.

"So you are the author of the play in the woods?" Hilde said, grinning. "Very good. And very naughty too! I saw the pictures."

Ellida scooped up Isolde into her arms and said: "Izzy and I were going to look at stones by the sea. Maybe you two guys would like to go off for a drink?"

And so I found myself trundling Herzog back up the street making polite conversation

with Arnholm, while Ellida, Izzy and Hilde went down to the sea. The whole episode mystified me until we turned a corner and Arnholm said, “It’s all right Francis. Don’t you worry! I know why you really came. Ellida told me everything.”

“Oh,” I said, looking down at Herzog’s ragged saddle and spattered wheels.

“We have to pretend for Isolde’s sake that we are still together. Ellida’s parents don’t know we are separated. They are paying for us to come and study here.”

I didn’t know what to say. We kept walking, side by side. “I’ve come to accept a lot of things this summer, Francis. It’s been hard for me, but one thing I know is that being here is right for me, and right for Ellida too. We didn’t get on. I realize that now. But we will always have Isolde, and we will be there for her. Above all, I know I am supposed to be here. My composition *Flight* is the most important thing in my life, and it’s here that I’ll write it.”

We headed through the back streets, towards Brighton. As we talked about his summer I realised a few things:

He’d been staying in Bergen with Ellida and Isolde.

They’d been walking in the mountains and travelling along the fjords.

The pair of them had been pretending to be together to get money from Ellida’s rich, divorced parents.

By the time I left Arnholm, I realised I could never be the person he was to her. I didn’t have a child with her, I didn’t know her parents and I didn’t know her language. I felt I didn’t know anything about her. What was I thinking of? I was a distraction. A plaything. A promise – but what did that really mean?

That evening, I watched a Derek Jarman film, *The Last Of England*, at our local cinema, the Duke of York’s. Jarman himself had come down to introduce the film. He had recently come out about being HIV positive and in the pub afterwards he talked about Aids. His honesty felt in marked contrast to Ellida’s.

The next day, Ellida got hold of me.

“Francis, I’m sorry, I thought my mum was leaving, but she wanted to stay. You can come around tonight. Isolde’s still with me. You don’t mind, do you?”

When I cycled round at tea-time, I found Ellida in the living room, smoking a cigarette as Isolde played with a glockenspiel. I kissed her hello and sat opposite her at the main table drinking a cup of tea. She said maintaining the façade of being married to Arnholm all summer had been very troubling. I glanced at Isolde. Did she understand us?

Ellida told me she only spoke a little English. Her talk partially reassured me: it was full of the difficulties of trying to pretend she was still with Arnholm and the nightmarish qualities of her parents. She wasn’t particularly interested in hearing about my summer. I thought nostalgically back to those amazing conversations we’d had back then. It didn’t make sense to

me.

Seeing that Isolde was growing restless, I played with her, trying as best I could to block out Ellida's dreary monologue. Isolde smiled and chattered away in Norwegian. I tried to teach her some English words: train, brick, and tracks.

Ellida asked if she could go out for a bit. "I just need to walk to the sea by myself. Could I do that?"

I agreed and continued playing with Isolde. As soon as her mother had gone, Isolde started crying, "Sweeties! Sweeties!"

"I don't have any, Izzy," I said, miming hopelessly that I had empty pockets. Isolde wailed in Norwegian. I recognized the nature of her sobs: they were like Ellida's.

I picked her up and felt her cheeks against my face. She smelt of cigarettes and milk and sweets. She calmed down a little as I showed her around the room and then took her outside into the back garden. But when I tried to put her down on the grass, she wailed again, reaching for my arms.

I showed her the garden, giving her the English names of things there: apple tree, bushes, earth. She was heavy and my arms ached, but I didn't mind; it reminded me of looking after my half-sister, Deborah, when she was little. She'd acted similarly if our mother had gone out and left me in charge. I knew that a confident tone and playfulness generally did the trick.

A tall blonde woman strolled into the garden, wearing thick black spangly Buddy Holly glasses, a long green dress, and white pumps. She was more like someone from a 1950s shampoo commercial than a Sussex university student.

"Hey you, what are you doing with Ellida's kid?"

Isolde jumped out of my arms, and ran towards her.

"Shirley! Shirley! Sweeties!"

The woman reached into a silver handbag and wobbled some Smarties out of the brightly-coloured tube. Isolde stuffed her mouth greedily as Shirley looked at me.

"Well, what hipster do we have here?"

Her accent was American Mid-West and her manner flirtatious. Not knowing how much she knew, I mumbled that I was Arnholm's friend. She poked me playfully in the stomach with her elbow, winking as she did. "I know all about you!"

High on the sugar rush of the Smarties, Isolde ran around the garden, enjoying the freedom of the grass. It was a beautiful autumn day and I realised that I had not known Ellida in this season. Our love had been a summer love.

Shirley, did indeed seem to know quite a bit about me but it was difficult to tell if she knew Ellida and I were lovers. She knew about the course I was studying, my play in the woods, my Northumbrian grandparents, and my London upbringing. It was strange hearing her saying in her American accent: "So you're the kid that's got the crazy English education

and the grandparents from heaven! I would just love to have a grandpa like yours, looking at the stars and the universe, wouldn't that be the most poetical concept in the world?"

I wondered if she was trying to impress me. She told me she was studying for an MA in the Novel, had a lecturer who she was "ditzzy" about, and was writing a book.

"At first it was going to be about every idea in the world of epistemology, but now I've decided to cut it down to being about all the magnificent ideas in the world. It's a kind of alphabetical book: it starts with all the great ideas beginning with A."

"How far have you got with it?"

"I'm still on A!"

"So you've got work to do?"

"Yes, well, maybe. I'm thinking of changing it again to being about a girl called Shirley from Cleveland, who's writing a book about all the ideas in the universe – but she only gets as far as A because reality intervenes!"

The conversation tailed off when another girl popped into the garden. She was small and dark haired, barely five foot with a fresh face.

Shirley screeched joyfully at her.

"This is him! Our little Northumbrian playwright!" Shirley said. "And this is a woman who is having an affair with a very famous poet!"

The small woman pinched Shirley playfully on the wrist.

"Shirley, don't say that! He's not famous at all!"

"He's published, isn't he? And he has a wife!" she said.

"Shirley!" the woman protested.

Shirley told me the name of the poet. I'd heard of him. Much of his verse was about having doomed extra-marital affairs.

"This, Francis, is Emily but we all call her Bronte for short."

Emily blushed but laughed quite generously. I could see that she loved Shirley. I was to learn later that they'd been living together for a year and had become the closest of friends.

When Ellida re-appeared, she seemed refreshed. She scooped Isolde in her arms and kissed her, burying her head in her daughter's golden hair and saying stuff to her in Norwegian. I hung around, but it was obvious that Ellida wanted me to go by the way she pretended I wasn't there.

She followed me to the door as I was leaving.

"I'm sorry, Francis. I'm sorry," she said, squeezing my hand. "When Isolde's gone home, things will be better...I just need you to be patient that's all."

"When's she going?" As soon as I asked the question, I regretted it.

"At the end of the week," Ellida said. "But maybe you'll come around for tea tomorrow? I'll be in a better mood then, I promise!"

I kissed Ellida goodbye -- a formal adieu. When I reached the end of the garden path, she appeared from behind the bush and kissed me again, this time more passionately. She tasted of cigarettes. It made me realise she'd stopped smoking in Northumberland.

"I love you, Francis, don't forget that," she said. She reached for my hand and shoved it down the front of her jeans, inside her panties before she pushed me away again, laughing.

Even though going to the Victorian house made my stomach knot with tension, I persisted in seeing Ellida and Isolde. Ellida never seemed that happy with Isolde in the flat; she kept smoking at the table as Isolde played on the floor and gawped at the television. Although I tried not to judge Ellida, I found it hard: this was no way to treat a child. On my third visit, I felt that Isolde's good humour was deteriorating too.

It was only when we went out to the sea that I saw Ellida showing some love towards her daughter. Ellida resisted going out because it meant getting so much stuff together: the pushchair, Isolde's coat and mittens, crackers and sweets. But I was desperate to get out of the gloomy flat and said that we could just go. I put Isolde's coat on her and carried her outside. Ellida followed.

On the pavement, Ellida was terrified that Isolde would run out into the road since she wasn't strapped to the pushchair. As soon as the little girl ran on slightly ahead, Ellida screamed at her to stop and grabbed her so tightly that she cried. Although I understood her fear, I was still shocked by it. It was as if her brother's death had left her imprisoned by anxiety.

"We should go back," Ellida said. "Isolde's not ready for this!"

"Just relax," I said. "I used to take my little sister out loads of times and it was fine."

Ellida studied my expression to see if I meant what I said.

"Well, you keep up with her then!" she snapped. "I'm going to have a cigarette."

I ran ahead with Isolde, hollering at Ellida that I would see her on the beach. Once Isolde was free of her mother, she relaxed. As I had done in the garden, I pointed at the things around us and said their English names: street, car, shops, van and, once we'd turned the corner, the sea.

Isolde loved the beach, running along it, picking up pebbles. She laughed when we threw stones into the sea. Ellida joined us and began to chuck pebbles in too. We built little mounds of pebbles and then promenaded onto the pier. Once we were at the end, I picked up Isolde and pointed at France invisible in the grey light.

"France!" I said, and then pointing at myself, I added: "Sea!"

"Sea!" Isolde repeated.

"Oh my God, Francis, you've got her speaking English!" Ellida said.

On the way back to the house, we all ambled together happily. Isolde no longer wanted to

run off.

“How do you do it, Francis?” Ellida said.

“What do you mean?”

“Get children on your side.”

I wanted to say: pay them attention -- but I resisted.

“You know what to do,” I said.

“I don’t,” Ellida said. “I really don’t.”

“I saw you on the beach playing with her. You were great.”

“I was?”

“Yes, you were.”

Ellida was grateful for my reassurance. She explained that her mother was forever telling her what a bad mother she was; when they were in Norway, Hilde would take Isolde away from her, chiding her that she didn’t know what she was doing.

When I went round on Sunday, I found a silver BMW parked outside the flat. Inside there was a large gathering. Isolde was sitting on Hilde’s knee. Sitting with a glass of schnapps in one hand and a cigarette in his other, a handsome man with silver hair in a very expensive grey wool suit pondered me with bright sea-green eyes. Ellida’s father, Leif. He seemed affable and spoke perfect English.

“It is nice that Isolde’s two grandparents should take her home,” he said, adding with a wink: “Even though we are divorced! You see, that’s the way we do things in Norway.”

There was something very odd about Arnholm and Ellida still pretending to be together if Leif exhibited no shame in being divorced. I couldn’t figure it out.

Ellida was comfortable with him. While she had spoken disparagingly about him to me, she was a Daddy’s girl in his presence. Meanwhile, Arnholm made a pretence that he and I were great mates. Leif didn’t seem very interested: once he finished his schnapps, he clapped his hands together and said that it was time to go. Both Arnholm and Ellida fussed over the bags and the pushchair, falling over each other to take the stuff out to the car. It was rather too obvious that they wanted Ellida’s parents to depart as soon as possible. I hung about in the background as they said goodbye. The light was melancholic, threatening rain.

A child’s cry pierced the air. Isolde extended her arms towards her mother, struggling to get out of her grandmother’s grasp as she screamed: “Mor! Mor! Mor!”

Ellida tried to laugh it off, chattering away in Norwegian at her and tickling her cheeks with laboured jollity. I found it difficult to watch. I thought: this is wrong. Isolde should be with her mother, not with that old crone.

However, Leif smoothed everything over, taking the child in his arms and twirling her around. Ellida and Arnholm looked at him admiringly. With expert smoothness, he deposited

the child in the back of the car, strapping her into the child seat so deftly that she forgot that she was being separated from her mother. Ellida and Arnholm waved them off, still holding hands.

They broke away from each other as soon as the car had disappeared and began arguing in Norwegian. Ellida burst into tears. Arnholm stomped off down the street.

“What was that about?” I asked Ellida.

“I said I was going to tell my parents the truth. That I couldn’t stand it anymore. Arnholm wasn’t too happy. It means he might not live in the style to which he’s accustomed.”

“Your Dad would cut the funds to him?”

“Probably.”

“But why? I don’t get it. He’s divorced from your mum.”

“But he doesn’t want us to make the mistakes he and mum made. Or at least that’s what he tells us.”

“Still sounds weird to me.”

Ellida sighed. “The real reason is because he’s a total control freak, and this is yet another way he can control us. He didn’t approve of Arnholm at first and tried to stop us marrying, but now we are married, he’s determined to keep us together – even though he knows we don’t get on. He’s just like that.”

“And what does your mum say?”

“She regrets getting divorced. She wishes she was back with Dad.”

“What would happen if you told him?”

“I don’t know. He might say I’d have to come home. But Arnholm has much more to lose than me.”

“But that still doesn’t stop you from telling the truth...”

“It’s complicated. I feel guilty for walking out on him. The least I can do is let him finish his course. And I don’t want to show my parents I’ve failed yet again.”

It began to drizzle. The rain flecked her white cheeks. I wanted to reach out and brush it away, but I vacillated. I touched a lock of her wet hair. She flinched.

“Maybe, we could do something tonight?” I said.

Ellida hurried towards the front door. “I’ve promised Shirley we’d go out together. I think I need to make up to her really.”

“What do you mean ‘make up’?”

Ellida bit her lip.

“I didn’t tell her about Isolde. It came as a shock to her.”

“That surprises me. She was very nice to Isolde.”

“She told me yesterday she hadn’t expected it – and then she said that we girls must go out to celebrate tonight,” she said.

“Celebrate?”

“Yes. Me being free,” Ellida said, trying to muster a liberated smile.

“Oh,” I said. I could tell that Ellida wanted me to probe her further about this, but I was pissed off that she was putting Shirley ahead of me: “Well, you have a good time.”

“Yes,” Ellida said – but she seemed doubtful.

I cycled off on Herzog. Even though it was raining, I rode down to the seafront and chucked pebbles into the sea.

The next day, I hid myself at the back of the university library by a window overlooking the Downs. Most of the trees in the neighbouring copse had been chopped down because they’d been so badly damaged in the hurricane. I scribbled notes about post-structuralism, cultural materialist theory and Lacan’s mirror phase.

I day-dreamed about being a writer. I had visions of living like a hybrid version of William Wordsworth, James Joyce and Steven Berkoff in the wilds of Norway, working with a radical theatre group who travelled the mountains and fjords, crossing Scandinavia and journeying through Europe, devising total theatre, making films and writing verse epics about natural and unnatural worlds.

Ellida would be my muse, making music and lanterns for my cult plays, and I would pen vital, inflammatory verse. We would fuck passionately in our snug van, our magical mystery tour bus, parked by the sea, underneath the sand dunes, taking walks together at dawn over snow-capped mountains and lichen-covered tree stumps.

That was my real ambition.

I made an appointment with a careers advisor. There was a lone computer, shining amidst the piles of leaflets and books. I took a careers’ test on it. It determined after a long series of questions that I should become an actuary.

I didn’t even know what that was.

Neither George nor Luke knew what they were going to do when they finished either. They’d both had rows with their girlfriends. Elaine had tried to stop George smoking dope during the day, and Lucy had hijacked Luke’s desk with all her papers.

“She said I never worked at it,” Luke said.

“That’s true, you never do,” George said.

George lit up a spliff and we all got stoned.

“Let’s face it, Francis, we’re nothing. We’ve missed the boat,” Luke said, puffing on the joint as he adjusted our TV aerial – a coat hanger – and the picture flickered into life. “I mean, there are guys we know who have great jobs lined up because they have contacts.”

“But they are cunts,” George said.

“That doesn’t take away the fact that they have direction, a sense of purpose, a plan, mummies and daddies who are supporting them. Whereas we have nobody,” Luke said.

"I've got my Ma," George said. "She helps me."

"And you've got Elaine," Luke said.

"You've got Lucy."

"She's not as nice as Elaine. Elaine doesn't shout at you and tell you to 'fook off'."

"Elaine is worse: she's disappointed in me," George with a strange little smile.

"Your Ma is a very spiritual person," Luke said to George. "But does that mean she's practical?"

"Spiritual things are the most practical things there are," George said.

George rolled another joint, and resumed his conversation about the practicality of spiritual thinking. I didn't want any more dope so I disappeared into my room. I was reading about Edmund Gosse and saw that he'd been very interested in Norwegian literature: he was one of first translators of Ibsen into English. I decided that I must read Ibsen's plays properly. I liked the sound of the titles: *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *The Wild Duck* and *When We Dead Awaken*.

I didn't see Ellida and she didn't get in contact. She had the number for Beaconsfield Villas so why didn't she call? Luke was always in and, although he was crap at writing down messages, he was particularly good at remembering when a "young lady" had called.

But she didn't. Days of waiting passed, the days became weeks. Still no contact.

Luke and George patched things up with their "women" and this depressed me. Their rows made them more passionate when Elaine and Lucy returned. They locked themselves in their rooms and fucked. Elaine even smoked some dope with George.

Late one afternoon, when the twilight was creaking down on the campus I bumped into Mercy; she was pushing a much bigger Kem-baby in a buggy.

"Oh, my Francis- boy-o, what a sight you are! You look worse than my washing line! Oh-ho! And you must be wanting to see the Mistress almighty I expect!"

"The Mistress Almighty?"

"Ellida, her with the one with the punky bleached hair looking like that Wendy woman in that terrible band."

"Wendy in *Transvision Vamp*?"

"Yes, that's the one. You mean, you haven't seen her swanning around with her new big-time friends? What a shower they look! Mistress Almighty couldn't get away fast enough from me and Kem baby. Her big friend, the American, took over and told me everything. Ellida didn't even speak."

"What do you mean?"

"That American girl she's with, and the tiny one who's called Bronte, who's having an affair with a poet. Apparently, they're having a big party this weekend. A surrealist party. She

told me to come as an onion and Kem baby as a Dadaist. Have you heard of anything so stupid?"

"I don't know. I haven't been invited."

This seemed to cheer Mercy up.

"You really are out of it, aren't you?"

The next day I was buying a chocolate milkshake in the Crypt – the lunchtime hang-out of all the "cruisers" on campus, the wannabee hipsters, the agit-proppers, and the punky Goths – when I found the three girls. Ellida came up behind me and pinched my bottom. I nearly spilled my chocolate milkshake on her.

Shirley laughed and kissed me on both cheeks, saying, "But Francis, we've missed you! Where have you been? It's so naughty of you not to come and visit us!"

I sat down with them and tried to hide my astonishment at the change in Ellida. Gone was the washed-out single mother, the pastoral Norwegian girl with ruby cheeks, the earnest, intellectual questioner. She had been replaced with a heavily-made up punky, sexy *agent provocateur*. Her hair was bleached an orangey-blond colour and cut aggressively short, and she was wearing mascara and thick red lipstick. Her green eyes peered through her black eyelashes like big fish. She was wearing a striped top I'd seen before, but the effect now was entirely different because her leather skirt was so short and her legs were wrapped in fish-net stockings.

"Do you like what I've done with Ellida?" Shirley said.

I looked at the floor, not knowing what to think.

"The real test is going to be on Saturday. We'll see how many men have their mouths hanging out at her, heh? I see her with a Montgomery Clift type – oh no, not one of them! – she needs more Warren Beatty, don'tcha think?"

Ellida averted her eyes and lit a cigarette.

"Well, I've got to go now," I said.

As I left, Shirley called after me, commanding me to come on Saturday.

"Come as a Brussels sprout!" she hollered. The three women descended into a fit of smoky, cackly giggles. As I was getting on my bike on the edge of campus, Ellida tottered after me in her high heels.

"Francis! Francis!"

"What do you want?"

"I just wanted to say -- this isn't what you think," Ellida said. "Let me come around tonight, and we'll talk."

I hesitated.

"OK," I said.

Later that evening, she arrived panting at my door because she had been running; we got drunk and made love. It was almost like the summer. Afterwards as she lay in my arms, she snuggled into me and said: "I know you think Shirley has got control over me, but it's not true. It's me that controls her. I told her about my brother you see."

"What did you tell her?"

Ellida giggled. "I told her that he was alive. And eighteen and really handsome. You know, just like she likes them. Like Kirk Douglas. And how he's gearing up to come over and fuck her senseless."

I wanted to say *This is fucking weird shit Ellida* but I didn't.

"She thinks your brother is alive?"

"Don't think I'm screwed up! This is about control. She may be able to control me, but she can't control my brother. I can create him exactly as I want him to appear to her. It's an amazing feeling. It makes me feel complete again."

"Aren't you worried she'll find out the truth?"

"Why should she? She never speaks to Arnholm, and she'll never see my parents again. I was thinking that I might even ask someone to impersonate my brother and have him shag her. That would be the weirdest funniest thing!"

It was weird, sure, but not very funny. Not funny at all. But when Ellida kissed me I couldn't think about anything but her mouth, her breasts, her cunt. We slept all night wrapped up in each other. In the morning, Ellida clung onto me under the covers, nuzzling her bleached hair against my neck. She didn't seem to have a hangover at all. I recollected the conversation we'd had and shuddered.

There was a knock on the door. It was George. Beaming broadly, he brought in two cups of tea: it was a ritual that whoever was up first should make a pot of tea.

"Here you go, you two!" he said, emphasizing the word "two".

George lingered a little, standing over us, examining the state of affairs in my bed. As soon as he left the room, Ellida got dressed.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"It's no good everyone knowing about us."

"What do you mean?"

"I told Arnholm I'd finished with you," she said. "He was threatening to tell my father that I'd been unfaithful."

"But you were!"

"Yes, but this is about other things. Things you don't understand."

"There's a lot about you I don't understand."

I had no idea what to wear to Shirley's surrealist party so I donned black. I thought I looked

pretty cool but I could see from the expression on her face when she opened the door that Shirley was disappointed. She sneered: “So you didn’t dress up?”

“I came as an existentialist,” I answered as cheerily as I could. “Who are you?”

She herself was not particularly surrealist looking, wearing a stylish silver, low-cut dress and her spangly glasses. She reminded me of a wicked pantomime dame; she was carrying a riding crop, which she lightly buffeted me with.

“I’m Nietzsche’s fairy godmother!” she said.

I followed her indoors as she bawled, “Ellida, it’s your little friend with the long hair!”

The party was only just beginning and most of the guests were in the room overlooking the garden, which was also Ellida’s bedroom. Shirley insisted I had a drink in the drawing room where there was only one other person; a small, balding man with a fake axe through his head, sitting somewhat forlornly on the sofa watching a video of a black and white surrealist film.

After it became clear that Ellida wasn’t going to appear, I headed out into the front room where everyone was clustered around a man wearing a long gold dress and a jewelled hat. I pushed closer and saw that it was Arnholm! Ellida, Shirley and Bronte looked at him with shining eyes.

“Well, you can imagine my surprise when this man said he was a Hollywood producer! I knew right away then that I was in the money!” he said, throwing up his arms in a gesture of extreme exuberance.

I paused to think for a moment and wondered whether Arnholm’s new-found wealth would stop him lying to Ellida’s parents. Or might his success re-ignite Ellida’s love for him?

“So you’re really writing the music for Rob Lowe’s next film?” I asked.

Arnholm smirked.

Shirley yelped. “Oh God! I love Rob Lowe. He makes me moist, so moist! You wouldn’t believe it. Will you help me meet him?”

Arnholm draped his arm around Shirley and said, “Of course!” This wasn’t the uptight Arnholm I knew; this was a different creature entirely, relaxed, confident and successful.

I tugged at the back of Ellida’s Norwegian leather dress. When she turned around I saw that she was made-up as a troll with a green face, wicked mascara eyes and yellow lips.

“This looks more like a Halloween party than a surrealist party,” I said.

“At least some of us have made an effort,” she said and continued to listen to Arnholm.

I insisted in a whisper that I wanted to talk to her. Eventually, she got the message. We tiptoed out into the garden without anyone seeing. In the frosty shrubbery, underneath some bristling leaves, Ellida sucked on her cigarette.

“Arnholm seems quite close to Shirley now,” I said. “Aren’t you worried he’ll spill the beans about your brother?”

“He won’t. I explained the situation to him.”

I was puzzled. “And he agreed to pretend to Shirley that your brother is alive?”

“Yes. He’s being very understanding!”

These words cauterized me: was Ellida actually getting back together with Arnholm?

“I don’t like this set up. Can’t we just get out of here? Let’s go back to my place,” I said.

“Come on,” Ellida said. “I’ll make you want to stay here.”

And she knelt in front of me, unzipping my trousers.

It was dark and cold but her mouth was warm. I was happy again.

Towards the end of the party, when most of the guests had left, I asked Ellida to come back with me but she refused, saying she needed to sleep in her own bed. So I tramped disconsolately home.

I saw nothing of her for weeks.

Then one day, I spotted Bronte scurrying into the common room. She looked oddly doleful without Shirley beside her. When she saw me relief suffused her face. I offered to buy her a coffee.

“Oh! I’d love a chamomile tea please, Francis.”

I returned with one and found her examining my books.

“You look like you’re working very hard. Ellida was always telling us how clever you are.”

“She did?”

“Yes, she did. And how wonderful your grandparents were. She had a lovely time in Northumberland I think. I’d like to go there at some point myself.”

I asked her what had happened to Ellida.

“There was a big barney between Shirley and Ellida,” Bronte blurted out. “Ellida said that her daughter was coming to stay again, and Shirley said that wasn’t possible. So Ellida said that Shirley was being mean and hypocritical, pretending to like Izzy and not letting her stay. Then Shirley said she wanted to hold a few parties and that Isolde would spoil things. And then Ellida just flew into this rage. It was like nothing I’ve ever seen! They were just screaming at each other. And then Ellida left. Just stormed off and never came back. You won’t tell, will you? I mean, Shirley would kill me if she knew I’d said anything.”

“Where did Ellida go?”

“Arnholm helped her find a place, a house in Foundry Street. So it turned out to be perfect really. God’s honest truth, she couldn’t have stayed on after that row with Shirley.”

Standing on a hill, very near the railway station, 25 Foundry Street was a small, quaint terraced cottage painted a bright yellow. Ellida didn’t appear at first, but when I knocked a

few times a shadow moved behind the curtain, then steps approached the front door. She was in her pyjamas. She wasn't wearing any make-up and dark roots were beginning to show in her hair.

"I just came to see how you were," I said.

Ellida reached for my hand and took me into the kitchen, where she sat me down on a chair. "What are you smiling at?"

"That you fell out with Shirley!"

"That pleases you, does it?"

"It sure does. The woman's a bitch."

Ellida made us cups of hot chocolate and poured two whiskeys. She drank the whiskey in one gulp and smelt her cocoa.

"I want you to love me now," she said. "You must massage my head and shoulders until I tell you to stop."

She curled up on the sofa and I stroked her, her creamy skin soft as a child's. She fell asleep. I fetched the duvet, wrapped it around her and got out my books from my bag, studying for a few hours. With Ellida sleeping by me, I believed I could do amazing work. I made myself intermittent cups of coffee from the kitchen and read about alienation. One critic had highlighted two Norwegian figures as being central founders of modernism: Henrik Ibsen and Knut Hamsun. I felt this was a sign.

When Ellida woke and saw that I was working at the table in the lamplight, she smiled.

"You didn't leave me," she said sleepily.

"I don't ever want to leave you," I said.

"Let's go to bed then!" she said.

At the top of the stairs, there was enormous bowl filled with condoms. I made a face and Ellida laughed. She said that it had been left there by Arnholm.

"God, what is the guy doing these days?" I asked jokingly. At the back of my mind was the thought that Ellida and Arnholm were together again.

"The Hollywood thing has gone to his head. Now he's been given this massive advance to write this music, he seems off the leash. I've never seen him like this: smooth, confident, sweet-talking every student he fancies."

"And you don't mind?"

"No! God, He's the last person I'd sleep with now. Ugh."

"But you're friends again?"

"Yes, we are. He's helped me out. He's bought this house with his money because he wants Isolde to come and live with us here."

"I don't get it. You're not with him but you're proposing to live here with him and Isolde? Is that right?"

A guilty blush spread through her features. She said: "Yes. We'll have separate rooms. And Izzy will have her own room."

This situation sounded complicated.

"Where is he at the moment?"

"He's out in LA. He's got a sabbatical to get this film done. Apparently, they all love him; he can do stuff with sound that no one out there knows about."

We took a bath together and then, using a condom from the bowl, we made love in the big bedroom at the front of the house. There was a huge mirror opposite the bed in which we observed ourselves. Looking at herself underneath me, Ellida drew me deeper into her and said we would always fuck in the mirror world.

"What's that?" I asked.

"The other side of death."

This felt very Ellida: I didn't know what she meant but I got the gist. It was pointless to follow up her point with any further interrogations. I loved her being mysterious.

Afterwards, we lay naked together in the darkness watching the headlights of the cars in the street sweep over the ceiling.

For the first time in a long time, I got a decent night's sleep.

* * *

"I don't see any sign of them," I said. Outside, in the chilly dusk, the street was deserted. Inside, Ellida sat cross-legged on the bed, smoking. It was the moment she'd been agonizing over for the past week: her parents were about to arrive with her daughter.

Just then, a figure emerged on the street, dressed in a big black jacket. I froze.

"It's Arnholm," I said.

Ellida joined me at the window, breathing smoke over my neck as she peered out. She looked at him and then told me I should go.

"But..." I said, about to protest.

"It'll be easier if you're not there," she said.

She hurried downstairs and opened the front door before Arnholm could knock. He had brought along a big rucksack with his stuff and observed me as Ellida barked at him in Norwegian. When she'd finished, he said to me, "You've got a lot to answer for."

Ellida took my hand. Her fingers were cold. "I'll call you tonight."

"But we agreed..."

Ellida put her finger to my lips: "Just do this for me."

I asked her whether I should get my stuff.

“Yes, that would be a good idea,” Arnholm said.

I stuffed all my tatty student clothes into a bag. When I returned downstairs, Ellida and Arnholm were locked into a serious Norwegian conversation. Isolde’s name peppered their sentences. Ellida glanced up at me.

“I’ll call you,” she said.

When I got back to the boys’ flat – as Ellida called it -- George and Luke grinned and slipped an early evening spliff into my mouth. After a few puffs, I made my excuses and got ready for bed.

“He’s shagged out,” Luke said.

I felt my prickly chin and realized I’d left my bathroom kit at Foundry Street. I decided to go back.

The cold rain spattered my face, sobering me up as I jogged down the hill, past the shuttered bakery, past the Duke of York’s cinema, along the dimmed High Street, past the pubs and bars, and up into the lanes. By the time I reached Foundry Street, I was re-invigorated.

The BMW outside the house told me her parents had arrived. But I thought: somehow *I have to break on through to the other side*. I knocked.

After some scuffling, Ellida answered the door. She looked horrified.

She came out onto the porch and said, “They want me to go back to Norway.”

“Why?”

“They’re saying I need to be with Isolde. Arnholm’s told them I’m going off the rails here. That he’s worried about me.”

“Have you told them?” I said.

Ellida pulled me into the house: like a side-car on a motorbike, I was dragged into the front room and was confronted by the patterned jumper of Ellida’s father, Leif, and the worn face of her mother. Arnholm’s eyes pivoted towards me from below his bushy eyebrows.

Enunciating her words in English, Ellida said: “Mama, Papa, this is Francis. Who you’ve met. I’m with him now. And I’m not going back to Norway. I’m finishing my course, and Isolde can stay here with us.”

Arnholm shot to his feet: “But this is my house! He can’t stay here! I’m staying here if anyone is!”

Leif said some stuff in Norwegian, but Ellida stopped him, saying that he needed to speak in English for my benefit. Gazing at me with his perfect blue eyes and his smooth smile, he said: “Francis, I can certainly say, a few things make much more sense now. And I thank you for making them manifest to us.”

He indicated that I should sit down. “You can understand that this is a difficult situation for us. You may not be aware that our daughter has been ill. Mentally ill.”

“Papa, I told him. You don’t need to scare him,” Ellida said.

Unfazed, Leif continued in his clear, functional voice: “We are very worried about her, and so is her husband here. And she has a young daughter she needs to be near. We can’t just let her stay here unsupervised. We had thought her husband was looking after her. But we are now realizing that this hasn’t been the case.”

“That’s rubbish!” Arnholm said. “I’ve let her stay in my house. I’ve done nothing but look after her.”

Leif smiled. “It is technically ‘your’ house; remember, you and my daughter are married. From what I hear, you haven’t been around very much, being busy with other projects.”

Leif’s eyes glinted as he said to me: “Well, what would you do in our case?”

“I’d do what my daughter wanted.”

“You would say that, wouldn’t you? But are you really thinking about Ellida?” he said.

“Of course he is! Papa, I am not five years old!” Ellida said.

“Ellida, you don’t know what you’re doing!” Arnholm said.

“I think you’re under-estimating her,” I said. “I know she can be a good mother to Isolde and do her studies. She’s amazing. She’s the sanest person I’ve ever met.”

The rest of the ensemble fell quiet. Leif’s mouth tightened. He considered his daughter.

“I tell you what,” he said. “We’re here for another week and then we’re going back to Norway for Christmas. What about an experiment? Ellida takes Isolde for a week here and if, at the end of the week, you and she are still speaking like this, we’ll see.”

“But this is my house! Surely, I get to decide who stays here?” Arnholm said.

“If it’s really troubling you, I’ll pay you the rent for my daughter, your wife,” Leif said.

“But she wants me to move out!” Arnholm said.

“Maybe that would be best for a bit,” Leif said. “I’ll cover any financial short-fall you may suffer.”

“You’ll pay my rent?” Arnholm said.

“But Dad, he’s making loads of money with his film.”

“I spent all that money on this house!” Arnholm said.

Leif raised his arms and then lowered them in a gesture to calm things down. “We’ll sort this out. Money is not the problem here.”

Leif and Hilde said their goodbyes. Ellida hugged her mother and then kissed her father on the cheeks. Arnholm caught up with Leif as he was opening the door to the BMW, and talked to him for a moment in a supplicatory fashion.

“Money. It’s always about money,” Ellida said, turning indoors.

Once the BMW purred away, Arnholm came into the kitchen where we were cleaning up. He hissed at Ellida in Norwegian. She busied herself at the sink, scrubbing the dishes with

unusual attention.

“This is my house,” he said. “I let you stay here.”

“You’re getting boring,” Ellida said in English. “Of course, he’ll pay for your rent. Stop getting paranoid.”

“You don’t know that.” Arnholm jabbed his finger at me. “Do you not realize an artist needs stability?”

But there was a note of defeat in his question. He disappeared upstairs and then trudged back down with a big bag dangling from his shoulders. Then he left, slamming the door behind him. Ellida and I looked at each other: our smiles crescendoed into grins and then laughter.

“I can’t believe it just happened!” Ellida said, draping her arms around me.

“How does it feel?”

“Strange. It’s like I was living in this fake world made out of pretty paper, and now the decoration has fallen away and there’s real walls behind it.”

“Do you think your Dad will give Arnholm the rent?”

“Probably. Right now, he’ll be devising a new plan for everything.”

“He seems quite a nice man.”

Ellida unhooked her arms from my neck.

“That’s his trouble. He’s too attractive. Too bloody attractive,” she said. “He thinks with his charm he can do whatever he wants.”

“What about Isolde? What should we do with her tomorrow?”

“Let’s do something extraordinary! Something she’ll never forget!”

“Take her to Xanadu?”

Ellida’s green eyes sparkled. “Let’s show her the Lake District! Let’s show her where Wordsworth lived. Let’s make her think the thoughts of great poets and feel the rhythms of the truly sublime!”

“But that’s miles away! And besides, it’s winter.”

“Your English weather is nothing to a Norwegian girl like me.”

“But Isolde’s only a little girl.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ellida said. “I just have this intuition that it’s the right thing to do. I want to tramp the hills in the rain and feel that I’m away from everything.”

Later, in the big dark bedroom, with the curtains open to the starry winter sky, we used the last of the condoms in Arnholm’s bowl.

* * *

It was dark when the bus, which we'd caught from Penrith, dropped us in Shap – a bleak village on the edge of the Lakes. The country cottage the brochure promised turned out to be a modernized terraced house at the very end of the village. Nevertheless, it was spacious with all mod-cons. Getting Isolde to sleep was difficult. She was fractious and hungry. Ellida sat at the end of her bed, failing to calm her. The child's howls filled the desolate house.

The morning was raw. Rising out of a sluggish half-sleep, I drew back the curtains and scanned Shap. A walk down the road revealed that there were no lakes or mountains remotely nearby. The village was full of ugly modern houses, shuttered shops and didn't even seem to have a children's playground.

I stopped into the only open shop, the Post Office, and asked how far it was to Windermere and Grasmere. The wrinkled old man behind the counter said he didn't really know. About twenty miles, he guessed.

“So how do we get there?”

“There's a bus now and then.”

“How often?”

“One in the morning, one in the afternoon.”

I bought some milk and bread, left the shop and decided Shap was shit.

Back at the cottage, Isolde had woken up and was crying. Ellida was still half-asleep. I warmed some milk and gave Isolde a bottle. She took it greedily, quietening down immediately. I'd found out that the next bus to Windermere was in an hour's time. If we were going to see the Lakes, we would need to get going soon. Neither Isolde nor Ellida was dressed. We hadn't even unpacked.

I roused Ellida and said: “There's nothing here, and we're nowhere near the Lakes. There's one bus in the morning and then the afternoon, but that's about it.”

“I need to sleep,” she said.

I told her I would take Isolde for a walk. Bundling the little girl into her thick Norwegian coat and strapping her into the buggy, I pushed her outside. I looked in front of me, feeling the cold bite into my cheeks, and saw this placard stuck on the front of a house, a placard I will never forget: Prospect Cottage. There was a medieval sun inscribed in the plasterwork around it. I felt a sense of hope: yes, there was a prospect here. Passing a red phone-box, I stopped and phoned the Midland Bank, getting through straightaway. I hesitated a moment and then said, “Could you cancel the cheque I wrote out to Shap Cottages please?”

The moment I hung up, I rushed outside and pushed the buggy at top speed back to the cottage. Isolde giggled with delight.

“Ellida, Ellida! We're getting the fuck out of Shap! We've only got ten minutes to get the only fucking bus out of this fucking awful place!”

Ellida jerked up. “What's going on?”

“I’ve cancelled the cheque for the cottage.”

“But where are we going?”

“Away from here!”

Isolde chuckled in the pushchair.

“Francis, what are you doing?”

“I’m saving us!”

Ellida understood that.

We quickly abandoned the cottage. The bus was a little late but when it stopped by the sad shelter, we all felt happy. Isolde did her own gurgling cheer. Folding up the pushchair and swinging our bags onto the rack on the bus, we sat down by the window.

“Shap was truly shit!” I said.

“Shit!” Isolde said, chuckling.

“Yes, Shap is shit!” I said, encouraged by her cheerful imitation of my words.

“Shap is shit!” she said.

Ellida laughed. “Francis, she is listening to you!”

We got a family room in a Keswick hostel. During the next few days, we wandered around the area, taking gentle walks, either pushing Isolde in the buggy or leaving it at the hostel and letting her toddle around the town. Isolde was happy. Ellida and I would take turns to amuse her, pushing her on the swings, playing peek-a-boo in the fields and woods, helping her climb rocks or navigate steep paths. Isolde loved running along the paths that circled the massive undulating presence of Derwentwater: she liked to pick up twigs and stones and make things with them: little dens, animals and shapes.

“Perhaps nature is the greatest educator, just like Wordsworth said,” I said.

“We could all come and live here, and things would be right,” Ellida said, her eyes scanning the placid grey lake.

I took her hand. “Yes, after our degree, let’s come here.”

We were quiet on the train journey back down South. The industrial Midlands flashed by the window. It was beginning to get dark. Ellida looked at the way her daughter was fast asleep in my arms and said, “Do you remember how she wailed at first?”

“She’s tired out.”

I smelt Isolde’s hair, which was redolent of the Lakes: the chimney smoke in Keswick, the fresh woody smell of the land and the rippling scent of the streams.

“Do you ever think she’ll sleep like that on me?” Ellida asked.

“Of course she will,” I said, indicating that Ellida should take her.

“No. I don’t want to wake her. She looks so snug there.”

“No. Take her. You’re her mother.”

With that, I lifted the sleeping body of the girl onto Ellida’s lap. She woke for a few

seconds, but then seeing that she was now in her mother's lap, she snuggled down again.

Tears trickled down Ellida's face.

"Oh Francis, I never thought I could do this," she said.

It was near to Christmas now and I had promised to see my mother and stepfather in South Woodford.

"Can you come back with me?" Ellida said, as we got off the train.

Ellida's parents were waiting for her in Brighton; they were going to fly back from Gatwick to Norway the next day. Much as I loved Ellida, I felt awkward being around her family -- particularly if Arnholm was there.

"I promised my mother I would come back tonight," I said.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have asked but could you give me your phone number in case I want to talk to you?"

I wrote it out on a piece of paper and said: "I'm not very good on the phone, especially if my mum's around. She listens to everything you say."

"Don't worry, I probably won't try!"

There was a real rush in London because we arrived so late: the last train was departing in half-an-hour, leaving little time to scuttle between Euston and Victoria. Ellida was forlorn as I helped her onto the Brighton train: she tried hard not to cry. She pulled down the window of the train and said to me as I stood on the platform: "Every time I look into my father's face I just see this accusation: you're not your brother!"

When I rang the bell, it was Carl who opened the door. I'd seen the windows of the house glowing warmly in the winter darkness as I walked in the cold from the station; but when I stepped past Carl the hall seemed echoey, empty. "Good to see you, Francis," Carl said, and patted my shoulder; he'd never done anything like that before. The TV was on in the back room; Carl went straight back to his easy chair in front of it.

I went upstairs; my brother Hal was sulking up in his room, accompanying Nick Drake records with his acoustic guitar. "Hey man," he said; he didn't look at me. I went downstairs again and took a cold sausage roll from the fridge, which was nearly empty. I thought my mother and Deborah must be out; but they hadn't come home by the time I finally fell asleep, lying on top of my bed in my clothes, listening to the Smiths.

The next evening, Hal and I went for a drink in the Railway Bell, the pub right by South Woodford Tube Station.

"What the fuck's happening?" I asked him. "Where's our mother? Where's Deborah?"

"I don't give a toss," my brother said. "There was some guy called Derek who was hanging around for a bit. Fuck knows."

It was better to talk about safe topics: the Smiths, Nick Drake, Bob Dylan, Jack Kerouac and the Beats, the films of Werner Herzog and actors we liked. After my fourth pint, I said: “I met this girl.”

“Oh yeah, who?”

“Just somebody.”

“What kind of somebody, you fuckwit?”

“She’s Norwegian.”

“Foreign Language student?” my brother said.

“No.”

“Tell me about her.”

“She’s got a kid.”

He slapped the table.

“Where’s the father?”

“He’s my friend,” I said. “Well, sort of. Not really.”

“My arse, he’s your friend. You’re shagging his missus. What are you? A fucking knob-end?”

“You don’t understand,” I said. I wanted to tell him how much Ellida meant to me but I knew he’d only make fun of me.

On the way home, my brother confessed in a mumbling fashion that he “liked” a girl at his college. She was from America, and already wanted to marry him.

“I mean, I do love her. But I don’t think I can marry her,” he said.

My mother and little half-sister appeared as if by magic on Christmas morning bringing with them an air of forced jollity, and we all opened our presents. Where had they’d been? My mother had never looked so sheepishly happy, nor my stepfather so determinedly chirpy. Deborah was inundated with presents from him: lots of sickly sweets, *My Little Pony* models, Smurfs, Cabbage Patch dolls, chunky pop videos and big girls’ annuals. My mother told us that Deborah had already opened the presents from her “elsewhere”. Carl bought his step-sons presents too: a hardback copy of Martin Amis’s *London Fields* for Hal and Philip Roth’s *Deception* for me.

Hal and I took a certain complacent satisfaction in the fact that we knew there would be no more Christmas Days like this. In the grey evening, my mother disappeared with my sister, promising to return next day. My stepfather stayed in the house for one more night but then vanished early on Boxing Day. Hal and I lay in bed reading the books he’d bought us, brooding on our love lives.

My mother re-appeared with her new man and my sister in tow. It was weird thinking that she had a boyfriend; for so many years she’d made such a thing of being married to Carl that

seeing someone else standing by her side was disconcerting. That said, it wasn't as if she'd taken up with a slick, young stud: Derek looked quite similar to Carl with his horn-rimmed spectacles, conservative cardigan and grey slacks. My mother introduced us and we chatted for a few minutes about the weather. Then Derek said he would take our sister for a walk.

This left Hal and I with our mother.

There was an awkward silence and then she said: "Carl said that he feels people can have a tacit understanding between each other. But I need someone to talk to."

Hal and I didn't reply. We were secretly pleased she was no longer blaming us for her woes: her resentment was reserved for our soon-to-be ex-stepfather. We switched on the TV and watched it together on the sofa.

I was feeling quite smug when the phone rang. My mother answered it and then called me over. Picking up the receiver, I was shocked to hear Ellida's voice.

"I just phoned to see how you were doing."

I could feel the misery behind her words.

"I'm fine. How are you? I thought you were supposed to be in Norway by now."

Pause.

"I did a bad thing, I told my family to fuck off. I told them to go away and leave me and Isolde alone forever. And now I don't know what I've done."

"What about Arnholm? Where's he?"

"He's found himself another girlfriend and gone to stay with her," she said. I could tell this upset her more than she liked to let on.

"So you spent Christmas alone?"

"Not alone. I was with Isolde."

I held the red phone receiver stiffly, fiddling with the long wire that came out of the skirting board. Ellida broke down: "Oh Francis, I need you to come and see me. I need you now. I can't explain why. I just do."

"I'm not sure there are any trains running today."

"Please. Just this once. I promise never to do this again. I just need you to come and get me. I feel I'm going crazy here. I'm really scared."

I really didn't know what to do because I couldn't drive and I was certain there was no transport to Brighton on Boxing Day. Opening the door to the kitchen, I glanced at my mother at the table nursing a cup of tea. I said, "That was a friend of mine. She's alone with her child today. She says that she wants me to go and see her. I don't know what to do."

While my words were relatively calm, my manner wasn't.

My mother considered, "You can't leave your friend alone at Christmas."

When Derek returned with Deborah from his walk, my mother told him that we had to go and rescue my friend from a lonely Christmas.

The roads down to Brighton were clear and Derek was a fast and cheerful driver, cracking jokes about how we would miss yet another repeat of *The Great Escape* and Geoff Capes appearing in *Blankety Blank*. Despite the ease of the journey and Derek's good humour, I felt impatient and anxious, worrying about what would happen when we met Ellida. Would she be hysterical? How would she treat me in front my family? My mother didn't say much, except she kept repeating the refrain: "You can't leave your friend alone at Christmas".

This would prompt me to thank her again for doing this, to which she responded: "Don't thank me, thank Derek, he's the one doing the driving!" And so I'd thank Derek. He'd quip that there was nothing he liked doing better than driving down the open road during Christmas time and we'd fall silent for a while until my mother reprised her refrain again.

Beside me in the back, in her child-seat, Deborah said: "Francis, do you have a girlfriend?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"What's the difference between a girlfriend and a friend?"

"I don't know. I suppose with a girlfriend you're friendlier."

"Like do you do yucky things like kissing?"

"I suppose so," I said. We were getting near Foundry Street and I felt nervous. What was going to happen next?

Ellida was surprisingly happy when she opened the door in response to my urgent knocking. Derek, my mother, Deborah and I traipsed into the house, which seemed small in comparison to South Woodford. We sat awkwardly for a few minutes in the front room, listening to Isolde's grizzling in her high chair.

"She was crying so much, I just didn't know what to do!" Ellida said.

My mother patted her gently on the back. "It's all right. Derek will make you some tea."

"No. I'll make the tea," Ellida said.

"OK, you do that, we'll look after Isolde here," my mother said, approaching the crying girl and unstrapping her from the high chair.

I followed Ellida into the kitchen. She filled up the kettle with jittering hands. Then she fell into my arms.

"I'm sorry, but I can feel it happening again."

"Perhaps you should see a doctor?"

"I phoned my psychiatrist in Norway. He told me to phone you."

"He did?"

"He knows all about you."

I continued to hold Ellida. She relaxed and put her arms around me. Isolde had stopped crying in the next room. Derek appeared and said, "I think what would be best is if we all

drove back and you stayed with us for a few days.”

Ellida didn't respond, but continued holding me.

“Is that all right?” I said.

She nuzzled her face more deeply into my chest. The front of my shirt was all wet. She didn't show her face to Derek.

“OK, let's do that,” she said.

The kettle came to the boil but no tea was made. Instead, I took Ellida upstairs and helped her get her stuff together. It wasn't difficult because she'd scarcely unpacked from our trip to the Lakes. As we were loading up the car with the buggy and Ellida's bag, Deborah and Isolde played in the front yard. Deborah seemed delighted with Isolde, holding her hand and showing her the garden, telling her their English names: “This is earth, and this is grass and this is a little tree.”

Soon, Derek was whisking us all away from Brighton. Isolde was put in the child's seat even though it was far too big for her, and Deborah sat next to the three-year-old. I was squashed next to Ellida. It was a squeeze but no one complained.

My mother sat silently in the front. I felt bad about all the nasty things I'd said about her now. Even though the two women, the two mothers, had exchanged no more than a few words, I sensed a kinship.

It was night now and we were approaching Gatwick. I wound down the window a little and felt the cold air on my face but was told by Ellida to close it; she indicated by pointing that the breeze would wake up Deborah who had fallen asleep in her arms. The sight of Deborah cradled by Ellida reassured me. Being with my family made Ellida seem a lot more normal. I shut the window and patted Ellida's knee in the darkness, feeling much more relaxed. I enjoyed the rest of the journey looking out of the window, feeling Ellida's leg pressing against me, absorbing the night-lights of London as they flashed by.

It was uncanny watching Ellida step into the house which had been the source of so much trauma for me. It was even stranger taking her and Isolde up to “my bedroom” and arranging things so that mother and daughter could sleep there. I had said nothing about the sleeping arrangements to my mother, nor explained anything to her about the full extent of my relationship with Ellida.

Isolde ran around my room while Ellida curled up into a foetal position on my bed. There was a gentle knock on the door. It was my mother and Deborah. Almost immediately, Deborah took Isolde's little hand. My mother looked at Ellida and then me and said, “You know you can go out if you like. Deborah and I will look after Isolde.”

Ellida stayed curled up, but I said yes. Isolde trotted off merrily with my mother and Deborah.

Once they'd gone, I sat down on the side of the bed and touched Ellida on the arm.

“Francis, you shouldn’t have done this,” she said, her face buried in a pillow

“Let’s go out,” I said.

“I can’t go out. If I see those wheels, I just can’t go out. It’s all I’m seeing. I can’t get it out of my head. The wheels, the blood, and a pool of oil. Oh Francis, I really think I’m better off dead. I think this is the only solution. He’s dead, Francis. It’s my fault. It’s my fault.”

Her words became progressively louder as her words switched to Norwegian: “*Det er min skyld, Det er min skyld, Det er min skyld! Blodet, olje, min bror, min bror, min bror!*”

The door opened abruptly and my brother said, “What the fuck’s going on here?”

Hal turned pale when he saw that I was clasping a strange woman on my bed. Ellida looked up at him, her eyes swollen with grief. He edged away without saying any more, shutting the door behind him.

“Who was that?”

“That was Hal. My brother.”

“I bet he got a shock.”

“Serves him right. He’s always trying to catch me out in some embarrassing situation.”

Since Ellida had forgotten to bring her coat, she put on my jumper and I donned my old donkey jacket. It was too small for me now, but somehow the way the sleeves rucked up high on my arms suited my mood: being in South Woodford was like wearing clothes that I’d grown out of. The streets were dark and cold.

Taking the steps onto the railway bridge, we stood standing behind the wire-mesh fence, framed by the lights of London.

“I used to cross this bridge to go and get a Mars Bar and a can of Coke on Saturday nights,” I said.

“Didn’t you go out to parties?”

“There was nothing like that. My brother and I would wander around the streets, muttering to ourselves.”

“Together?”

“No. We always went our separate ways.”

“Do you think your brother thinks I’m mad -- seeing me like that in the bedroom?”

“I shouldn’t worry about it. His opinion doesn’t count.”

We continued to muse upon the urban glow. Then I searched under her jumper with my hands. She shivered and kissed me.

“Do you remember that promise?” I said.

“More importantly, do you?”

Her cold hands explored down my trousers.

“Go on then, take me,” she said.

“What? Here? Someone might come along.”

“It’s dark. No one will see.”

She unbuttoned my trousers and took me in her mouth. Then she pulled down her trousers and bent over so that she was gripping the mesh fence. I entered her watching the capital’s illuminations swing in and out of my vision.

Afterwards, she said: “That feels much better, just what I needed.”

“A good fuck bucks you up?” I said.

“Bucks you up?”

“It’s the kind of thing my grandmother says.”

“A good fuck bucks you up?”

“No! Not that!” Now I was laughing. “She says, ‘buck up’, all the time. It’s an English thing: it means stop being sorry for yourself and do something.”

“A good fuck did buck me up!” Ellida said.

We went for a drink in the Railway Bell. Ellida told me what had happened when she got back from the Lake District. The whole family had been due to fly back to Norway after Christmas. Her father wanted Arnholm to come with them because, in his view, she’d had her fun with her English boy, but now it was time to face her responsibilities. Ellida had said he couldn’t lecture her about being divorced when he was divorced himself. Then a long, complicated argument had ensued. There were many points made but the contentious one was Leif’s claim that Hilde and he had only divorced because of the strain of their son’s death. Then Hilde stated what mattered was that Isolde had some stability. Ellida implored them that given the right support she could be a good mother: she was going to stay in England with Isolde and make her own way. Her parents and Arnholm said they doubted she could do this. So Ellida kicked them all out of the house. She didn’t know where they went and she didn’t care. But she woke on Christmas Day feeling like she’d made a serious mistake. She tried to keep Isolde amused, but it was no good. She went for a walk. She felt so cold, she told me, even though she knew it was much colder in Norway; but still this English cold seemed bitter to her, went to her bones. She had premonitions of being run over by a lorry. That’s when she phoned her psychiatrist who told her to call her parents or me.

Just before New Year, my mother caught me alone. She and I hadn’t talked about my situation. I could tell from the look in her eye, though, that she had a point to make.

“Francis, you should think about what you’re going to do after university,” she said. I had my jacket on; I had been about to walk out the door. I could hear the television blaring in the sitting room where Deborah and Isolde were watching *Count Duckula*.

I muttered something about not really knowing, adding that I had a plan to go to Christon

Bank and write.

“You’ll get trapped before you know it.”

Although she didn’t mention Ellida, I knew she was referring to her. She and Derek had been looking after Isolde, not me, not Ellida. My mother hadn’t said anything, but had found some of Deborah’s old toys in the attic; had gone out and bought a booster seat for the table.

“You should apply for jobs. Even if you don’t like the look of them, a job might take your mind off everything.”

When I informed Ellida of my mother’s suggestion on a chilly bench by Camden Lock, she said: “Don’t worry about getting a job. No! I think you and I should find a place in the country, by the sea, and you should write there, in a room overlooking the waves, with seagulls swooping in the air above you!”

But against Ellida’s advice, a few days later, I started to apply for various media jobs I saw in the *Guardian*. Over the next few months, I received lots of rejections but eventually, after I’d honed my CV and letter writing skills, I managed to get a couple of interviews as well. In the late autumn, nearly six months after I’d completed my Finals, I secured an internship at a local north London paper. A few jobs later and I had my great gig at *City Beats*.

Chapter 2: The grown-up daughter

Josiah keeps me waiting in the echoing atrium of his office building. I sit by an artificial tree embedded in a pebbled box, adjusting my tie so that it doesn't constrict my throat. Eventually, his PA, a well-put together woman in her thirties, comes down in a lift and apologises.

"We've had an unexpected visit from the Schools Minister," she says. "He'll see you in a few minutes."

This makes me think that Josiah is far too important to take on my piddling project; his company, Learning for Life, runs thirty schools, he advises the government on education policy, he travels the world giving other countries help on best educational practice. As I watch the Schools Minister sweep out of the building with his entourage, I feel my confidence waning. A little later, his PA reappears and takes me in the lift to the top of the building.

"So Hadley tells me you've got a great idea for a magazine," Josiah says, using his legs like paddles to row his ergonomic desk chair across his immaculate floor. His office is high above the London skyline, with the Thames, the Tower of London and Tower Bridge sparkling in the spring sunshine below.

His grin is the smirk of someone who knows more about me than I would like him to.

"It's the sort of thing you could give to clients," I say, with what I hope sounds like real confidence. "Based around the idea of 'learning for life'. You'd have poems, photographs, stories, articles about the elements: earth, wind, water and fire. The magazines would be inspiring but also educational."

Josiah puts his hands together in a pyramid.

"I liked your proposal a lot. I liked the idea of commissioning good people to bring fresh thoughts to a very old theme. My only concern is cost. We're a charitable foundation so the budget for that kind of thing is limited. The way to do this, in my view, would be to get some of our schools to contribute to it – and get students writing some of the articles."

"Well...er...I suppose..."

"Fabulous! Our new schools liaisons manager should be able to sort out the details with you," he says, winking at me.

"Oh yes, my wife!" I say, feeling dry in my throat.

He asks me about Jack and how he is getting on at school. I tell him all's good and inquire after his children; he mouths some banalities about how well they're doing but he is concerned they are always on their iPads at home. We moan about all the gadgets that swamp our lives. Then, he says: "Now, if you don't mind, I have another meeting..."

He puts his hand out. I look at it and then realize I'm supposed to shake it -- which I do as I rise to my feet. His grip is non-committal. I thank him and head for the door. He presses a

button on his speaker phone, telling his PA that he's ready for his next meeting. I wonder who's coming in after me – some fat cat in a chalk-stripe suit who'll hand over a wad of dosh in exchange for, well, something or other.

Before I leave, I try to hunt down Hadley but discover she's doing a school visit. I try calling her but her phone is switched off. Leaving the glassy block, I head back into south London, crossing Tooley Street, passing the tourists queuing up for the London Dungeons.

My hands are trembling. Why am I so angry? Ever since I got sacked my life has been a series of humiliations. I stop by our local corner shop, nestled in between two tower blocks, before going home. The young Turkish brothers who run the shop are more or less the only people I meet on a daily basis during “work hours”; they ask me how it's going.

“Shit.”

The youngest of the brothers laughs. “How come?”

“Oh, you know – just shit.”

The handsome boy snaps his fingers empathetically. This makes me feel better. I like him. He's never intrusive but he's the closest I've got at the moment to a therapist. They don't sell dried fish or Acquavit, so I do the best thing: I get some nachos, salsa and a bottle of Diet Coke. I unlock the door to the house, kick off my shoes, and wedge myself in front of the PlayStation where I immerse myself in *Call of Duty* until Jack gets home. The nachos, salsa and Diet Coke provide all the necessary fuel for my hard, bloody work killing enemy soldiers hiding behind derelict buildings in apocalyptic landscapes. I'm called tHeAlBatrOsS.

When I was at work, I was dismissive of computer games, but now I'm in favour; I read an article online about how they're good for improving your creativity. Since then, I've found that they are the best way of making time pass. I used to enjoy being alone in the house, but not anymore.

At four, I eject the CoD disc, put it back in its box, and make Jack's “tea”. Recently, my son has become more interested in me. He pays a paternal attention to my activities – mimicking his mother's air of concern.

“So Dad, what have you been doing today?” he says, as I set down his customary bowl of microwaved sweetcorn.

I back away from him because I don't like the smell of sweet-corn – it's something I've never told him because he seems to love the stuff and, apart from broccoli, one of the few vegetables he will eat.

“I got a commission to make those magazines I was talking about,” I say.

“You don't seem very pleased about it,” Jack says, munching.

“I am pleased.”

“What pleases you about it?”

“I don’t know. It’s a good thing. I’ve got a job.”

“Oh.”

He tells me about his day: how Vadiya, a kid in his class, did a karate kick on the school psycho called Ibrahim, and how their teacher shouted at the two of them for being violent, and how he, Jack, got put on the yellow table for Maths because he’s improved. He never used to talk to me like this: I never knew really what went on at his school. But now I know everything; I know all about all the children – the clever ones, the naughty ones, the weirdoes, and the sad sacks. And I know about the teachers as well. He has a support teacher who is marvellous in every way, encouraging him to create stories, music and art. I’ve met her a few times in the playground at picking-up time. She’s young and beautiful and full of purpose – she makes me feel old and useless.

But I’m pleased Jack is now talking to me. Hadley has noticed he’s doing much better at school since I’ve been home. I can feel her constructing a new domestic “dad” role for me.

Today, after “tea”, he and I play a ball game on the concrete pitch across the road because it isn’t full of hoodies smoking spliff. He is not that sporty and a bit clumsy. An internal critic speaks a running commentary in my head as I play with him: “God, he really can’t kick a ball, can he? You know what that means, doesn’t it? It means you’re a crap Dad. You never played football with him when he was younger when he could have learnt how to shoot at the goal on target and to throw a ball without looking like a wuss. He could have been good if you’d been a good Dad from the start.”

Then a counter-critic pops up: “Why are you so hard on yourself? You’re playing with him now, aren’t you? Why can’t you just relax and enjoy the moment, what’s wrong with you?”

“Dad, what are you doing? I scored the winner, and you’re just standing there! Come on!”

Normally, my procedure when playing a game with him is to let him score a lot of goals to begin with so that it’s something like 9-0 to him in a first-to-10 game, and then I’ll suddenly buck up, score 9, and then let him score the winner. But today he’s won 10-0. I haven’t done my normal “buck-up” and Jack has noticed.

I’m making the salad for the evening meal when Hadley gets home. It’s 7.30pm. She’s been coming home later and later. She kisses me and, as is her wont, takes over the cooking -- sighing as she does so. “Pasta again, eh?” she arches an eyebrow; too late to change the menu now. Nevertheless, she busies herself at the counter, chopping an extra sprig of parsley for the sauce, adding a pinch of salt to the boiling water and so on. Normally, I’m happy to step back but tonight I bristle with indignation.

“I was doing that,” I say.

Hadley steps away from the stove.

“OK, I can see that,” she says, putting a conciliatory hand on my shoulder.

She asks me how it went – as if she didn't know.

“Fine. I got the gig. He's going to commission the magazines.”

“That's great! Why don't we open a bottle of wine to celebrate?”

“No thanks.”

“OK...I might have a glass on my own.”

She fetches a bottle of white wine from the fridge and pulls out the cork. Her upper arms are toned and firm. She's been working out since she got this job: there's a gym in the office's basement and membership is free with Learning for Life.

“Apparently, I have to talk to you about liaising with students to produce work for the magazine.”

“Really?” she says, taking a sip of her drink.

I switch off the gas and drain the pasta. “Like you didn't know?”

“Josiah never mentioned it to me, but now you've said it, I think it's a good idea.”

“Me, having to deal with school kids?”

“I'll help you.”

“I'm not a bloody school teacher. That's your department, not mine. It's wasn't part of the plan.”

“I think it could be exciting for you. You'll get a mix of people.”

I proudly serve the dinner to Hadley and Jack, who manages to dent my culinary-inflated ego by saying: “Hey mom, did you know that I beat Dad 10-0 today?”

“Has Dad lost his footballing talent?” Hadley says as she examines my over-cooked pasta on the end of her fork.

“I'm not sure I had any in the first place!” I say.

“That's unfair, you can have your good days Dad,” Jack says, shovelling pasta into his mouth. I find it consoling that he eats my meal with such gusto.

Later that night, I think about telling Hadley how I really felt about the meeting with Josiah – about his condescension -- but I don't. The next morning, I phone my agent – who I never use – and tell him that he has to contact Hadley and ask her for a contract. My agent is a dozy fuck and hasn't worked out that Hadley is my wife because she has kept her surname. Although this is shooting myself in the foot a bit -- because he'll take 15% of my fee -- I feel it's worth it.

Not least because this means I don't have to do any work until I've got the contract. I decide to go for a walk. I head up Telegraph Hill, sit on the bench in the park at the top, admire the skyline of London in the distance, and then wander down to the main road where I catch a bus into town. Around lunch-time, I find myself near the Learning for Life offices; I tell myself I've ended up here by accident, by chance, but I know that's not true. Although I am hungry, I'm too nervous to eat. I find an alcove where I can watch people coming and

going; I step back when I see Hadley and Josiah leave the building, worried that they might see me. Then I turn away and run down a side street, along the narrow cobbles, the high walls; there used to be a prison here. I only caught sight of them for a second but it was enough to see that they were smiling at each other.

Josiah's house is ten minutes' walk past the cemetery in Highgate; a tall Victorian edifice with a fanlight above the door. Out in back, the garden seems to stretch for miles, an artful wilderness of wisteria and lots of other plants – I have no idea what they are but I know that Josiah didn't plant them; this is a place with a gardener, with a maid. Caterers have made the food we're eating, tasty pockets of shrimp and crab and lamb; I used to go to this kind of party in my old life – now, apparently, it's Hadley's turn to get invited to these things. She's insisted that I wear a "lounge suit" and tie: I'd be OK with this except that I seem to have put on weight and I can feel my belly spilling over my belt and my shoulders threatening to burst the seams of my jacket. I decide the solution to this is to take my tie and jacket off and undo the fastener to my trousers, leaving my loosened belt to keep them up. When we arrive, Hadley is swept up into the group who cluster around Josiah – an eddying crowd who laugh at his jokes and listen intently to his sage judgments on the state of the world. I hang back, and then see to my horror that Clive, my former editor, is among those milling around Josiah. What the fuck? Doesn't Josiah know that the guy sacked me? Or is that the point?

Fortunately, Clive sits well away from me when we finally sit down to dinner but I know he's seen me and he knows I've seen him because he has a snidey glint in his eyes as he tucks into his starter. I glug down the wine which seems to be obligingly refilled at every opportunity and try to talk to Joy, the woman sitting next to me. She is a "principal" at one of Josiah's schools. She is clearly over-the-moon to be invited to such a star-studded event; apparently the *crème-de-la-crème* of the educational world is here. When I tell her about Hadley, she's very admiring. "Her research into why boys under-perform in secondary schools is the best I've read," she says.

I didn't even know she'd published anything like that, but I don't admit this to Joy. It's relaxing to sit next to because she won't stop talking: I sit back as she bangs on and on about all the initiatives at her school and what she's doing to "close the attainment gap". She talks in a lingo I don't understand; words and phrases like "differentiation", "meeting the needs of all learners", and "adjusting the modular system so that it's a terminal one" punctuate her conversation. I think about Clive at the other end of the table. In a way, I'm grateful for his presence because he's stopped me obsessing about Hadley and Josiah.

As Joy witters on about the culture of academic under-achievement in the Afro-Caribbean community, I briefly imagine following Clive home after this shindig. Down a dark alley. Take all his stuff and kick his head in.

Then I look at my wife. She's next to Josiah at the head of the table while his partner, Geraldine, takes the other end. As Joy continues to chatter on about the culture of violence that some families create, I examine Geraldine's expression for signs that she thinks her husband is having an affair. Her accent is much posher than it was at the museum – and she seems more in her element. Amidst the noise of the party, she's acquired a bolder demeanour and an annoying way of pronouncing "yes" as "yarse". Would I want to have an affair if my wife said "yes" like that? Maybe.

In the cab home, Hadley enthuses about the evening: how nice the food was, how she'd had some interesting conversations, and how amazing Josiah's house is.

"You've never been in it before?" I say.

"No. Why would I?"

"You and Josiah seem very friendly, that's all."

Hadley touches my arm. "You don't think I'm having a thing with him, do you?"

I'm quite drunk, but I'm still in control. "No, of course not."

She looks out of the window -- but not at me. London zips by in the darkness. Under the yellow streetlights, I can see the blossoms are budding on the trees. In a month's time it will be April. A year since I was sacked.

"You know who else was there, don't you?" I say. "My old boss."

Hadley is shocked. "God, that's terrible. I had no idea. I don't even know what he looks like. Are you sure?"

"Of course, I'm sure."

"How would the two of them know each other?"

"I don't know."

The next day, Hadley phones me from work and tells me I was wrong. "It must have been someone who looks a lot like him, because I've seen the guest list and his name isn't there," she says.

"I saw him with my own eyes."

I am lying on the sofa nursing a bad hangover.

"Maybe you need to get your eyes tested?"

"I know what I saw."

A few days later, though, I get my eyes checked out. The optometrist prescribes a stronger lens. Depressing: I'm degenerating. When the glasses arrive a week after that, I walk up the high street seeing everything in high definition. I'm grateful because now I can see what Josiah and Hadley get up to much more clearly. Something is definitely going on. The clincher for me is that they're happy in each other's company. That is far more disturbing than seeing them snogging.

* * *

I can see immediately Isolde has her mother's green eyes and brown hair. But she has her father's bold nose and strong chin. Ellida had a pretty, round face, but Isolde's is more mannish; more handsome than pretty. Ellida was quite short but Isolde is as tall as her father with a slimmer figure than her mother. She's dressed up like an "EMO": long bangs drooping over her forehead, lashes caked in black eye-liner, a tight-fitting black top and black skinny jeans. I've worked out she must be twenty-seven but her outfit makes her seem younger, almost like a rebellious teenager.

She's texting on her phone but looks up as I approach. Arnholm rises to his feet. He is remarkably unchanged except that he's much smarter: he's wearing designer jeans, a Ben Sherman shirt, and expensive shoes. He hugs me like the long lost friend that I am not.

I disengage. Isolde continues texting on her phone. Arnholm prods her.

"So do you remember Francis?"

Isolde carries on texting. We're in an organic café in Brighton. Arnholm and I go to the counter and order coffees. Standing in front of the vegan flapjacks, out of Isolde's earshot, Arnholm tells me she's in a fragile state.

"She's been in hospital: it's this bipolar thing. She wanted to meet you, though. Ellida told her about you."

"What did she say?"

Where most people might have hesitated, Arnholm wades right in: "Oh, you know. That you were once an artist, full of ideas, and then you lost your nerve, settled down, didn't live your life, that kind of thing. That's what she kept telling Isolde until the end, 'Live your life, even if you die young. At least then you'll have lived it'. You know what Ellida was like."

We return to the table. Arnholm doesn't notice that his words have cut right through me. He chats about all the great scores he's written for TV and films, and how he's now a Lecturer in Contemporary Music at the university. He's got the kind of life I would kill for: stable, reasonably high status, not too much work. He pauses for a moment after finishing listing all his achievements, and leans close to me. "But do you know what I'm most proud of?"

"No."

"I finished *Flight!*"

Isolde snorts. "Come on, Francis, let's go and get a drink."

I hesitate. Arnholm has stopped talking.

"Yes, let's do that," I say.

"Could I have a word with Francis alone?" Isolde asks her father.

Arnholm gives me a warning glance.

I follow Isolde up the steep street. She doesn't speak but texts as she strides. The weather has been overcast, but now sliding clouds reveal bits of blue. Seagulls squawk above us. Isolde's skinny black jeans and Converse trainers make me feel creaky. At the top of the hill, she lights a cigarette as I pause for breath. I ask her what's going on, but she doesn't reply. We cross the road and climb another hill. Isolde stops outside a small pub, The Battle of Trafalgar.

"So are you going to buy me a drink?"

I look at my watch. It's 11.30am. "OK," I say.

We enter. The dark cramped atmosphere and beery smell is familiar. Isolde orders a triple vodka and downs it in one go. Slapping the counter, she demands a pint of lager. I get a half of bitter and a packet of crisps. At her request, we sit in the alcove. We chit-chat for a bit, draining our glasses as we talk about the shops in Brighton: the second hand stores are really great here. After speaking like this for ten minutes or so, Isolde grabs my hand and says: "So Francis, you came here with mum, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Mum talked about you."

"What did she say?"

"Everything."

"Everything?"

I slug my bitter.

"Absolutely everything."

"All the gory details?"

"Everything."

I regard my empty glass. My new specs enable me to see every bit of beery foam. I take them off and put them in my pocket. The world blurs and becomes more manageable. "God, that's weird."

"Why is it weird?"

"Aren't parents supposed to hold things back?"

"You know my mum was never like that."

"I need another drink. Do you want another one?" I say.

"Now you're talking!"

Isolde smiles, and a thrill shivers through me: it's Ellida's smile!

I return with two pints of strong lager. Isolde asks me about my life. I tell her about being sacked, and about my magazine ideas. "You know, it was your mum who sort of gave me the inspiration to do something about the elements. I can remember her talking about the sea so clearly and it's like she's still speaking to me."

Isolde puts her hand on my knee. "She's still speaking to you?"

"Yes."

We rest our backs on the bench's leather and the tips of our shoulders touch. The pub hasn't changed. I could be in the 1980s.

Isolde says: "You know it feels such a relief to meet you finally. Again. I mean I can't remember you from way back."

"I can recall you as a little girl in Brighton and how we took you to the Lake District. You loved it."

"Yes, Mum said you took me there...I grew up hearing all about your long, red hair and your play with the penis hat and your castle in Northumbria."

"Castle in Northumbria?"

"Yes. Your family has one, doesn't it?"

"Well, not really."

"Mum told me you made her a very big promise there."

"She told you that? I haven't even told my wife that."

Isolde grips my hands, entwining her fingers with mine. "She told me everything. She never stuck to any of the stupid rules that society invents to imprison us."

Now I am worried that Ellida was foolish enough to tell her everything. That wouldn't be good. "I should go," I say.

"Oh come on, stay for another drink."

"OK, one more."

Another pint on this empty stomach will really make me pissed. But I realize that I would prefer to be here than at home. Isolde returns with more lager and two whiskeys. We both look at the chasers in silence.

"Here's to your mum!"

I pick up the chaser and down it in one.

"Yes, here's to my mad mum!"

Isolde downs the chaser and then snuggles up to me. I feel awkward but go along with the canoodling, which I tell myself is pretty innocent drunken larking around. Suddenly, Isolde whips out her phone and asks to take a selfie. I agree and we put our heads together and smile. Then she presses her chest against me and kisses me on the lips. I back away.

"Hey! What are you doing?" I say. I glance at her phone. Did she take another photo with it? No. I don't think so.

Isolde grins. "Just having some fun. Don't worry, I don't fancy you."

"Just as well," I say.

"Is that because it would be too like incest to fuck me?"

I move my lips but no words come out.

“Did my Dad tell you they put me in the loony bin?”

“No.”

“I’m sure he did. He tells everyone.”

“OK, he did.”

Isolde loops her arm through mine and says: “It was after she died. You see, when she was dying we became very close. That was when she told me all about you. She said she wanted to pass on the story. But before that, I hadn’t seen much of her. I was mostly with my grandparents and Dad.”

“What happened to them?”

“Didn’t you know? They got back together again. Leif and grandma. How weird is that? To get divorced and then to marry again! Mum didn’t like it; she thought they were ganging up on her, like she felt they did when they came to England when she was at Sussex and basically took me away from her.”

“Is that what she told you?”

“Yes. She said they always had a secret plan to take me away from her.”

“Oh.”

I think about those times and wonder if this is the right interpretation of events, and can’t quite decide. I’ve never thought things through from Isolde’s point of view. She explains that she lived in Norway with her grandparents until she was ten, and then moved to Brighton. Arnholm and Ellida wanted her to get away from what they saw as the claustrophobic atmosphere of Norway.

“Restrictive? Norway seems a very liberal place.”

“It is in some ways, but in other ways it’s closed. There are so many expectations about how you should behave: you’re expected to be neat and tidy and organized and polite and reasonable in a way you just aren’t here. It’s difficult to put into words, but believe me, if you get to know it well, it’s suffocating. Dad and mum were right.”

“So what was it like growing up here?”

“I liked it. I liked going to the local school here. I did well. I’m good at Maths and Science. I got into university and got a good degree in Maths, but after that mum became ill. Suddenly she wanted to see me...”

She trails off. I look at her and am reminded of how much I loved Ellida. All the bad bits of the relationship are gone, I only feel the intense longing I had for her when she came to Northumberland and I made her that promise.

“I’m glad I met you again,” I say. It’s scarcely noon and I am drunk. I kiss the top of her head, feeling the texture of her hair.

She slides her face underneath mine and peers up at me with her big green eyes. “So, you’re sure you don’t want to fuck me?”

Chapter 3: Baby games

“You’re making a very big mistake,” George said, as he put the battered kettle on the ring.

“It’s nothing personal, it’s just that it would save me a lot of money if I lived with Ellida,” I said.

“I can see that.” He lit a match, watching the flame burn to the edge of his fingertips before blowing it out. “But you can’t put a price on friendship.”

“Can’t we still be friends?”

“You’ll have let us down, Francis.”

I hadn’t anticipated that George would be so resistant. In a way, I was flattered – it meant that he cared for me – but from another perspective it felt hypocritical for him to object to my moving out: it was alright for him to have his live-in lover stay rent free, but I wasn’t allowed to leave. Elaine entered the kitchen wearing George’s rugby top. She pawed him adoringly as he poured the tea.

“You’re living with Elaine, why can’t I live with Ellida?” I said.

“Why can’t you get her to live here?”

I explained that this wasn’t possible with Isolde. Elaine kissed George’s arm.

“Oh, can’t you let him just go and get his leg over?” she said, with a lascivious grin.

“No, I can’t. Francis needs to stay here. It’s for his own good. We did that play together, we live together; this is the time when we’re all meant to be together. Otherwise, nothing counts. I’m not saying he can’t go off with Ellida when this is all finished. In fact, I think that’s a good idea. I think he should go travelling with her. But right now, we have a contract, both an unwritten and a legal one, with our landlord, and we all need to stick by it. I’m not having him bailing out with six months of uni left. It’s not fair on us. And actually it’s not fair on you, Francis. You’ll land up looking after her daughter all the time and it won’t be any fun. You’ll probably ruin your relationship. I’m actually doing you a favour – even though you don’t know it.”

I picked the dirt out of the tops of my fingernails. This was the first time I’d been properly told off by George.

“Maybe you’re right,” I said.

When I told Ellida that George didn’t want me to move out, she went right over to see him. They had a private conference in his bedroom. I was worried that they’d have a big argument, but they didn’t, and she emerged looking amused. She kissed me on the cheek, and George clutched my hand. It was like I’d got the job.

“I’ve just sorted out your life for you mate,” he said.

I never quite got to the bottom of what they discussed, but Ellida said that she and George discussed my future and how it was really important that I went travelling with her. “You and

me, we're going to escape! George understands!"

So I continued to rent a room in the boys' flat, but I spent most of the time at Ellida's. During January and February, she and I slipped into an uneasy domestic routine. When I wasn't on campus attending lectures and tutorials, I spent most of my time at Foundry Street doing my work as best I could and helping out with Isolde. Arnholm would take Isolde for the occasional day or so; he was living out in Lewes with his new girlfriend, Carol; she had a big farmhouse there. One night, the phone rang, and Ellida jumped to answer; I could hear it was Arnholm, though I couldn't hear what he was saying. I could see Ellida getting more and more agitated. "But -- !" she said, and "That's not right!" The atmosphere around her was charged. Eventually she slammed down the phone.

"He wants more 'quality time' with Carol," she sneered, "whatever that means. What it does mean is not having Isolde around!" She sat down hard on the sofa. I was afraid to sit down beside her. "He's so selfish. He tells me that Carol is very delicate. That she's already had two break-downs in her life and that she can't do her research if children are around and all of this shit! Why is Carol my fucking concern?"

Ellida became obsessed with Carol. She dug out her book and research papers in the library: they were on the 18th-century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft.

"She calls herself a feminist, and yet she goes out with Arnholm!" Ellida said.

The crisis happened when Carol confided to Ellida one day that she was hoping the divorce would come through soon. Ellida had gone to Lewes with Isolde; she was scathing about the big place Carol had there, but it was as if she were drawn to it, too.

"What? He's said he's going to marry you?" Ellida said.

"No, not exactly. But I'm going to pop the question," Carol said.

"I thought you didn't believe in marriage."

"I don't," Carol said. "But with a man like Arnholm you have to keep things on a firm footing."

Ellida recounted this conversation one afternoon as we were walking along the promenade. "How dare he bloody get married to that fucking woman! He only wants her for her money!"

Later on, after we'd searched for shells on the beach, and were heading back to the house, we saw Carol and Arnholm waiting with Isolde outside Foundry Street. Ellida seized my arm: "You know, I just can't face it."

Suddenly, the pair of us were running to Beaconsfield Villas, hoping we weren't seen by Carol and Arnholm. Later on, with Ellida safely installed in my bedroom, I snuck back to Foundry Street and collected some of her clothes and her bathroom kit. There was no sign of either Carol or Arnholm.

When I got back to Beaconsfield Villas, the phone started ringing. Ellida and I both knew who it was. She told me not to answer. However, Luke, totally unaware of what was going

on, picked up and said Arnholm was asking for me. I instructed him to say I wasn't there. But the phone kept ringing. Eventually, I answered. It was Carol. She explained that she was very confused and shocked. Arnholm was still sitting in a café near Foundry Street, waiting for Ellida to collect Isolde. I told her that Ellida didn't want to talk to her. Carol hung up. Shortly after this, Arnholm phoned, demanding to speak to Ellida.

I stalled him again, then returned to my bedroom. Ellida and I made love slowly and desperately. The next morning, Ellida wrote a long letter to Arnholm saying that she wanted to give full responsibility for looking after Isolde to him while she found a new place to live; she couldn't live in his house any more.

The stress of the situation made both me and Ellida feel sick. I wanted to tell Ellida that she had to contact her parents but didn't dare. Later, Carol phoned and started to cry when I repeated that Ellida wasn't talking to anyone but had written a letter to Arnholm. She said: "Ellida is being selfish, you know. She's causing herself a lot of harm. And I feel as though you are shielding her from the realities of the situation. Arnholm and I are hardly speaking, and can't go on like this. Somehow I'm caring for someone else's daughter!"

I was gripping the telephone so hard that my knuckles were white. I loosened my hold. "I'll take Isolde if you want. I'll take her."

The relief in Carol's voice was palpable. "You're doing the right thing, Francis. I'll bring her to the station. Can you meet me there in a couple of hours?"

Putting down the phone, I entered my room and looked with disgust at the smoke rising from Ellida's mouth.

"This has got to stop!" I said. "You can't treat Isolde like this."

"Fine! I'll fuck off!"

She tried to push past me, but I caught her, grabbing her by the shoulders.

"Ellida, you have to contact your parents. If you won't look after Isolde, you have to make them get her."

She struggled in my arms.

"Get off me! Get off!"

I let go.

"Yes, you're right. I've failed," she said, sitting down on the edge of the bed and lighting another cigarette. Although not usually a smoker, I took one of her cigarettes, lit it and said: "I'm going to get Isolde from Carol."

I opened the door to the bedroom and stood in the hallway, waiting for Ellida to come out. She didn't move, but carried on smoking.

Elaine was sitting in the hallway, wrapped in a duvet, reading some tome about contract law. She scrutinised me.

"I'm going to get Isolde," I said.

Still no reply from Ellida.

I glanced at Elaine and shrugged.

Suddenly Elaine kicked off the duvet and rushed into my bedroom.

“Go and get your fooking kid!”

She looked silly because she was in her nightdress and somehow this didn't give her the full authority she might have wanted. Nevertheless, it was shocking because of all the people in the flat, Elaine had never discussed Ellida with me. Ellida seemed unruffled at first: she tapped her cigarette on the ashtray.

Elaine moved closer to her and said in a much quieter voice, “Go and get your child, Ellida. She is not Francis's child, she is your child. Do you understand that?”

Luke surfaced from his bedroom. He was wearing his dressing gown and had lit a spliff. He hovered behind Elaine. I thought he might say something but he didn't. Then Lucy, Luke's girlfriend, appeared too. She, at least, was fully dressed.

“What's going on?” Lucy said.

“I told Ellida that she needs to go and fetch her child,” Elaine said. “Don't you realize that Francis has got his Finals soon? He's got to get a degree! Don't you realize how selfish your behaviour is?”

Suddenly Ellida flung her cigarette on the floor, stood up on the bed and screamed at the top of her voice. “ARRRGH!”

All of us shrank back except Elaine, who climbed on to the bed, opened her arms and hugged Ellida tightly. Ellida sobbed into her chest. Then Elaine took her hand and led her out of the room. Eventually Ellida was calm enough to speak.

“OK,” Ellida said to me, adding after a pause: “I'll come with you.”

We got dressed and walked in silence towards the station. It was another miserable winter day, damp and cold. Ellida had her thick Norwegian coat but I only had my bomber jacket. Carol and Ellida didn't look each other in the eye at the handover in the greasy station café. Isolde was pleased to see her mother, leaping towards her. Ellida picked her up and carried her away, leaving me to take the buggy with the child's paraphernalia bundled on it. I held the handles of the stroller, lingering with Carol, who was harbouring a mug of tea.

“Where's Arnholm?” I said.

“Why isn't Ellida asking that?” Carol said, peeved that Ellida had not acknowledged her, let alone thanked her.

“I'm just as much in the dark as you are,” I said.

“I'm not doing it again, Francis. It's nothing against Isolde. She's a lovely child, and I've got to know her well, but I just can't. It's destroying my relationship with Arnholm. I don't know how you've coped with the situation for so long.”

That evening, Ellida spoke to her mother on the phone. I didn't understand what they said,

but Ellida told me that Hilde would come and fetch Isolde in a few days. That took the pressure off me: I was happy to play with Isolde now that I knew my time with her was finite. Ellida and I took her to the beach and pier, the shops and the local park, we played with her almost constantly.

The evening before Hilde was due to arrive, Ellida went out for the evening but wouldn't let me come with her. When I asked her where she was going, she wouldn't say. It was to prove to be the last evening I would spend with Isolde in a very long time: we amused ourselves with hide and seek and Peepo, I fed and bathed her, and then read her *Where The Wild Things Are* before she went to bed. She laughed uproariously: I was pleased she was so contented in my company and hadn't once asked for her mummy. I would miss her when she left.

Ellida came home that evening drunk and fucked me without explaining anything. I didn't resist. She seemed much happier than she had been in a long time and this made me inclined not to ask questions.

The next morning Ellida's mother came to fetch her granddaughter. Isolde didn't want to go because she'd been having a really good time: Hilde had to entice her with the promise of an ice cream.

After Isolde left, Ellida was mute as we walked away from the station. As we were about to turn into Foundry Street, she said she didn't want me to stay in the house. "I need some sleep."

"I thought we were going to find our own place," I said.

Ellida drew a strand of her hair back over her ear. "Arnholm said it was all right for me to stay."

"Is that who you saw last night?"

"Yes."

"I just don't get it. You and Arnholm have been rowing like bastards all this time, and now you're friendly again with him. Is he going to be living in Foundry Street as well?"

"He might be..."

"He might be!"

"Francis, he's the father of my child. I've known him since --"

"So you're going to live with him?"

"Yes. We're going to try again."

"But what about Carol? I thought he was so in love with her!"

Ellida smiled wryly: "He caught her in bed with her lodger...who was supposed to be gay!"

With these words, she backed away from me, breaking into a run. An emerging blue sky winked behind her. I watched her go, dumb-founded, and then ran to catch up.

“You and Arnholm are going to try again? How can you say that after all we’ve been through? What’s the matter with you?”

“I’m doing you a favour! I really am.”

Whenever I passed the house, I could see that Arnholm was there; his keyboards and music equipment was set up in the front room. I suspected he was sleeping in the master bedroom with Ellida.

I talked about it a lot with my flat-mates. Lucy and Elaine both told me that I shouldn’t see her; that I should get on with revising for my Finals and completing the coursework. George would sometimes joke that perhaps I could nip back for a shag if Arnholm was out.

I tried knocking on the door when I knew Arnholm wasn’t there, but Ellida didn’t answer. And she didn’t pick up the phone either. I kept calling. One time, I got Arnholm. He chatted amiably about his music and how *Flight* was progressing well. But when I asked him if I could speak to Ellida, he said that it was probably best if I didn’t. I realized he was friendly with me because he knew he was in charge again.

“How’s Carol?” I asked.

“She’s a waste of space. I’m not thinking about her.”

“Because she shagged the lodger, who was supposed to be gay?”

There was a pause on the line.

“Ellida told you that?” he said.

“She did! And she told me that she never loved you!” I shouted into the receiver.

The line went dead.

I wrote Ellida a number of long furious letters reminding her of our promise: I never got an answer.

I buried my anger and sorrow in my work; I developed a routine which I’d never managed before. I’d get up at 7am and cycle to the library, work until 10 or 11am, attend lectures and seminars, and then would return to the library where I would work well into the night.

Tensions were rising in the flat, particularly between Luke and Lucy. Luke was unhappy because Lucy, having been inspired by Elaine, wanted to train as a solicitor and was aiming to do a post-grad law course after her degree. He wanted to go travelling. They argued about their plans. Luke was insistent that he wasn’t going to live in London with Lucy; that he was going to take off across the globe. Lucy wasn’t happy about this: she filled in an application form for him to do a post-grad course himself at the Royal College of Art. One evening, she told him that she had forged his signature and sent it off.

There was a huge row. Luke, who normally never lost his temper, was livid.

“You forged my signature! You’re not going to fucking have me at your fucking beck and call! No, you’re not!”

“I’m saving you from yourself, you moron! You won’t last two minutes travelling around the world without me!” Lucy said.

George and Elaine were watching a Werner Herzog film on BBC2. George asked them to take their argument outside. Which they did. We didn’t see them for quite a while. I had dinner with George and Elaine, and then we went to the pub. Elaine and George decided to go night-clubbing but I headed home. The day had been warm but the night was cold; a thick sea mist invaded the streets of Brighton.

When I got back to Beaconsfield Villas, I found the door open and mist pouring into the flat. I knew immediately that something was very wrong. I found the old TV smashed up on floor and Luke, crouched in the corner, crying. I asked him what the matter was, but he didn’t say anything. Instead, he reached for me and clasped me forcefully. His stomach squeaked and palpitated. He tightened his grip on me and started crying.

“She said she was going to kill herself! She was going to jump off the pier!”

I made him a cup of tea and, in between his sobs, he explained that he and Lucy had had a fight on Brighton pier. Lucy had threatened to jump off it. Luke’s face was badly scratched and bruised.

“I turned and ran, Francis, I just ran...” he said. I think his running away shamed him the most.

“Perhaps we should go back and look for her?”

Just then there was a knock on the door. It was Arnholm. He had his arm wrapped around a dishevelled Lucy.

Immediately, Luke rushed up to his girlfriend and started apologizing.

“We’ll go to London! We will! Just forget what I said!” he said.

Arnholm came into the hallway of the flat and looked at me. I’d never been so pleased to see him.

“I was getting some inspiration for my composition, *Flight*, on the pier, and I found Lucy wandering around crying so I thought I should bring her home,” he said.

“Thank you! Oh thank you!” Luke said, kissing him on his bristly cheeks.

I followed Arnholm onto the street. He said: “But thank you, Francis, Ellida and I are much better now. I think it’s going to be OK between us.”

I didn’t say anything, but watched him wander back down the misty street.

Chapter 4: Isolde

When I return from Brighton that evening, I catch Hadley and Jack snuggled up together gawping at *Finding Nemo*. They appear guilty that I've caught them indulging themselves. It makes me think they have a familiarity with each other that I never really have had with anyone. With her arms around Jack, Hadley asks whether I had a nice time with George. "You look like you've been reliving your student days. I hope you didn't overdo it."

"Oh you know George! There was quite a bit of drinking."

"I can smell it! You'd better take a shower!"

To stop my head throbbing I swig a glass of wine in the bathroom; it soothes my confusion. After my shower, I shave and put on clean clothes and go downstairs for dinner. Over macaroni cheese, Jack and Hadley talk about their day: they went to the Museum of London with Josiah and his children.

"Josiah told us all about how London used to be: how there were prostitutes and children who were slaves," Jack says.

"Chimney sweeps," I say.

After dinner, when Jack is in bed, Hadley and I watch *Father Ted* on Netflix. My phone beeps. Hadley glances at me. I never normally get text messages in the evening so she notices. My screen reads: "I need you."

I drop my phone.

"It's George. I'd better just reply. He wants to know if I got back all right."

I hurry into the toilet -- which is just as well because Isolde is calling. I shut the door and say: "What are you doing?"

"I need to see you again."

"Look, can I call you tomorrow?"

"Can't we talk now? Is your wife there or something?"

"I'm in the toilet."

"Just say something nice to me."

"I've got to go now."

I press the "off" button very hard on my cheap phone, put my head into the toilet bowl and puke.

I am too tired to get up with Hadley and Jack in the morning. Their tramping around makes my head throb. I feel sick. Hadley brings up a cup of hot lemon and honey just before she leaves.

“I thought you might need this,” she says.

I take a sip and thank her.

“You always overdo it with George, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.”

When she’s gone, I drag myself out of bed and make myself a strong cup of coffee, take some paracetamol and sit at the kitchen table in my dressing gown. I switch on my phone and twenty texts pop into view: “why dd u hang up?” “R u there?” “can u call me asap?” “fucking hell just call me!”. I delete each one, and then see that there are bigger messages with large attachments that my phone can’t handle. When I hook my phone to the computer, I see that it is the “selfie” of Isolde kissing me. The attendant text reads: “what will wifey think?”

I had been intending to get on with my magazine work, but it’s impossible now. Isolde could do anything: put that photo on Facebook or contact Hadley or turn up at the house. Does she have our address?

I need to go ex-directory. I surf the internet and fill in the relevant form. Phew! At least, I’ve done that.

But what next?

Let’s face it: I’m going to have to contact her. Calm her down. Just as I am about to dial, I see she’s calling.

“Francis, you’re there!”

“Yes.”

“Can you talk?”

“Yes.”

“Is your wife at work?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve been calling you a lot.”

“My phone packed in.”

“I know you switched it off.”

“I just needed to get some rest.”

“Look, I’m sorry. I just phoned to apologise, that’s all.”

This is a relief to hear: sanity!

“I’ve got a terrible hangover now.”

“Yes, I’m feeling a bit the worse for wear, but I’m much older than you.”

“You don’t seem that old to me.”

There’s a pause.

“I’d still like to see you again. You were nice to me. Kind. Fun. You made me feel good again.”

“I did?”

“I’m not surprised my mother liked you so much.”

“I’m quite busy at the moment.”

“What about tomorrow? You could come down here for lunch maybe? Then be off home for tea? What about that? Or even today?”

Suddenly, she doesn’t sound quite so sane.

“Can I get back to you?”

“When?”

“Later today?”

“In an hour?”

“Maybe, yes, I’ll call you in an hour.”

“Why don’t you get yourself another drink if you’ve got a hangover?”

“I’m not an alcoholic.”

“Vodka is the best way out of a hangover. No one can smell it on your breath.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Get a vodka and call me back in an hour. And I’ll do the same.”

I put the phone down and bury my head in my hands. My head is still hurting. Getting that vodka is not a bad idea in the short term.

With an alcohol-motivated spring in my step, I get up from desk, make a sandwich, wrap it in cellophane, fill a plastic bottle with water, get some fruit, a cup, my laptop and put the lot into a rucksack. I do this very well for someone who feels so ill. Then I head out of the house, down to the Sainsbury’s Local opposite Goldsmiths’ College and buy the vodka. I walk through the college and find a recess beyond lecture theatre and drink the alcohol. I feel better.

I phone Isolde. She says she’ll meet me at the station.

There are usually plenty of Goths standing under the vaulted roof of Brighton Station, but even so Isolde stands out. Her pale face has a slash of cherry lipstick; her eyes are blackened with dark liner and thick mascara, and her black waistcoat is hung with silver chains. She flings her arms around me and kisses me on the lips. The scent she’s wearing is cloying and sweet.

“Daddy! It’s so good to see you!” Her voice just in my ear.

I yank myself back from her. “Daddy?”

“No one will suspect we’re having an affair if I say you’re my Dad! We can hold hands and things like that.” She reaches right out and grips my hand hard; I can feel my wedding ring press against her palm.

I reach for my Coke bottle and take a swig of the alcohol-laced drink.

“I’m not holding hands, Isolde! That’s what I came to talk to you about. We’re not having an affair. This is nothing like that.”

Isolde inveigles her arm inside mine. “Come on, let’s hurry.”

“Where are we going?”

We walk arm-in-arm through Trafalgar Street and stroll through the Pavilion Gardens. I wonder if anyone will see us.

“So what’s it with you and your wife?” she says as we pass the decadent spires of the Pavilion. The lunch-time crowd mills around the lanes.

“You don’t need to worry about that,” I say, disengaging from Isolde’s arm.

“Mum always said that she wasn’t right for you.”

Isolde grabs my hand and pulls me across a busy inter-change, even though the traffic is psychotic.

“You’re going to kill me!”

“How would you like to die?” Isolde says as we stand in the middle of the honking, whizzing road.

“I don’t want to die,” I say, searching for a way across.

“We all have to die sometime!”

With that, she pulls me forward and neatly navigates us around the other two lanes of traffic. I let go of her hand once I’m on the pavement and put my hands on my knees. She pats me on the back.

“That was good, Francis, that was really good. I got a kick out of that. It makes you realize that you don’t have to jump out of an airplane to get an adrenalin hit.”

“Can we just walk normally now?”

“OK, Daddy!”

“*Don’t* call me Daddy!”

We climb a hill lined with terraced houses. At the top, she pushes through a big iron gate and enters the precincts of a large Victorian house with a turreted roof. Tall grass and floppy weeds greet us in the front garden.

“This is my house!”

“It is?”

“Grandpa bought it for me.”

“Leif?”

“Yes.”

“He wanted me to be independent from my parents.”

“I thought your mum left you it. That’s what Arnholm told me.”

“I think mum told him that to make it sound like she was important, but it’s not the truth. I was given the house from the outset.”

So this is the place where Ellida died.

It is a complete tip: the hallway and front room are full of cardboard boxes, overflowing with clothes, bedding, towels, papers, books, lampshades and lamps and knick-knacks. I wonder if any of this stuff is Ellida's. A quick glance suggests it isn't: the T-shirts and trousers at the top of one box look like Arnholm's stuff.

All the junk makes it difficult to find anywhere to sit. There are empty bottles – wine, beer and spirit bottles – everywhere. Many of them are stuffed with stubbed out cigarettes and roaches.

“Izzy, this place is...”

“A shit-pit!”

“And the smell!”

The kitchen is unspeakable, reminding me of the one in the 1980s comedy show, *The Young Ones*: caked in filth and heaped with dirty crockery. Izzy holds up a half-full wine bottle.

“Wine or spliff?”

“Just a glass of water actually.”

I scrub out a dirty glass on the drainer and fill it from the tap.

The room may be disgusting but the view from the window is magnificent. You can see most of the waterfront: the beach, the pier, and the sea.

“This could be great if you tidied it up a bit,” I say.

“It's fine as it is.”

After a few sips of water, I get a guided tour. Arnholm's room on the first floor is massive and has its own en-suite toilet and bathroom. Unlike everywhere else in the house, it is orderly. There's a lot of musical equipment: a couple of keyboards, a few guitars, a microphone on a stand and an iMac on a large worktop. Rothko paintings of big black and red lozenges line the wall. In the middle of the room, there's a king-size bed.

“Let's have a spliff here and then you can fuck me on my Dad's bed.”

I feel myself falling into one of Rothko's dark henges. “No thanks.”

“Why not? Don't you find me attractive?”

“I looked after you when you were very little.”

“How old are you?”

“Forty six.”

“I'm twenty seven. It's not that much older.”

“I could be your Dad.”

Isolde sighs, but I can tell, in a way, that she's grateful for my refusal. It is the most adamant I have given so far.

She rolls a joint on the bed and lights the spliff, dragging heavily on it; she holds in the smoke for a long time and then breathes it out in a big green cloud. I sit on the edge of the bed with my glass of water.

“The smell brings back memories.”

“Why don’t you have some?” Isolde says, holding out the roach end at me.

“No, thanks.”

“Why not?”

“Not in the mood.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Do you think your Dad would mind if I used his toilet?”

“Do I look like I care?”

I venture into the bathroom, which is surprisingly clean. It is full of expensive toiletry items for men: an ivory shaving brush, a variety of razors and lots of creams and colognes. I splash some Aqua di Parma onto my cheeks and think about how Arnholm has found his niche here.

When I return I find Izzy lying naked on the bed. She is beautiful: a long, slim body, small but plump breasts and shaved pubic hair.

“You need to put some clothes on.”

I leave the room, but she follows me, dancing beside me with her phone in one hand. On the landing, she presses her body against and takes a selfie.

“Don’t I turn you on?”

“I’m going.”

“But I bet you jerk off to this picture when I send it to you!”

“I’m never going to fuck you. Do you understand that?”

“OK, Daddy.”

“I’ll wait for you outside.”

I leave the smelly house and sit onto the doorstep, gulping the fresh air. A little later, she steps out into the sunshine in a floral dress and sandals, looking demure and innocent. She shields her eyes from the sun with her hand.

“She was the love of your life, wasn’t she?”

“What do you mean?”

“My mum.”

“I don’t know...”

“Isn’t that the reason you’ve come all this way to see me?”

“If my wife knew about any of this...”

“You haven’t done anything.”

“Yes, but she’s looking for excuses.”

“Oh.”

“Why don’t you walk me to the station? It was interesting to see your house and everything, but I think I should go now,” I say.

We walk back down the hill, with the sea sparkling in the distance: it is the same green as Ellida’s eyes. Our pace is slow and thoughtful.

“You’re still obsessed with her, aren’t you?” Isolde says, squeezing my hand in a well-meaning way. “Why did you split up anyway?”

“She went back to your Dad.”

“Oh God.”

“You didn’t know that?”

“No.”

“We were both young. I was younger than you are now.”

“You take pity on people, don’t you?”

“You think that’s what this is, pity?”

Isolde laughs. “Yes, you’re the pity committee. Before you came along I was on the verge of trying again.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean...I was going to get back to mum. Then Dad said that you’d contacted him, and that you wanted to see us. I took that as a sign.”

“Don’t you think you should get help?”

“I am getting help. From you.”

“But proper help.”

“I have been sectioned for months at a time. I know what proper help looks like. It’s shit.”

We reach the lanes.

“Look, why don’t we have a drink, one last one before you go?” Isolde says. “I promise no funny stuff. Let’s just talk.”

We return to the Battle of Trafalgar, which is near the station. I tell Isolde that I’m catching the five o’clock train to London; that gives us some more time. I feel better now that she seems to have calmed down. I buy the drinks this time. We sit down at the same alcove as before.

“When we were walking through the lanes, you were thinking of being with her when you were students, weren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Was that the last time you fucked her, when you were students?”

“She didn’t tell you?”

“No.”

“She came back. When I was married. Before my son was born.”

“She didn’t tell me.”

I look at Isolde. She has begun crying. I can’t tell whether it’s because she’s upset her mum didn’t tell her everything about us, or because she just misses her, or a mixture of both.

Part Four

Chapter 1: Ellida again

It was another blue day by Eros. Standing nervously by the statue, I examined the tourists milling around but, although I saw a few Scandinavian girls pass by, none of them looked remotely like Ellida. I contemplated the lithe boy with his bow and thought: *God, I really hope she doesn't turn up.* I fiddled with the fourth finger on my left hand, feeling where I'd taken off my ring.

I was just about to reach for it in the pocket of my designer jeans when a hand skated under my arm. "Francis! I can't believe it! You did cut your hair and now you look so, so, sooooo..."

Ellida put her hands over her mouth.

"No offence. You look, well, somehow much younger!"

I pecked her on the cheeks. "None taken."

She cuddled me.

After the shock of the greeting, I saw she'd changed. With her bleached hair drawn back in a bun, she was thinner underneath artful make-up; her cheek-bones were visible and, contrasting with her narrower face, her lips seemed fuller. Perhaps most strikingly, she was wearing a black skirt suit, black stockings and shiny pumps. She was a professional.

"I wonder why you chose to meet me here?" she said.

I shielded my eyes from the sun. "It was the first place I could think of."

"How typical of you to think of meeting next to the Love God made by your ancestor!"

Her hand found mine. The intervening years were whisked away. I was a gawky student again.

"You know, I think your great-great grandfather was very good at flesh with his metal work! Very sensual. The boy's skin looks absolutely real, doesn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose it does," I said, adjusting my sunglasses.

Ellida pinched my stomach. "Hey, Francis, your flesh feels quite firm. Have you lost weight? You look different somehow!"

"I could say the same about you."

Ellida pushed out her chest and did an imitation of a tourist-guide walk, "Yes, dear sir, I must tell you that Norway is the best place to visit in the summer, winter or fall!"

"So that's what you're doing, luring Englishmen to their doom in Norway!"

"Yes, my job is to lure Englishmen to the lairs of the trolls so that they can use and abuse them as they wish!"

I decided it was probably best if I toned down my flirting so I said in a coolly: “You must tell me about everything you’ve been doing.”

This felt like the safest topic.

“No, let’s walk. Where did you walk me before?” she said.

This wasn’t a safe topic. “Down to the Mall and by St James’s Palace. I showed you Princess Alexandra in Marlborough Place.”

“So you still remember?” she said.

Her green eyes pierced me.

“I guess.”

“Please, lead on, great-great grandson of the man who invented love.”

“That’s what you said last time. That my ancestor invented love.”

“I didn’t actually. I said: the people of the UK invented the only God who exists! And then I wrote in my notebook all the things you had to do to get to heaven. I can still remember a couple of questions. I asked: *Have you been so drunken by love that you'd throw up everything in your life for it?* You made fun of my expression with that one. The other question was simpler, it was: *Who do you love?* Do you remember those questions?”

I frowned, smothering my memories.

“You mustn’t forget a day like that!”

As we walked, Ellida told me about her life after we parted. Once she finished her literature module at Sussex, she completed her Music Degree at Bergen and then did lots of different jobs: bar-tender; bassoonist in an ensemble, stage manager at the local theatre; coffee vendor at an airport and, most significantly, conflict-resolution manager for the UN. There, she was part of a big team: she’d been recruited because of her ability to speak so many languages and to learn new ones quickly. She’d travelled the world, working with various NGOs, helping warring factions talk to each other. I felt jealous: she’d done some good.

When we reached the ICA on the Mall, she said: “Sometimes there’s stuff that just can’t be put right. So I decided to take the job with the Tourist Board. I’d had enough of suffering!”

She told me about her marketing strategies. Her enthusiasm surprised me: it was the kind of business enterprise she used to despise. But as she explained, the Ellida-isms of yesteryear surfaced: “What we need to do is make the English feel passionate about Norway, make them fall in love with it, with its landscape, with its culture, with its people. The thing is that we need to show the English that Norway is an extreme place, a place of great beauty, where you can do really cool mountaineering and trekking like you can’t do anywhere else in the world... Anyway, I thought you could help me!”

By now we were standing in front of the memorial to Princess Alexandra on Marlborough Place: mournful children were enfolded in the caresses of the Princess’s dress.

"I'm quite busy at the moment," I said.

Ellida tickled my hand. "Oh dear, Francis, I have been talking about myself and I haven't asked about you at all!"

"I'm an Arts journalist. I work at a listings magazine. I've been doing it for years now. It's a good job. The hours aren't too bad and I get to go to openings of movies and galleries, and get the odd freebie holiday thrown in if I write about it..."

This was the usual "schtick" that I regularly trotted out when asked what I did. Most people were admiring of my set-up -- but not Ellida.

"I thought you were going to become a playwright."

"Nah, too much like lots of work for no money." This was a phrase I used when trying to explain why I'd abandoned my ambition to be a writer and it had frequently fostered world-weary sympathy. But not with Ellida, who was hurt by my cynicism.

"That's a shame," she said.

I hung my head.

She entwined her fingers with mine, making me look into her eyes. We walked for a bit and then sat down on one of the benches in St James's Square. Ellida produced a packet of cigarettes. I took one, even though I'd given up smoking years before.

"Well, here we are!" Ellida said.

Before we knew it we were kissing, our smouldering cigarettes held comically aloft above our heads. Ellida's tongue searched hungrily in my mouth. Sensing my reticence, she whispered in my ear: "You told me to meet you by Eros. You told me to meet you by Eros."

I thought: *Oh fuck, how could I ever let her leave me again?*

We staggered to our feet and wandered around Piccadilly in a daze. I wondered if any of my journo mates or acquaintances would see me.

"Let's go back to my hotel," Ellida said.

I didn't say anything at first. The West End was bathed in liquid light.

"I can't."

"What do you mean?"

Looking down at the fossilised chewing gum on the pavement, I said: "I'm married."

"I thought you said -- "

"I – I – I didn't know what to say."

Ellida stopped in her tracks and glared at me. "Do you have children?"

"No."

"How long have you been married?"

"A few years."

Ellida considered and then shrugged. "You don't have children."

"I'm married."

“But that didn’t stop you with me, did it? And I had a kid too!”

She stroked the length of my fingers.

“How is Isolde?”

Ellida let go of my hand. “She’s a teenager – and behaves like one.”

“God, how time passes!! What’s she doing? Where is she?”

“She’s living in Brighton. With Arnholm.”

“How’s that working?”

Ellida bit on the fingernail of her index finger. “It’s fine. He’s single, but he sees people every now and then. We’re finally divorced.”

“But do you and he still have that weird on-off-on relationship of yours?” I said, with real bitterness.

“Oh, that’s not nice!”

“Let’s not forget, you left me for him!”

Ellida looked away. “So who is this wife of yours? What makes her so special?”

“She’s a teacher.”

“Oh God, how boring.”

Ellida took my hand again. I could feel the wetness of the saliva on her index finger on my palm. “Please Francis, come to Brighton tomorrow. I need you to be by the sea with me and talk about things! I can’t think here.”

“And why would I want to go back to Brighton?”

“It’ll be good for you. We’ll be able to think things through by the sea. Like we used to. Do you remember that Francis? Do you remember how you told me about the bullying at your school by the sea?”

I grabbed her fag packet off her and lit another one. Puffing out smoke I said, “You betrayed me, you know that, don’t you?”

“I kept all those letters you sent me. I’ve still got them.”

“Then why didn’t you reply to them?”

“I couldn’t. I was trying to make it work again with Arnholm. I thought if I made it right with him then it would be better with Izzy.”

When Hadley returned home late that evening, I told her that I had met an old college friend. I don’t think she registered what I was saying; she’d set her bag on the chair by the table, was looking through it, organizing her things, setting her umbrella back by the door where she always kept it: she was such a creature of order. We were living in Leyton and things were good between us. In the days before Jack, we went running in the morning around Coronation Gardens together, Orient stadium looming up by our shoulders; shopped in the Stratford Sainsbury’s, and would drive in our Nissan Micra out to the Newham Showcase cinemas on

Saturday evenings, out along the A13, our little car flying over the old river Lea, the industrial wastelands of Beckton; in the dark of the cinema, we'd hold hands in the back row. We'd talk about anything and everything: politics, the science of climate change, the virtues of California wine, the problems with Martin Amis's sexist fiction, the Millennium Bug. We'd write Post-Its reminding one another to buy milk or toilet paper, but would always sign them off with a row of xxxs, inky kisses.

It was a time of innocence. Infidelity had never crossed my mind.

Hadley sat down at the table. "Hang on a minute, you met *who* today?"

"A friend from college."

"The mad Norwegian girlfriend?"

"Yes," I said; I could feel the colour come to my face.

Hadley raised an eyebrow. "No funny business, I hope?"

Her eyes flashed with humour – and maybe suspicion? I couldn't quite tell.

"Of course not! We only met briefly in town. She's working for the Norwegian Tourist board. She looks much older. And she's become quite boring actually."

"Oh, OK."

This seemed to reassure her.

* * *

The sun-worshippers were already installed on their towels when we crossed the promenade and crunched onto the pebbles. Ellida stretched out her arms and said, "Yes, it feels better here!"

A little later, she said: "I can talk to you, but first we must have a swim!"

I chucked a pebble into the surf. "I don't fancy swallowing the whole of Brighton's sewage – or getting swept out to sea!"

I watched as she shrugged off her top and her jeans and stepped into the sea. She dived into the water and swam far out while I sat with my chin resting on my knees, staring at her through my sunglasses. Hadley never went swimming like that. In fact, as far as I was aware, Hadley had never been swimming outdoors while she'd been with me – even though she was a strong swimmer. Hadley was a "lengths" person: up and down the lanes in the pool thirty-two times.

When Ellida returned dripping and laughing, I handed her towel to her. She dried her face and then sat on the towel in her swimsuit. I edged away from her, trying not to look at her body. Reaching into her rucksack, she produced familiar sustenance: rye bread, a jar of pickled fish, a packet of dried fish, some mayonnaise and the obligatory Aquavit. I accepted her offer of pickled fish on rye bread and swigged down the Aquavit quickly.

"I always do this before I go and see Izzy," she said.

I produced some sun-cream and started rubbing it into my face and neck. I offered some to Ellida and she took a dab and wiped it uselessly onto her hands.

“So you come to Brighton a lot?”

“Yes, I do. At least three or four times a year. I usually stay a few weeks.”

“Oh. ”

I was hurt that she hadn't contacted me earlier but I didn't say anything.

A little later, I held the towel around her as she undressed, glimpsing the sheen of her flesh in my shadow.

As we crossed the road on the promenade to go back into town, she said that she wanted to drop her rucksack at the hotel where she was staying. She collected the key from a rather miserable old lady at reception, who eyed me suspiciously.

“I'm not staying,” I said.

“Makes no difference to me!” the old lady said.

I followed Ellida into the creaky lift. Time slowed down as we waited for it to ascend.

“God, I would have thought that the Norwegian tourist board would pay for a better place than this!” I said. “It's like something out of a Pinter play.”

“I wonder what the room is like!” Ellida said.

I froze. “I can't do this. I have to go home now. It's not fair on anyone.”

Ellida jabbed hard on the elevator button hoping the doors would shut quickly. “It's too late now.”

“Is it?”

Then she grabbed my shoulders and kissed me, saying: “Oh come on.”

The room was very pokey, but it had a great view of the sea which twinkled through its dusty panes. She took out a couple of wrapped presents from her rucksack and put them by the door. Then she caressed my face. “I'm sorry for before: I was out of my mind.”

“Let's not talk about it.”

“Yes! Let's not! Let's just fuck instead! You can't go back on your promise, can you?”

We took off our clothes and stood before each other naked.

“I feel like it's my first time again!” I said.

“Have some Aquavit!”

I kissed her neck as she poured. She leant back, savouring the kiss.

“You have good touch. That's what I missed the most,” she said, shutting her eyes as I took her breasts in my hands. “The way you touch me. Soft, gentle, kind. With your hard cock pressing against me at the same time.”

“So you did miss me?”

Ellida toasted me with her Aquavit, “I'll always love you until the day I die.”

And then I was back inside her. I loved the sensation of her wetness. It was the most gorgeous thing I'd ever felt in my life.

"I love your chest hair," she said. "I love your Englishness. I love the way your cock is so nicely shaped. Like a mushroom on top, but also thick below. Some men have such nasty cocks. Mean little pencils, or monstrous fat things like estate cars or something. Your cock is great. Just perfect!"

"Have you seen that many?"

"I've seen a few!"

"I expect you have!"

We both laughed.

"Doesn't your wife talk to you like that?" she asked as she continued to run her hands through my chest hair.

"What do you mean?"

"About your cock?"

"Not really, no."

"But she's nice to you?"

"I'm supposed to be fucking you, not talking about my wife."

"But talking about your wife turns me on. I'm fucking a married man. I'm leading him astray, I've got someone's husband's cock in my cunt. That feels good!"

"I'm not just someone, Ellida."

"Oh shut up -- and fuck!"

Chapter 2: One fine summer night

“So what are the best things about being an adult?” Jack says.

The voice of Father Jack from *Father Ted* pops into my head: “Drink, drink, gurls!”

“You get to choose your own bedtime,” I say.

We are walking home from the playground on the top of Telegraph Hill. It is a lovely summer’s day: up here, away from the traffic, the air rises balmy and fresh from the lush grass of the park and the sunlight twinkles in between the shadows rippling on the tree-shaded pond.

“Yes, I was thinking that,” Jack says. Checking to see if his friends are not around, he puts his hand in mine. I squeeze it. He continues: “It isn’t a big deal because you go to bed early. Mum says it’s because you drink too much.”

“She does?” I say, adding: “Do you think that mum’s out a lot?”

“Maybe.”

“Do you think she goes out more than I do?” I ask.

“Yes, definitely.”

“Do you miss her then?”

“I miss her more than you because she pays attention to me when she’s here. She doesn’t just play computer games and stuff,” Jack says.

“I pay attention to you!”

“A bit...a little bit...I mean you talk to me. But Mum listens to me read, she helps me with my homework, she plays Scrabble and chess with me...”

“I see.”

“You used to play football and tennis with me.”

“I used to? I still do. But I’ve had this magazine to make.”

“What about some football now?”

“OK.”

So we go home, fetch the football, and play in the concrete park for a bit. But it doesn’t stop me from feeling like I’m not there.

After that, we make supper together: Hadley is out tonight. As he chops his broccoli, he asks me what I wanted to be when I was his age. I say that I can’t remember really, possibly a train driver or something.

“We had a careers session today in school and they were asking us what we wanted to be.”

“You’re only ten, how can you know that stuff? I didn’t even know what I wanted to be when I was at university!”

“Everyone needs to know what they’re going to be.”

“I still don’t know what I’m going to be.”

Jack chomps on a bit of raw broccoli, saying with his mouth full: “I thought you were a journalist.”

I scoop up the chopped vegetables and put them into the wok. Jack stirs them with a wooden spoon.

“I’m going to be a New York cop. I’m going to live in America. After all, I’m half American.”

“Would that be safe?” I say, as the vegetables hiss and steam in the wok.

“I’d get my own gun and bullet-proof vest. I’d shoot anyone who was going to hurt me.”

“How would you know they meant to harm you?”

“They’d look nasty.”

I think about arguing with this “lookist” point but I’m too tired. “Yes, I suppose they would.”

“And I’d get them. Bang-bang you’re dead!”

I pour myself a glass of wine. “You’ve been watching too many cop shows!”

“You can never watch too many cop shows Dad! Rule of life!”

After supper, we watch another couple of episodes of *CSI*.

I finish the bottle and fail to wash up. Jack reads me his bedtime story: he’s half way through Thomas Hardy’s *The Withered Arm* with Hadley. I’m too woozy to absorb the words but it’s soothing to hear him read them so well.

“You’re much better at reading than me, and you’re only ten.”

“That’s a state school education for you,” he says, copying a phrase Hadley often uses.

Once I’ve put his light out, I plod to bed and lie down in our tidy bedroom with its clean, fresh smell. I shut my eyes and think that I have to stop seeing Isolde. I’ve been going down to Brighton too much recently: we go for long walks along the beach, we have boozy lunches together and we talk about her mother.

I fall asleep but I’m woken by Hadley shaking me. Her face, chiaroscuro in the shadowy bedroom, looms over me.

“Get up now! Get up!” she says.

I can smell alcohol on her breath. A lot.

“What is it? What?”

“You haven’t done the washing up!”

“I’m knackered.”

“Get up!”

She wrenches me out of the bed so hard that I fall on the floor. “Hey! That hurt!”

“Get up, you fat shit!”

“What’s the matter with you?”

I wonder whether she has finally flipped out over my slovenliness or is it more than that?

In the kitchen, she points at the dirty dishes.

“Why couldn’t you even do *that*?” And then she slumps into my rocking chair and breaks down into sobs.

“What is it? What?” I say, hovering by her.

She rummages about in her black leather handbag and produces her iPhone, unlocks the screen and shows me an email. “What the fuck is this?”

I gasp. A naked Isolde is clasping me on the landing, her nipples pressing against my shirt. I can see the look of horror on my face in the image; but I’m not surprised that Hadley can’t.

“That is not what it seems at all!”

“Just read the fucking email, cunt!”

It is from Arnholm: “I think you should know what your husband is doing to my daughter, Isolde. My daughter has suffered from very severe mental problems since her mother died, and your husband’s behaviour hasn’t helped her recover. Yours Stefan Arnholm.”

“It isn’t what you think it is,” I said, knowing how pathetic that sounded. I was so shocked I couldn’t get anything else out of my mouth.

Hadley smirked. “Oh, right. That’s you standing next to a naked woman. And this is you snogging her!”

She swipes the screen on her phone: Isolde is smooching me in the dingy light of the Battle of Trafalgar.

“She leapt on me.”

“A good looking girl throwing herself at a fat middle-aged slob like you. Very unlikely. I think you’ve been working on her for a long time.”

“Just let me explain.”

“But you have been seeing her?”

“I talk to her. That’s it. Really.”

“Then why haven’t you told me? Did you see her when you said you were seeing George?”

I don’t reply.

“You did!”

“I just felt guilty, that’s all...”

“I bet you did!”

She wipes away her tears with the back of her hand.

“Anyway, what about you and Josiah?”

“Oh God, just get out will you? Just go!”

I stand and glower at her, not believing what I’m hearing. I could have fucked Isolde so easily but I didn’t! I resisted! This just wasn’t fair at all.

“You’ve got this all wrong!” I yell at the top of my voice, the words scorching my throat. I

stalk towards her, wanting to shake some sense into her. Big mistake. She shrinks back, fear and anger on her face. My protestation of innocence sounds more like guilty defensiveness now. She points at the front door. I actually feel I have to go, otherwise I might do something stupid.

It is a cool summer night. I step outside with some clothes in a black bin-liner and look at the hazy purple sky lingering over the roof-tops. I don't really have anywhere I can stay except George's, but he lives in Dorset. So I climb to the top of Telegraph Hill and find a bench in the park.

Chapter 3: The lady from the sea

It was the end of October and cold in Oslo, but not freezing. Wrapped up in our overcoats and hats, waiting to cross the rain-slicked road, we watched the leaves eddy outside Ibsen's old home.

Pushing through a plain door, we ascended some stairs and found ourselves in a dark, gloomy apartment full of heavy furnishings, polished floors, rich curtains; stern portraits stared down at us from the walls. It didn't look like the home of someone who'd written so critically about bourgeois respectability; in fact it appeared to be the very embodiment of 19th century decorum. Ellida explained to me that Ibsen had spent most of his adult life in exile from Norway and only returned to his native country when he was a successful playwright. "He was always bitter about the way Norway never really accepted him," she said.

Out on the balcony where Ibsen used to stand and wave at his admirers, I said that the Norwegians appeared to adulate him as an old man.

"But even then he was attacked. Younger writers like Knut Hamsun would write about how bad his plays were," Ellida said.

Returning indoors, we peered into Ibsen's wife's room, which, with its large bed and armchairs, looked like it was designed for an invalid.

"When he was an old man, he had mad passions for young women, you know," Ellida said, her eyes shining at the thought. "They inspired him to write his best work like *The Master Builder*. The young woman in that is quite unhinged."

What she didn't tell me – but the guide book did – was that his wife was instrumental to his success: reading all his work carefully, promoting it, and bringing up their only son.

Using her contacts at the Norwegian Tourist Board, Ellida negotiated for the pair of us to take a cut-price trip around the country, starting in Oslo and finishing in Bergen. The fact that the excursion was short – only five days – suited me; I told Hadley that I was on a press trip to Scandinavia and was going to write about it for the travel section of the magazine. Everyone was obsessed with the coming of the 21st century, back then; I spun a story for Hadley about what the next millennium would bring for Norway; I must have sounded convincing.

"So you're not seeing what's-her-name?" She didn't even glance up from her *New Yorker*.

"No, of course not," I said, glad I didn't have to look into her eyes.

In Oslo it got dark very early. We returned to our hotel room; the place was right on Stortingsgata, overlooking the National Theatre where Ibsen's statue held court. I sat down on

the edge of the bed while Ellida opened a bottle of wine.

“Ibsen knew fucking is more important than anything else!” Ellida said, pouring the wine into a glass.

“But was it fucking that interested him, or was it love? Or was it obsession? He saw the deadly lure of obsession...” I said, tapering off.

Ellida handed me the wine and sat on my lap. “He knew a really good fuck is worth dying for,” she said. She took a slug of the wine.

“But do you have to be in love to have one?”

“You have to feel love during those moments, but you may not necessarily be in love,” she said, her arm snaking over my shoulder.

I pushed her off my lap, nearly making her spill the drink.

“Hey, take it easy!” she said.

“You were crushing me!”

“I’m not that heavy, am I?”

I peered at the dark sky lit up by the city lights. “It’s weird that it gets dark so early.”

“It’s always depressed me.”

“It does feel claustrophobic,” I said. It wasn’t yet four o’clock, but already the street-lights were on; outside the glass people hustled along, wrapped up in their hats and coats.

“Is that also because you’re with me?” she said, handing me back my glass.

“No.”

“I should have never have brought you here.” Suddenly she sounded despondent.

“I’m having a good time, really,” I said quickly.

“Are you?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I don’t know if I am,” she said.

I walked to the window and observed my distorted reflection. “Are you in love with me, Ellida?”

I wanted her to answer right away. Of course I wanted her say, swiftly, *yes*. But she didn’t. Instead she said: “What do you mean?”

“Are you in love with me, right now?”

“Of course, I am. I wouldn’t be here with you if I wasn’t.”

“But will you be in love with me tomorrow?”

Ellida joined me by the window. Our reflections jostled against each other. “Probably.”

“But you don’t know for certain?” This conversation wasn’t the one I’d planned.

“Why, do you?”

“Yes. I know I will love you tomorrow.” I was so certain of that. More certain of it than I was of anything else.

Ellida looked away from our reflections, up at me. “Yes, but the moment you say that, it kills it, doesn’t it?” she asked, her eyes flickering beneath the fringe of her hair.

“But you have to have some faith in your feelings, don’t you?”

Ellida scowled. “Hey Francis, I’m not married.”

Outside, the snow swirled over the roof tops. I put down the wine on the bedside table. It was disturbing to be staying in a hotel with Ellida: I had spent many nights in similar rooms with Hadley and thought nothing of it.

“But I’m going to leave her,” I said. It was out of my mouth before I knew what I was saying. I hadn’t known I’d say it. But as I spoke, it became true.

“You are?” She kissed me softly on the neck. “Why did you marry her in the first place?”

“I don’t know.” I didn’t. I couldn’t remember. My marriage to Hadley – it just *was*. I didn’t know anything about it anymore.

“Was she a good fuck? Is she a good fuck?”

“Oh come on, do we have to talk about this?”

“I want to know. What’s she like in bed?”

“Don’t do this Ellida.”

“Do you lick her cunt?”

I pressed my forehead against the window. “This is a stupid way of talking.”

Ellida forced me to face her.

“What is Hadley to you? Is she your mother?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Do you fuck your mother?”

This was what I loved about Ellida: her fearlessness. I almost hated her for the question, just for an instant – and yet I was glad of it, I told myself that with Ellida I discovered vital truths. I dragged an armchair up to the window, sat down. “I guess we have sex. But it’s not like it’s very passionate. Not anymore.”

“Not like it is with me?”

Ellida sat on the arm rest of the chair and then fell onto me, her wine sloshing.

“Hey, careful!” I said.

She gulped her drink and nuzzled her boozy, warm face into my cheek. I relaxed a little as she put her glass down and licked my ears and neck.

“Is sex important to you? Does sex trump everything else?” she said.

“Well – in the moment – right when it’s happening, and when you’re wanting it, when I’m wanting it -- ”

“Have you ever had good sex with Hadley?”

“Yes, sometimes. Early on. But our relationship isn’t really based on that.”

She stopped kissing me.

“What is it based on?”

“It’s a routine. A structure. Have breakfast together, go to work, come home, have supper together, watch TV, go to bed, wake up, do the same thing again. Except at weekends, you do less work, and do the shopping. Maybe go to the cinema, or theatre.”

“Sounds like death...” Ellida said, kissing me again.

“Yes, when I put it like that, it does,” I had to admit.

“So, she’s really boring, is she?”

“No, not boring. She’s clever.”

“Cleverer than me?”

“She’s -- different. She knows a lot of stuff. Different stuff. Stuff you wouldn’t expect. Not just about books. About engineering, about money, property, children.”

“Do you want children?”

“Maybe. But that’s not the point. The thing is...Hadley knows how to interact with the world.”

“And I don’t?” Ellida looked hard at me.

“I didn’t say that.”

“I want to escape from the world,” she said. “That ‘interaction’ – what’s the point.”

“Do you want to escape with me?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

“What do you mean, maybe?”

Ellida sighed. “I thought we were supposed to be having a good time,” she said.

I did, too. “Why don’t we fuck then?”

“OK.”

So we fucked on the bed, or tried to, but it was difficult because we were both too tense and drunk. Hadley’s presence haunted us.

I switched off the light and lay back in the bed.

“Don’t I give you a hard-on anymore?”

“I fucked you this morning, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but you can’t do it now.”

“Ellida! Just stop it! It doesn’t matter.”

She switched on the light and examined my dazzled face. “How can I stop it when you can’t fuck me and that’s all we have? You’ve got so much with Hadley, and you’ve got nothing with me except fucking.”

I rolled over, away from the light. Ellida grabbed my back and held me fast. I told her to switch off the light, which she did. Then she began to cry. I turned around and held her in my arms, her face wet against my chest.

“Did I treat you really badly back then? You know, making you promise all those things,

and then leaving Izzy with you all the time and then going back to Arnholm. Did I do wrong?"

"No."

"It was like you were a parent to Izzy."

"Not for that long." I stroked her hair, trying to soothe her

"And then just leaving you like that."

"Let's not talk about it."

"I'm a fucking pain."

"I wouldn't be with you if you were."

"I think you like being hurt. I bet Hadley is a pain too. Is she more of a pain than me?"

The answer was no, but I said yes.

I'd opened the floodgates, and Ellida got me to exaggerate all the things that were annoying about Hadley: her controlling behaviour, her need for structure and routine, her put-downs, her inability to experience real passion. As I exaggerated I felt myself believing my own lies.

After a day in Oslo, we took the train up into the mountains, heading west towards the North Sea. Initially, the landscape was unremarkable. I read a copy of Ibsen's plays I'd bought in Oslo. It contained a drama I hadn't read before -- *The Lady From The Sea*. I read it first with a sense of wonder – and then alarm. The main character in it was called Ellida: the things she said reminded me strongly of the real Ellida. Obsessed by the sea, she was the ex-lover of a sailor who had inexplicably disappeared at sea.

When I pointed this out, Ellida grinned. "Yes, she is rather like me, isn't she?"

"You can say that again. All that stuff you used to tell me about the sea!"

"My father named me after her. It was – and is – his favourite play. We used to go to an island like the one she comes from for our summer holidays."

"And the sailor. That's similar. You told me you had a boyfriend who disappeared out at sea."

Ellida took my hand. "I know. I'm sorry," she said, and looked away from me, out towards the severe grey hills beyond the train's windows. "That technically wasn't true. But it felt like the truth when I was telling you."

What the fuck? I withdrew my hand from hers and looked out through the glass: this was a different Norway, a world away from the tidy streets of Oslo. There were little houses here and there, red and yellow; but you'd have to know how to live in them. This was a hard place, a fearful place.

"I think it was the closest I could come to telling you about my brother's death at that point," she said with a confidence which I found breathtakingly arrogant.

“You lied to me! You made up some sob story about your boyfriend dying when it wasn’t true.” *What the fuck.*

She said in a faraway voice: “It felt true at the time.”

“Things are not true just because they feel true.”

“I think you’re wrong there.”

“The trouble is it makes me doubt everything. It makes me even wonder if your brother really did die.”

Ellida put her fists against my chest, shoving me hard against my seat. “Don’t you ever joke about that,” she said through clenched teeth.

“I’m not joking,” I said, pushing her away.

“I didn’t *lie*,” she hissed. “I would never lie about that. You don’t dare – you don’t dare – You with your *wife*, your happy life!” She laughed, mirthlessly. Her green eyes shining with anger and tears, I felt afraid, afraid of her, of this strange place, this cold place, this mess I was making.

“Okay, okay,” I said. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Ellida.” And I was. I just didn’t know what for.

Seeing that I was convinced, she fell into my arms and wept. A little later, she rested her head on my shoulder and slept as we continued over and through the mountains. When it was time to leave the train, we walked towards the hotel in Voss; Ellida wrapped her arm around my waist; the touch of her made me forget my anger and my fear. It began to snow; the flakes eddied and twinkled underneath the yellow streetlights. The place was more or less deserted, giving our stay there a ghost-like quality.

“Does anyone actually live here?” I said, setting down my suitcase on a snowy kerbstone.

“Only zombies. I thought it would be magical here, but I have an overwhelming feeling of dread now.”

“Look, I didn’t mean to offend you,” I said, feeling guilty about the scene on the train.

“Oh no, it’s not that. It’s other stuff.”

Over dinner – bland fishcakes and boiled potatoes -- I asked her why we weren’t going to visit her relatives.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“But your parents are in Bergen, aren’t they? Didn’t you say they moved there after they got back together again?”

“Yes, but I don’t want to see them.”

We had to go to Bergan anyway to catch our flight back to London; there was a bus from Voss, and like all public transport I’d seen in Norway it was new and clean. The order of this

place seemed a stark contrast to my entanglement with Ellida. We sat in silence on the ride to the city; we didn't speak about her parents again as we got ourselves to the airport. Gloom seeped into us on the flight home. Ellida was depressed by the thought of returning to her hotel room at London Bridge: its exoticism had worn off now.

"When will we go away?" she asked me as the plane began to descend into Heathrow.

I had a sensation of falling.

"Soon."

She gripped my arm. "Are we having an affair, Francis? A proper love affair?"

"I suppose so."

Without bothering to see that there were other people around, she put her hand down the front of my trousers. "I think it's better that we're just friends. Friends are friends forever. It'll be too complicated if we're lovers."

"Yes, but what are your hands doing?"

"My brain thinks one thing but my body wants another."

She put her cold hands on my crotch. I whispered for her to stop, but she wouldn't. She stroked my cock. I glanced at the guy next to us. He was pretending not to notice.

"I don't think you're a good lover anymore. You've lost all the spunk that you had when you were younger. But you're a good friend. You can be my friend, now." She took her away her hand.

Once we got back to her hotel, Ellida poured us a couple of G&Ts from the mini-bar. We considered the night-time rooftops of London Bridge, looking at the hospital opposite us. We could see into its strip-lit corridors: a nurse was pushing a patient on a trolley through some flap-doors.

"I'm scared," Ellida said. "Can you hold me?"

"There's nothing to be frightened of," I said. But I felt scared myself. We were holding each other; her arms slipped under my shirt and soon we were kissing, and I was pulling off her top – she kicked out of her shoes, out of her jeans, and then we were on the bed, and I didn't even think to use a condom, there was nothing between us, skin on skin. It was as if we were in a trance, in another time, the past and the present flowing together with our bodies. And then it was over -- as I got dressed she asked me to stay the night.

"That isn't what friends do," I said, though I knew that what happened between us moments before wasn't a part of friendship.

"I don't want you to be my friend anymore! I want you to be my proper, proper lover!"

"Hadley's expecting me."

"You should have a shower then. You smell of sex."

I didn't have time for that and I knew what Ellida would do; she'd follow me into the shower, and then I'd never get home. So I bolted, feeling relief at my escape.

When I turned the key in the door, I fortified myself to lie. The house was dark, but still I could see our books on the shelves, our nice IKEA sofa in front of the TV, our slate floors, the small Japanese garden outside. There were photos of me as a child on the wall, and ones of our wedding party in the toilet: me looking drunk as I kissed the white skin on Hadley's back.

Upstairs, she was sitting in bed reading. The bedroom felt comfy and homely. She closed her book and smiled, and asked me how the trip was.

I improvised a plausible story, telling her about all the places we'd been to but omitting, of course, Ellida. "I think I'll write a great piece."

Her gaze was placid and unsuspecting "Did you look up Ellida when you were there?"

"There's wasn't time," I said. "It was all pretty hectic. And the train from the airport was packed. I'll just hop in the shower."

In the bathroom I shoved all my clothes straight into the washing machine; I turned the tap so the water was nearly scalding, scrubbing myself, washing my hair. By the time I'd got out and dried myself, Hadley was asleep. I lay in bed beside her for a long time, wide awake, listening to the London night, sirens wailing, blue lights flashing, the world I knew going by.

A few weeks later, Ellida phoned me at home just before I was about to go to work. Hadley had already left for school. She didn't even say hello.

"I need to talk to you," she said. "I need to see you."

I was standing by the patio doors of our kitchen, overlooking the little garden. My stomach lurched. Maybe I already knew what she was going to tell me. "Okay," I said. "I'll be right over."

I ruled supreme in the office in the late nineties. The internet had hardly got going and the magazine was still selling well; the editor at that time loved me. I had a big budget to work with, and, above all, I was respected for being a cool, young editor. I could easily take time off -- I was with Ellida within the hour. She opened the door in her work clothes: black suit, stockings and pumps. She had looked so self-possessed in them a few months ago but now seemed forlorn and out of place.

"Oh Francis, what am I going to do?"

She didn't even have to tell me that she was pregnant. I knew.

"Are you sure?" I had my hands on her shoulders; she gripped my wrists.

"Arnholm managed to get me an emergency appointment with a doctor today. I'm definitely pregnant."

I thought: fuck, what has Arnholm got to do with this?

"That was nice of him," I said, but I couldn't keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

She looked at me bluntly. “He can take care of everything – if that’s what we want to do.”

“What do you want to do?” I asked. I knew what I wanted her to say. Fuck Arnholm, I thought, but *he can take care of everything* was what I wanted to hear, all the same.

“Why do I ruin things? *Hvorfor ødelegger jeg alt?*”

I put my arm around her and said: “Everything’s going to be all right. It’s going to be all right.” What else could I say? Fuck. Fuck.

“What should I do, then?”

Have an abortion. Give me my life back. “I don’t know. What do you want to do?”

I found a tissue in my pocket and dabbed her tears.

“I think I might be able to get it right this time. You’d be a good Dad.”

She clutched at my hand. I tried my best to look reassuring, but my heart was pounding. Suddenly all I wanted was to get out of there. How stupid could I have been? Thirty-five seconds in a hotel bedroom. Great move, you idiot. You arse. But I knew I had to be calm.

“What about being just friends?”

She flung herself on the bed and said with her voice muffled by the sheets: “I don’t know, I don’t know!”

But then, as if I was washed away on a wave, love and pity swept through me. This was how Ellida affected me: something about her swept me away, my emotions, my life, no longer under my control. She was a tide that carried me. In that moment I was no longer a successful editor; I was no longer married to Hadley; I was no longer an adult, I was once again a long-haired student admiring Ellida as she hung bright lanterns in the forest clearing.

“Look. I’m going to talk to Hadley. I’m going to tell her everything. Then leave her. Tonight.” I couldn’t believe I’d said it. The words jumped out of my mouth. Is this what I wanted? What I really wanted?

“You are?” Ellida turned round on the bed, her eyes open wide, mascara streaked down her pale cheeks.

“I am!”

I clenched my hands into a fist and Ellida kissed my knuckles. “We’ll be with each other,” I said.

She cried as I left. But when I finally got to work I was relieved to be there; and I was glad to home that night, too. It was an ordinary evening – except that I hoped Hadley wouldn’t notice how jumpy I was. I dropped a little blue bowl she’d bought on one of our holidays when I was doing the washing up – “Oh Francis, *do* be careful!” Hadley snapped, but I didn’t snap back; I was glad to be here, in our kitchen, eating supper, mooching around, leading this ordinary life. “Sorry about the bowl,” I said, a little while later; Hadley shrugged, and hugged me. This was my life. What on earth had I been thinking?

The next morning, I found a payphone tucked away in a backstreet in Clerkenwell – I’d

only just got a mobile phone from the office; I still didn't quite think to use it -- and called Ellida at her hotel. I decided the only option was to be honest immediately. With my heart thudding I said: "Ellida, look, I'm really sorry, but I can't do this. I can't leave Hadley."

"Francis, is that you? What are you saying?" Her voice sounded sleepy.

"I just can't do this. I'm not leaving Hadley. I can't leave my job. We can still see each other, but I can't do the whole travelling around the world with a kid thing. I can't do it."

There was a pause and I could sense Ellida waking up with a jolt.

"Francis, what are you saying? What the fuck are you saying?" Ellida cried down the phone. "Why didn't you come and see me?"

"I had to tell you straight away."

"You come here and say this shit to me."

With that, she slammed down the phone.

I wondered whether I should go to the hotel or not. I'd told her after all, hadn't I? I was worried I would get lured into bed again and I'd make promises I couldn't keep. But after some deliberation, I opted to visit her.

When I arrived, she enveloped me into a smoky embrace and offered me a drink.

"It's ten in the morning," I said, trying to extricate myself from her arms. "And I have to go to work."

She was wearing her fanciest black lingerie – and nothing else. I pulled away from her.

"What is all this shit you were saying on the phone?" she said, pouring herself a drink from the mini-bar.

I explained again. She downed her drink and looked at me. "Are you serious?"

"I can't do this. We can see each other but..."

Then I watched her expression as it dawned upon her that I had made up my mind: within a few seconds, her face morphed from sexy to self-pitying. She reached for her T-shirt and pulled it on with strained, jerky movements.

"Fuck off please. Fuck off now," she said.

"I think this is the best thing."

"But what about our fucking kid? Have you thought about that?"

I pointed to the glass of wine and packet of fags on the bedside table. "You don't seem to be thinking much about it either!"

"That's only after you told me you were fucking abandoning me!"

"Ellida, I just don't think it's going to work..."

"What am I going to do? I don't want another kid! I've already got one and that's been a total fuck-up! What am I going to do?"

She started to cry. I moved towards her and tried to comfort her by touching her on the shoulder, but she shrugged me off. "Just fuck off, will you? Just fuck the fuck off!"

* * *

I sat in the waiting room of the clinic and peeped from behind my battered magazine at the other guys there. They were mostly young men, trying to read copies of *Women's Own* and *Reader's Digest*. There was a buzz at the door and a nurse emerged holding a pale-looking Ellida. "You must look after this young lady today. She mustn't be allowed to walk around very much and she needs to have plenty of fluids. If there is any serious bleeding, you must call 999 right away."

I didn't know what to say to Ellida. As I shuffled slowly with her to the car, eventually the right question popped into my mind. "How are you feeling?"

"Like fucking shit."

I helped her to the car and eased her into the passenger seat.

I revved up the Nissan and did a three-point turn to get out of the cul-de-sac we were in. Ellida touched my hand as I raced down the road. "This is too fast Francis."

I had no idea where I was supposed to be going.

"Is there anything I can do?" I said.

She frowned.

I put on some music but she switched it off, saying that she had a headache. She needed silence. I drove from Lambeth – where the clinic was – through the miserable streets of south London and then decided to head over the river. We passed through the gloom of the Blackwall Tunnel and headed towards Walthamstow. For some reason, I was keen to drive around the area where I'd grown up.

"Where are we going?" Ellida asked eventually.

"Nowhere really," I said. I didn't want to tell her that we were passing Joshua Taylor where I'd bought my school and scout uniforms; passing the playground where I'd met my father for the first time in years after my parents' divorce; passing the library I'd haunted as a teenager. Although it was quite early in the afternoon, it was already getting dark.

As we approached the William Morris gallery, which is situated in a grotty part of Walthamstow, she told me to stop.

"I've always liked William Morris," she said.

"God, I'm amazed you've even heard of him."

"He's quite famous in Norway. He's ideas about saving the environment and setting up workers' co-operatives are very popular."

"And his wallpaper?"

"Yes, that too."

I steered onto the gravel driveway and parked the car. I was surprised to find that the museum was open.

The gallery was silent, except for the sound of traffic beyond the richly embroidered curtains.

“What do you think?” I said, turning eventually to Ellida.

Her eyes were red. She had been silently crying -- and I hadn't noticed at all. She wiped her face with the back of her hand and said, “I think this is a dead world.”

“A dead world?” I said.

Ellida snarled at me.

“Yes, a dead thing,” she said.

“What's that supposed to mean?” I said.

“You know what I mean.”

We were in the hallway now, behind the attendant, who was dozing by the cash register. Not waiting for Ellida to answer, I put my hand on the grand newel post and ascended the stairs. She didn't follow me.

I was determined to go on looking around the gallery on the top floor and took my time as I examined the paintings. There was an exhibit of murals completed by the artist who had partially decorated the Rockefeller Centre in New York, a building not far away from where Hadley's parents lived at that time. I regarded their muscular, Art-Deco bodies and thought I'd made the right decision.

Ellida was still sitting on the bench when I returned downstairs.

I sat down beside her.

“You're death to me, do you know that?” she said. “You killed our child, and if I'm not careful you're going to kill me.”

Then she punched me as hard she could in the stomach. But the operation had debilitated her and, although the blow gave me a shock, it hardly hurt. Her energy spent, she hunched up on the bench and clutched her stomach.

“Are you all right?” I said, pretending the punch hadn't happened.

“Just take me back to the fucking hotel, then fuck off home to your fucking wife.”

We scarcely exchanged more than a few words on the journey back. I parked the car a couple of streets away from the hotel because there weren't any spaces nearby. I asked her whether she wanted me to walk her to the hotel as she got out.

“No. I'll manage.”

“Would you like me to stay with you? The nurse said someone should stay with you.”

“I'm going to call Arnholm. He'll come over.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I'm sure.”

I got out of the car and made a gesture to kiss her goodbye, but she pushed me away.

“OK, be like that,” I said, feeling now the full force of her anger.

“Fuck off,” she said as she slowly walked down the street. She was a pathetic sight and I felt sorry for her but I didn’t know what to do. If I’d known these were the last words she’d say to me, I’d have run up to her and done anything I could to get us to part on good terms. But I thought I would speak to her the next day and smooth things over. So I got back into the car and drove home. That night, I drank more than normal in front of the TV but Hadley didn’t notice.

In the morning, feeling quite hung-over at work, I called the hotel in my coffee break but was told Ellida had checked out. I wrote to her a few times after that, but got no reply. I was depressed that it had ended that way, but I was glad I had chosen Hadley.

About a year later Jack was born.

Chapter 4: Ellida's room

After my night sleeping rough on Telegraph Hill, I phone Hadley.

"You can get your stuff now," she says.

"You can't believe it," I say.

"Jack and I are going out."

It feels like she's terminated her contract with me. "You're only doing this because you want to get rid of me anyway!"

"I don't want to talk about it."

I run down the hill, determined to catch her before she leaves. I find her and Jack in the hallway, putting on their coats. He reaches for me and we hug.

"Dad! Where were you?"

Hadley, over Jack's shoulder, shakes her head at me.

"I just went out," I say. I was prepared to launch into a tirade against her unreasonableness but I can't now. "Hey, you have some fun OK? I've got some work to do."

I go to the bedroom and hear mother and son talking down below. Then the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. Hadley's precise tread. I lie down on the bed and pretend to sleep.

"What are you doing?" she says.

"I need some rest."

"Just get your things and go." I smell her perfume and open my eyes: she is looming over me.

"Please, I didn't sleep a wink."

She crouches down beside me and whispers: "You fucked Ellida's daughter."

"Those photos are not what you think."

"I started packing for you."

She points to the corner of the bedroom; there's an opened suitcase with neatly folded clothes and a wash-bag in it.

"I know what you're up to," I say.

Jack appears and asks what's going on.

"Dad is going on a business trip."

Jack's face is bright and calm: "Where are you going?"

"I might go and see George."

"Might?" Jack says.

"I'm definitely going I mean."

"Can I come? I like George!" he says.

“I’d love you to but I’ve got work to do there; George is helping me with my work,” I say, improvising as best I can in my confused state.

“I thought you were unemployed,” Jack says.

Hadley enfolds our son. “Dad’s editing some magazines for my charity, Jack. George is helping him with his research so I think we need to let Dad get ready for his trip now.”

After this expertly delivered lie, she guides Jack downstairs. A little while later, I hear the front door click shut. I think about lying back down on the bed, but I can’t. I wander around the house feeling my anger grow.

This is my house. This is my fucking house. This is my study. This is my CD player. This is the PS3 which I bought with my wages. This is my kitchen where I have my cans of beans and spaghetti hoops, and this is my fridge where I keep my bagels which I toast in my toaster. These are the cups that only I use.

I phone George.

“Hell-o,” he says in that distinctive, deep-throated way of his.

“Hadley’s kicked me out and I didn’t fucking do anything. She’s the one who’s been fucking me over for the last few months, she’s fucking kicking me out, and I’m going fucking insane here, I’m in this fucking house and I’ve got to leave and I can’t think, I just can’t think. What do you think?”

“Whooh... Sounds tough, guy! Look, why don’t you just run this by me again? I’m finding it difficult to make sense of it all.”

I sit down at the kitchen table and explain. And as I do, I find myself crying: crying for Jack, for the house I’m leaving, for Hadley, for Ellida and Isolde, for the passing of time and the ruination of everything. The only person I can’t cry for is Arnholm. Fucking bastard. “So you can see I’m fucked.”

“Maybe you should get Isolde to tell Hadley it’s not true.”

“The moment I move out, I’m toast. She’ll never let me back in.”

“Maybe a break from each other would do you good?”

“Could I come and stay with you for a bit?”

“You’d be welcome except we’ve got guests.”

“What guests?”

“Just guests.”

“Oh.”

I take the train down to Brighton, carrying the suitcase Hadley packed for me, to which I have added a couple of framed photos of Jack, an anthology of poems called *Staying Alive* and some cans of beer.

I tramp around Brighton unable to concentrate on anything. It's hot and my clothes drip with sweat. After wandering around aimlessly for a while, I buy a pint of lager at a pub on the waterfront. I sit on a sea-wall, looking at the sun-bathers enjoying the sun. George calls and asks if I'm all right.

"I've lost my job, my wife, my house, my kid."

"Stay there, I'm setting off now."

"I thought you had guests."

"They can go fuck themselves: my best mate needs my help."

"Won't Elaine be annoyed?"

"Never mind about her."

The news that George is coming motivates me to get my act together and book a room in a B and B, using the internet in a local library. I meet him later that night at the train station. We hug and head up past a shuttered Battle of Trafalgar towards the B and B, which is on a hill in the Seven Dials area. We pass students smoking weed in the summery twilight. We are sharing a room: two beds on either side of a bedside table. George chucks down his rucksack and examines the bleak room.

"I wouldn't mind having a walk down to the beach," he says.

We descend the hill through the dark streets and reach the beach in a few minutes: George walks fast and seems distracted. He runs on the shingle and sits down near the breakers. I follow him, panting: I'm not as fit as he is. It is secluded here. The lights on the pier have been switched off, and peace engulfs us.

"We should have done this more when we were students," George says.

He rolls a joint. We lie back and smoke it, staring at the stars.

"When you die, what legacy do you want to leave?" George says.

"That's a heavy question for me to handle at the moment."

"This is the moment to think about these things."

So I consider: "A broken marriage, a son and a few articles on the internet."

"I said what do you *want* to leave, not what you will leave!"

"What do I *want* to leave? Oh, you know, just the normal: a great novel that will be read until the end of time; lots of adoring grandchildren; a political legacy that will mean fairness and equity all over the world... Why are you asking?"

I roll over on the shingle. "Is everything all right with you and Elaine?"

George makes another spliff before replying. The wind picks up but his hands are expert at nursing the flickering flame of the match and burning the resin. He rolls a big fat one, sparks it and inhales deeply as he says: "No. It looks like we're going to get a divorce."

"What the fuck?" I sit up and look at him in alarm. The spliff trembles between his fingers.

“I thought you and Elaine were so good together.”

“It’s my fault.”

“You had an affair?”

“No, worse than that.”

George pushes himself to his feet and tramps to the white caps plunging against the pebbles in the darkness. I follow him. He says: “Recently, well, I have felt the need for an outlet. Just anything to take away the pressure. I was working late. There’s all sorts of bad stuff going on at work which I won’t bore you with. I was driving back home, late at night, and I stopped at a petrol station and I got out and was putting the petrol in the car and I saw this guy looking at me, and something came over me, so I filled up the car and drove around the back where I found a group of men doing stuff. And I joined in. And then, of course, like you do, I had sex with Elaine. And she got something. And then I knew I should have been more careful. So we went for tests and everything. It’s all fine now, nothing serious, but she said she can’t do it anymore. Can’t live with me. Says I’m suffocating her. And she’s always suspected that I’m gay.”

I try my best to hide my shock. “Are you gay?”

“It’s more about being stressed out.”

Is taking part in a gay gang bang at the back of a petrol station a good way of relieving stress?

Until now, I had thought George would be my father confessor but now the roles are reversed. I learn loads of stuff I never knew: the serious medical complaints Elaine has had on top of her cancer; the diabetes, asthma, kidney problems; the hospital meetings he’s attended with her; how he brought up the kids more or less single-handed because she was so ill; how she never really wanted to have sex with him; how she never supported him in furthering his career; how she has flirted with half the men in Dorset.

We return to the B and B and go to bed. The next morning, as we are getting ready to go out I reflect upon how “un-gay” George seems: he is the opposite of camp, he has a no-nonsense masculine demeanour about him which would make most people automatically assume he was heterosexual.

We decide to go for a long walk down by the beach; it is a beautiful summer morning and early enough for the promenade to be deserted. We walk in silence, the crests of the waves glistening in our eyes. Life has the quality of a dream.

“You must have found it hard to listen to me moaning about my problems with all of that going on,” I say at lunch. We are eating fish and chips straight out of their wrappers on the pier.

“It was OK. It took my mind off other things,” he says, munching on his chips.

We catch a train to Falmer in the afternoon and wander around the Sussex Uni campus. It seems eerily familiar in a faded, washed-out way, except there are lots of new colourful buildings on its fringes. George talks about how it used to be with Elaine before they got married and had kids. "It was the best times of our lives. We did everything together; we gardened and cooked together, we painted and sang together, we got drunk together. We made love."

"Together?" I say with a smirk.

George and I burst out laughing. It's good to know he hasn't lost his sense of humour.

When he leaves the next day, I find a cheaper B&B in Portslade, just outside Brighton. I put my laptop on the desk by the window and sit before the screen wondering how the hell I'm going to edit these magazines. Then I realise I can't. And I notice the relief I feel: I don't have to please anyone now. Not Hadley, not Ellida, not Isolde. None of them.

A couple of days later, after I insist, Hadley brings Jack to see me. She drops him off at the station, and we agree that she'll pick him up at six. He doesn't talk much until we've had a laugh on the pier's rollercoaster and have had our lunch in the same fish and chip restaurant which George and I got take-out from. After his ice cream, he says: "So are you and mum getting a divorce?"

Through the port-hole window, I can see there are seagulls bobbing up and down in the blue air outside.

"I don't know."

"Mum needs someone with a job."

"Did she say that?"

"No, but it's obvious, isn't it? I mean, you were at home all day, doing nothing."

"So what's she saying?"

"She says you wanted to move out. And then she said that you don't agree about the important things, and you just couldn't live together."

He doesn't seem that upset. However, at the station, when it's time to leave, he cries and asks me to come home. Hadley pulls him away, looking stony-faced. I say "Hi and bye" with a flicker of a smile, and she says "Hi" back with dead eyes. I phone her much later that evening when I'm sure Jack will be in bed and ask her when I can come to get the rest of my stuff.

"When you've got a place, I'll get a removal company to bring it to you," she says.

A few weeks ago, I thought we were married forever.

"OK."

I can't speak anymore. I had been intending to go to bed; I had been tired when I phoned Hadley, but now my heart is racing. My money is running out. I can't afford to stay in the B and B much longer. I must either get a job or move into a much cheaper place. I walk outside

and listen to a brooding movie soundtrack on my battered old MP3 player. This seems to be all I listen to these days: melancholic melodies which make me feel like I am in a sinister sci-fi movie. I buy two cans of cheap lager from a tacky off-licence, and meander onto the beach. The sea with its salty, sexy smell helps. It reminds me of Ellida: the immortal part of her, the pretentious part of her, the picnics with the aquavit and dried fish, the strange lies and half-truths about her dead boyfriend.

I look at the city lights of Brighton hovering over the water and sip the alcohol. I can feel myself calming down. My phone vibrates. It's Isolde. "Where have you been? I've been calling and calling!"

"Arnholm sent my wife those selfies you took. Did you give them to him?"

In-take of breath.

"He never told me!"

"How did he get hold of them?"

"He must have got them off my phone..."

Pause.

"She kicked me out."

"Where are you staying?"

"I'm in London with a friend."

"Sounds like seagulls in the distance."

"Yeah, they're here too."

"Fuck, Francis! Fuck me! So she kicked you out!"

She sounds triumphant. A pause for thought and then: "How are you?"

"My money is running out."

Her breathing becomes agitated. "Why don't you come and stay with me? You know there's loads of room. In fact, if I think about it, there's a whole spare flat. You'd have your own bathroom. I wouldn't pester you if you needed your own space."

"Isolde, why do you want me living with you and your Dad?"

"I'll kick him out if you like."

"He's your Dad!"

"He's a selfish scrounger and he's fucked up your life!"

"Maybe he has."

"I want to help you, like you've helped me."

"I've helped you?"

"You have. Mum always said you got her out of her worst depression. And you did the same for me."

After the phone call, I sit on the sea wall and drink my beer, thinking about whether I should move in. If I did, would Hadley interpret it as a definitive indication that I am having an affair with Isolde? Would my marriage be over?

No. Not necessarily: maybe Hadley might visit and see that there's nothing going on. Maybe then she would learn to trust me... Maybe, ultimately, after the inevitable initial fracas about it, living with Isolde would help me and Hadley get back together...

No, I tell myself as I finish my beer and feel the sea breeze on my face, moving in with Isolde doesn't necessarily mean my marriage is over. And besides, I'm lonely and I have no money: Isolde is offering me security while I sort myself out.

The next morning Isolde smothers me in kisses in her stinky hallway. After I've prised her off me, she suggests coffee, but the kitchen is so messy that she can't find the pot. Eventually, I unearth a cafetière in the dishwasher -- which is still full of dirty dishes -- and a packet of coffee buried at the back of a cupboard. I wash the implements and make the coffee. I pour Isolde some but she only takes little sips. "I like hot chocolate to be honest."

After digging around, I discover the cocoa in a grubby cubby hole, and make her a cup. Then we gaze through the window at the vista: the sparkling blue sea, the pier with its flashing lights, and the crowded beach. We drink in companionable silence.

"Aren't you going to show me the room?" I say. Isolde gives me a look and put my cup down on the table: I realise whose room I might be staying in.

Putting on a seductive smile, Isolde sidles up to me, spreading her legs. "Are you sure you don't want to pay the rent by fucking me?"

"Isolde, stop it."

"Now you've broken up with her, it would be guilt-free."

"I should go."

Isolde puts her legs together. "No, don't. I'll stop, I promise."

She touches my wrist and I look down at her bitten nails.

"You want me to stay in your mother's room, don't you?"

I follow her out of the kitchen and up the first flight of stairs. She says: "I think you'll like it. It's got its own bathroom, space for a proper office, a double-bed, and a skylight."

We mount the stairs on the third floor and come to a green door. Isolde reaches underneath a lip of carpet and produces a large brass key. The door creaks open and decay assaults our nostrils. She steps away. Grime billows out of the room.

I grope for a light switch but can't find one. Although it is daylight outside, it's dark here: I figure the skylight must be covered. After some feeling around, I find a switch but it doesn't work. I fumble for my phone and use the screen to look around. The room is caked in dust: it streams in front of the light beam as I move around.

I can see there are old Afghan fabrics hung on the wall; a big double-bed with an old duvet; faded photos in frames dotted on the walls and on the shelves: I recognize the outlines of Isolde as a young child, Arnholm playing his keyboards, and then, with a tug of shock, myself, smiling on Brighton beach. I wipe away the dirt and see how much younger I am.

Familiar books line the shelves: Joseph Campbell's volumes on mythology, Carlos Castaneda, the Beats, and the Romantic poets. Besides the bed there is a wheelchair covered in cobwebs, and a table heaped with books. On the top of the pile is an illustrated edition of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

When I pull back the curtains, they come off their railings, falling to the floor, and sunlight floods into the room.

I find Isolde smoking a spliff in the filthy kitchen. Her face is white with pain. I look at her for a moment, and then put my hand on her shoulder.

"It's all right," I say.

She hands me the spliff, wraps her arms around my midriff and buries her face in my chest. I hold her and look outside at the sea shining on the horizon.

"You haven't been in there since she died, have you?"

She nudges her forehead against my rib-cage.

"Didn't Arnholm want to help you clear it out?"

"He doesn't want to go in there either."

Her tears wet the fabric of my shirt. After a while, when she's stopped crying, we let go of each other and she looks at me with a tear-stained face.

"Are you still sure you want me to stay there?"

"Yes."

"Well, I think I might have to give it a clean," I say.

Izzy kisses me on the cheek.

"I knew you would the moment I saw you."

"You've been planning this?"

"Not exactly, it's just a vision I had. When I was mad. I saw you coming to live here. Before I even met you. It helped get me out of the hospital."

I fill up the kettle, switch it on and then listen to it boil.

"Did you set Arnholm up to tell Hadley? How did he get hold that photo?"

Isolde's fingers play with a silver earring, shifting it about in her lobe.

"You still want to move in?"

"I don't know."

"You have to. This was meant to be."

I buy rubbish bags, a mop, a few pairs of washing up gloves, a bucket, detergent and other cleaning materials at the local supermarket. I think: this is what Hadley would do. Once I'm back in Ellida's room, I start with her clothes: I bin all her underwear, her shirts, her T-shirts, trousers, socks, jackets and coats, saving only a faded bra that I discover flattened at the back of a drawer: it's black and sturdy and feels unbearably poignant. I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand.

After rooting out around in her bathroom and bedside cabinets, I chuck away lots of pills, chemicals, toothbrushes, shampoos and other weird bottles. I bin all the bed linen, but keep the duvet and pillows, which only need an airing. I decide to keep the photos, but put them away in a drawer. Hidden at the back of a cupboard, I find her bassoon. I get it out, grease the cork and put it together. There's a stand to go with it. I think: maybe I'll learn to play it or I'll have it as an ornament, it's a handsome instrument. I fetch the cleaning stuff and scrub the floor, walls, bed, bathroom, toilet and shower.

It's the early evening by the time I finish. Izzy has spent the whole day sitting in her room smoking and surfing the internet – is this what she normally does?

I meet Arnholm coming up the steps as I put the bags in the bins in the front garden. He sets down his guitar case and frowns. "So you're here."

"Yes. My wife got your email."

"I see."

"I didn't do anything, you know."

"You did what you did," he says, but he won't look me in the eye.

I stand in the front garden gazing out to sea and know why Ellida wanted to die here.

When I return into the house, I hear Izzy shouting at her father on the landing.

"I can fucking well do what I like. It's my house, and if you don't like it, you can fuck off."

"That man is the most selfish person I've ever met."

"He's got some serious competition."

I climb the stairs and they both turn towards me simultaneously. "I'll go if you want me to, Arnholm."

"You just cleaned mum's room! You can't do that!" Isolde says.

Arnholm wrinkles his lips: I recognize a habitual exasperation with his daughter.

"Why don't both of you come up and look at the room? I think I've done a good job," I say.

"Nah, I don't want to go," Isolde says. "You two go!"

Arnholm clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth, but follows me. I have drawn back the blinds from the large skylight: twilight glows on the cleaned surfaces. Although the

room is stripped of the Afghan draperies, the photos, most of the books and the psychedelic bedding, it looks inviting and cosy, just like an attic room should be.

Arnholm sniffs around. Finally he says: "You're lucky."

"Why?"

"Isolde likes you." He says this in such a way which suggests he feels she doesn't like him. Then he leaves.

Later, I knock softly on Isolde's door and find her smoking by her iMac. I sit on her bed. "The room looks good. I did a good job."

She climbs on to the bed and rests her head on a pillow. "Will you stay and watch over me? I need to sleep. I haven't slept in days."

"OK," I say. And then I pat her hair. It's the same paternal gesture I give Jack before he goes to sleep. I hope he is all right. Then I lie down. Within a few minutes, I'm fast asleep too.

* * *

My life is now about travelling between two houses on a hill: one overlooking the sea, the other a city. My therapist's domain is on the top of Telegraph Hill. It is a Victorian terrace, full of reminders of his long and successful life: copies of his psychotherapy books fill the shelves and pictures of his children and grand-children cover the walls. Benign, liberal affluence pervades every nook and cranny. Hadley and I sit in his front room, out of sight of the street, tucked away on opposite sides of a sofa in an alcove. Martin is ensconced in a wooden swivelling chair in front of us. We have been seeing him for a month. I commute to London every Wednesday morning: we have a counselling session, I see Jack and then I catch the late train back to Brighton. The first few sessions were taken up with telling our life stories, but now we're actually beginning to talk about what went wrong.

"I think Hadley lost respect for me when I lost my job," I say.

"That was in your head," she says.

"You took Josiah's job because you thought we wouldn't have enough money. You didn't want to do it until then."

"That's not the same as saying I lost respect for you when you got sacked."

Martin scribbles enthusiastically. He is an old man with a crumpled face and a brown corduroy jacket. I like him. "This is good, you two, you're beginning to be honest with yourselves, I think."

"I showed respect for Francis when I got him the commission for the magazines he wanted to produce."

“You and Josiah took pity on me because you were having an affair. Still are.”

“We aren’t having an affair. That is your delusion.”

“You aren’t?” I say, fiddling with the sofa’s lace fringe.

“No. We aren’t.”

“It’s an emotional affair then,” I say, mustering my forces.

“That isn’t the same as going to bed. There’s a big difference.”

Pause. Time for a different tack: “You should have been cruel to be kind and rejected me outright. There’s no way I can drag decent articles out of school kids.”

“So you’re telling me you’re not going to do it?”

“I don’t think I can.”

“You’d better give back the money you’ve got then. You got the job on the condition that you would work with our students.”

“You know I’m no good with children.”

“You were good with Ellida’s child.”

“Now that’s below the belt.”

“You fucked your ex-girlfriend’s daughter.”

“She still doesn’t believe me!” I say, looking at Martin for some support. He bows his head and scratches on his pad.

“You’ve even moved in with her!”

“If you trusted me, you’d know there’s nothing going on between us – and never has been!” I say.

Now Martin intervenes: “OK, OK, Hadley, Francis, I feel we’re moving onto different territory there. You were raising an important issue: how to disentangle your personal and professional lives. Maybe we can come to a decision about this. Francis, are you going to give up the magazine project, and pay back the money?”

“I was only given £2500 to begin with.”

“How much of that have you spent?”

“All of it.”

“Hmnnn...” Hadley says.

“I’m broke.”

Later in the session, Hadley talks about her relationship with Josiah. This is where she is the most hesitant, stumbling over her words, reaching for things to say. “He... We’ve been talking. He wants to get a divorce. He wants to try...”

“Living with you? Marriage? What’s going on?” I say.

“Maybe.”

Hadley looks at Martin. “He and I are much more on the same wave-length than I ever was with Francis. We have the same interests. And both of us ended up marrying people who don’t really understand us.”

Back in Brighton, I feel moved to sort out the rest of the house. This isn’t entirely altruistic: if Jack is going to stay at weekends, I can’t have things in such a state. I find the work therapeutic. Sometimes Isolde helps out with adjusting the hanging of a painting or doing some wallpapering, but her efforts are inconsistent.

Occasionally, she goes out clubbing or drinking and brings back some dodgy-looking guy, who disappears in the morning. But mostly she’s chaste. I make sure she gets up in the morning, has regular meals and gets some exercise. We shop with each other quite a bit. Sometimes we see a film together. There’s nothing romantic about these outings, but I can feel a strong bond has developed between us.

It is the first time in a long while that she has lived to any sort of routine. Arnholm rarely interacts with her. He is a sulking, ghostly presence, locking himself for long periods in his room to compose. He and I begin to get along better though because I’m one of the few people he can talk to about his music.

Jack likes Isolde. He laughs at her sour comments about everything being shit. On Saturday afternoons, she often comes with us down to the pier and mucks around with us on the fruit machines and the fairground rides. Once or twice, I’ve seen Jack holding her hand. In the evenings, she plays Monopoly and Scrabble with us.

Jack pretty much takes her for granted, but once he asks me if she’s my girlfriend as we’re riding back to London on the Sunday evening train.

“No. She’s a friend.”

“But was she your girlfriend once?”

“No.”

“Did you do all that disgusting kissy stuff with her?”

I look around to see if anyone is listening. They don’t appear to be.

“Is that what mum said?”

“She just said that you let yourself down and felt you had to move out.”

“She’s wrong.”

“Do you think you’ll live with us again?”

“Is that what you want?”

“Yes.”

I cuddle him, and tell him I don’t know what is happening. With tears welling, he says that he likes coming down to Brighton at weekends but that he misses me. I miss him too.

“Oh God, this is hopeless, we’re both crying now!” I say.

Then we laugh at this, and hug again.

“So you’re telling me that you went away to Norway with her before Jack was born?” Hadley says.

I hesitate and look at Martin.

“Is this important anymore? It happened so long ago,” I say.

“You lied to me! You lied and lied and lied to me – then we had a baby!”

Hadley stands up and paces about the room. Martin scribbles furious notes.

“I think that’s what hurts the most: the fact that I knew nothing,” Hadley says, addressing Martin.

“I didn’t want to hurt you. That’s why I didn’t tell you.”

“You knew I would kick you out if you did.” She has her arms crossed, staring at me.

The only sound is Martin’s fountain pen scratching his notes. When he finishes, he looks up.

“Is that all you want to say about the affair, Francis?” he says.

Hadley is standing away from me, near the door.

“It was a bad time. I thought I was going to go with her but Ellida -- Ellida got pregnant. She had to have an abortion.” I’m looking down at the floor, at Martin’s Persian rug.

“Wait a minute...she had an *abortion*?” Hadley says.

“Yes.”

“And you were going to run away with her until then?” Hadley says.

“We were going to – to travel around the world. I was going to give up my job and be with her. It was crazy. I was crazy. I can’t explain what it was like in her company. She was maddening, she was always changing her mind about things, but I just felt subsumed.”

“Subsumed,” Hadley says, her voice flat.

“I guess. Yes.”

“So why didn’t you go off with her?” Hadley says.

“I didn’t want to give up our life together. I loved you,” I say. I think about changing this verb to the present tense. “I love you.”

Hadley throws up her arms and continues her rounds over Martin’s floorboards. “It’s becoming clear now. You had this affair with Ellida but things turned sour when she had an abortion, and then you realised that you preferred me because I’m sane?”

“I loved our life together. The affair didn’t happen because I was unhappy. It happened because of Ellida. She gripped me in ways I can’t explain.”

At that Hadley leaves the room. I look at Martin who is still writing. After a while he stops. Hadley hasn’t returned. Martin looks at his watch. “I’m sorry, Francis -- the session has actually ended anyway.”

At the next session Hadley won't look me in the eye but is much more composed. She says, "The thing is, Martin, the only conclusion I can come to is that he can never be trusted again."

"I just didn't tell you," I say.

"Martin, are you listening to this self-serving bullshit?" she says.

"Jack was born. He's our son. Are you saying you'd rather not have had him?" I say.

Hadley's anger rises. "And what do you think I would have done if I had known?"

Silence.

"I'm sorry, Hadley. I did wrong. I apologise. But I don't regret having Jack with you."

Martin waits for us to continue the conversation. Tears run down Hadley's cheeks. I think about putting my hand on her arm.

"Oh God, Francis, why were you so obsessed with that fucking woman – and now her daughter?"

"I have never, ever slept with her daughter. You have to believe me."

Hadley doesn't reply. It's clear she still doubts me.

"Why are you living with her then?"

"I'm helping her get her life in order. You've never needed me like Isolde or Ellida needed me."

"Now we're getting to the heart of it. You need to be with some pathetic woman who you feel you can lord it over. It's all about you being the *pater familias*. The big daddy. Ha! Since when do you want to be in charge?"

"I'm just trying to help. For once, I'm doing the right thing."

"And you're sleeping in the room where your girlfriend died. How creepy is that?"

"I find it comforting." That's the truth. I'm supposed to speak the truth now.

Martin and Hadley look at me, waiting for me to say more: Martin with a crumpled careworn sympathy in his face and Hadley with spikey vindictiveness.

"Maybe you could explain why you find it comforting?" Martin says.

"I'm not sure I should say it."

"Say what?" Hadley says.

"Oh fuck it! Ellida was – she was the first great love of my life. It's hard to let go of that. To forget that. That's why there's a sort of truth in me being in her room. Now that I have nowhere else to go."

Hadley twists and turns on the sofa. I watch Martin's eyes follow her jerky movements.

"Do you know how hurtful that sounds?"

"Maybe what Francis means is that he had feelings of great intensity with Ellida," Martin says.

"Yes, that's it," I say.

“And that’s not to denigrate his experiences living with you.”

“It is a denigration!” Hadley says.

“It’s not. I could have never sustained those feelings. I’d have burned up...” I say.

At the end of this session, Martin takes off his glasses and wipes them with his handkerchief. “After a very difficult session last week, I think we’re on the verge of a real breakthrough. You’re talking to each other. You’re saying things you’ve needed to say to each other for years.”

I am not so sure about this, but as the days pass by, I realise that I am feeling less shit. I make a genuine effort to look for a job. Until now, I have been signing on at the Benefits Office and pretending to job-hunt to keep the officials off my back. After quite a few applications, I find some writing work at an internet company in a business centre in Brighton: it is pretty menial stuff -- just writing reports on websites for various business clients -- but it is a job.

It takes time but finally Hadley becomes convinced that I didn’t sleep with Isolde. It’s Arnholm who swings it: I persuade him to write an email to her saying that he knows now that it didn’t happen. Neither he nor Hadley will show me the email but it has a profound effect: Hadley finally calms down when she’s around me, and begins to look a little guilty in our sessions with Martin. Finally, she says: “I think I would like to say sorry to Francis for not believing him when he said he hadn’t slept with Isolde. I think that was wrong.”

“Do you accept her apology, Francis?” Martin asks.

“Yes, I do.”

“And I need Francis to apologise for being so suspicious about me and Josiah. I admit I did have feelings for Josiah at one point. I did. But I didn’t act upon them, nothing happened. And never will happen. He needs to accept that.”

“What’s going on with you and Josiah now? You seem different,” I say.

“It’s just that I’ve realised I prefer slackers to corporate types.”

“Slackers like me?”

We look at each other and laugh. It’s the first time we’ve done that in a very long time.

“I’m sorry for being so suspicious. I really am,” I say, swallowing hard.

I stretch out my hand and she puts out hers: our fingertips meet and move away quickly but something crackles between us.

From this moment on, things are much better. Further sessions help Hadley see that just because I loved Ellida didn’t mean I didn’t love her, that I was thinking with my cock not my brain. And I learn that whatever went on with Josiah is now fizzling out.

The holiday season approaches and I ask Hadley and Jack to Christmas lunch. When Arnholm learns that there is a big meal on offer, he invites himself.

It is the first meeting between Hadley and Isolde. They seem hesitant around each other, but I can tell immediately there's no real hostility. Isolde gives Jack her Christmas present for him: a luxury Scrabble set.

"Thanks Isolde!" he says, leaping up at her. She takes him in her arms and kisses him. Hadley doesn't flinch but seems pleased that Jack has a friend; she smiles. Jack is even happier with Isolde's gift than the presents he got from his parents.

Once the present-giving is over, Hadley comments on how clean the house is, and Izzy says: "That's all Francis. I'm a complete slut in that regard."

She looks at Hadley with insouciant eyes, challenging her to take the phrase "slut" in a different way. Her accent is posher than it normally is, and she's made a real effort with her make-up and clothes: she's in her customary black, but her black blouse, trousers and jeans are all very smart.

"He never used to do that kind of thing," Hadley says.

"Finally he met someone lazier than him and was forced to get off his arse," Isolde says.

Isolde grins at Hadley. I say I have to check on the turkey and disappear.

Hadley follows me into my gleaming kitchen. "So Isolde really does no housework – and you do it all?"

"Don't sound so incredulous! This place was like a tramp's toilet before I came along."

"I never knew you had it in you."

"I didn't either."

She asks if she can help. I say she could make the gravy; and the carrots are ready to steam. Before I know where I am, she has taken over. I sip my wine and have that familiar feeling of both being pleased that she's in charge -- and also of being inadequate.

"We should tell Martin about this," I say.

"What do you mean?"

"I was cooking there, and feeling competent, but then you arrived and I feel like one of your students. I should let teacher do it."

"We used to cook together all the time."

"I was only ever the *sous-chef*; you know that." I feel relaxed enough to say this; I'm glad.

Hadley puts the knife down on the cutting board; her brown eyes are warm. "Well, then. Now you're the chef. How about that?"

"You go and enjoy your wine. I'll be fine."

We hear Jack cheering next door. He bursts into the room to tell us that he had just got 50 points in Scrabble for using all his letters. Hadley hugs him and regards Izzy who has followed Jack into the room. She says to her: "Jack tells me that you play with him a lot. He enjoys it."

"No problem. I like playing with him. He's hard to beat."

I serve the lunch. It is OK, though not nearly as good as it would have been if Hadley had been involved: the roast vegetables are overdone, the turkey is a bit dry, the stuffing could use a bit more flavour, but no one complains. Arnholm, in particular, who never eats with us, tucks in. Jack smothers everything in gravy and cranberry sauce and tells us about how he won at Scrabble: the words he made, the triple letter scores he landed on, and his overall Scrabble strategy.

“You were very strategic,” Arnholm says. “That is very important in life, to have a proper strategy.”

“Do you have a strategy?” Jack asks him.

Isolde bursts out laughing. “Yes, he has a strategy: himself!”

“Now that is unfair. I think I have had too little of a strategy. All my focus has been upon my music. I’ve spent twenty five years writing one piece of music. I had the vision of what I wanted it to be, but never the strategy. Vision and strategy are very different but linked. All creatives have to have vision: to know what they want, but they also need to know how to do it.”

“I remember you writing *Flight* when I first met you,” I say.

“I had many distractions on the way, but I finished it in the end.”

After the lunch, Arnholm plays us *Flight* on the piano: it is a poignant, complex piece, its arpeggios taking me back to the Sussex woods in the 1980s: the paper lanterns, Ellida nursing me in her lap, our picnics by the sea. The music finishes and I become conscious that Hadley is looking at me. I can tell she realises who I am thinking about, but it is OK: our legs have remained touching throughout the performance.

A little later, Hadley, Jack and I go for a walk together – both Arnholm and Isolde decline our offer to accompany us. Most of the shops and cafes are shut but the pier is open. We dig our hands deep into our pockets because of the cold. When we are in the fruit machine arcade and Jack is playing a racing game on a toy motorbike, Hadley tells me that things haven’t worked out with Josiah.

“I’m thinking of leaving Learning for Life and going back to teaching actually. I don’t like all this corporate education stuff. It’s not me,” she says.

“Josiah won’t be very happy about that.”

“He’s not, but that’s his problem.”

“And he’s definitely not going to get a divorce?”

“I don’t really talk to him about those kinds of things anymore.”

“That’s good.”

“Yes. It is good.”

When we return back to the house, Isolde surprises us by saying that she wants to talk to Hadley. I follow them into the living room but Isolde rebuffs me, saying that she wants to talk alone.

I give Hadley a look but she doesn't respond. Jack and I play Monopoly on the kitchen table as they talk. I take it as a good sign that they are talking. After about half an hour, Hadley emerges and says to Jack that it's time to go home. Isolde has vanished. I follow mother and son to the car.

"What did Isolde want to talk to you about?"

"Stuff."

"What?"

Hadley makes a face indicating that she can't say anything in front of Jack. She smiles warmly at me as she drives off though. I shout for Isolde when I return to the house but she's gone. I go up to my room and fall asleep. Much later on, I'm woken by loud knocking and two people stumbling around. I switch on the light and see Isolde and her friend, Joe. They totter on their feet, swaying about, then plunge into my room. They are wild and out of control. Isolde chucks my laptop onto the floor and Joe rips my Matisse print off the wall.

"Hey! What are you doing?" I say, leaping out of bed.

"That's him! That's him! That's the fucker who stopped me having a brother or a sister or whatever it was going to be! You cunt, you fucking cunt!" Isolde says, pointing a finger. Her eyes glint in the darkness as Joe grabs me. He is younger, stronger and taller than me. He tosses me onto the bed and pummels me on the chest. I smell body odour, beer and spliff as he beats me. I try to wriggle out of his grasp but it is useless.

Then I black out.

When I come to, my face feels swollen and throbbing with pain. My chest is bad. I get up slowly and find the floor of my room covered in broken glass. I put on my clothes and shoes and pick my way through the wreckage of the room: the place has been properly vandalized.

I go to A&E. It is Boxing Day and thankfully the waiting room is not that crowded. I wait for an hour and then get seen by a doctor, who says I've got a broken rib and a lot of bruising. Apart from that, I'm OK. "Someone really turned you over but you're not badly hurt. We should probably keep you here for observation in case you've got concussion. Or have you got someone at home who can be with you?"

This makes me feel very lonely. "No."

I'm given a hospital bed for the day. It's actually quite relaxing to lie here, doing nothing, being checked every now and then by a nurse. As I rest, absorbing the hospital smells of detergent and sick people, listening to the TV jabbering away in the corner of the ward, I think about what happened and how it's true that I deprived Isolde of a sibling. I wince as I realise I've never really thought things through from her perspective.

I'm given some painkillers and by the time I return to the house in the evening I feel much better. However, I'm frightened I'll meet Joe again.

Isolde runs downstairs when she hears me come in.

"Oh my God, Francis!"

She puts her hand over her mouth. Her mascara is smeared. "I tidied your room for you."

"Where's Joe?"

"I kicked him out."

She takes my hand and leads me into the kitchen where she looks at my face. "He hurt you, didn't he?"

We sit down and she pours us whiskeys. The glass shakes in my hand.

"Look, I should probably move out," I say.

Isolde reaches for me. "It was a mistake. I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

I down the whiskey. "You know, I think I deserved it though. I think I needed someone to beat me up."

"What do you mean?"

"Hadley told you about the abortion, didn't she?"

Isolde gulps. "I asked her. I always had a suspicion that something like that happened, although mum never told me outright."

"Did your mum tell you about the affair we had when I was married to Hadley?"

"Not really. She just said you met up again and became friends so I sort of guessed. But she never said that anything happened. I think she was ashamed. It wasn't the image she wanted me to have of her. That's the thing which probably upsets me the most. When she was dying, she wasn't a coward. She was brave. She never, ever gave up. And she was making all these plans for me: how I would do a PhD, how I would get a great job, become an agent for change, how I would have a family, go travelling and write poetry and do all this stuff..."

Isolde wipes the snot away from her nose with the back of the hand. "And the thing is, I just kept saying yes, yes, I am going to do those things. I am going to be this great successful, happy, balanced, artistic person, with a great partner and a hippy-happy life and it was suffocating, it strangled me. And it still strangles me. Look how I've failed!"

I hold her and feel her hair nuzzle against my cheek.

"It's just that sometimes I feel so alone. So fucking alone," she says.

I think about saying that a sibling might not have solved that but don't.

"You'll stay, won't you?" she says, gripping my hand.

"Let's see how it goes."

A few days later, I suggest that she should get a job or do a course or something instead of drifting around the house or hanging around her slacker friends.

“Oh fuck off, just fuck off,” she says but later on that day she knocks on my door and comes into my room.

“Do you think I could get a job?” she says.

“Yes. Sure. You’re clever.”

“But what job? What could I do?”

We go through all the things she could do from the menial to the managerial. Then we talk about courses. She doesn’t want to do anything academic -- her degree put her right off -- but she would like to do something with her hands. “What about being a plumber?”

“Why not?” I say.

Over the next few days, I help her find some courses: she settles upon one close to home. During following months, she shows surprising dedication: she attends the nine-to-five training course every day, does her homework diligently and is apprenticed to another female plumber, Kate, who she likes a lot. She establishes a routine for herself that borders on normality: she has breakfast with me at eight in the morning and then goes out to either attend classes or work with Kate, who is massively in demand in the Brighton area. I meet Kate one evening when Isolde brings her home: Kate is a heavy-set woman with short cropped hair and a Yorkshire accent; she eyes me with suspicion but warms up when we get chatting. Isolde has told me previously that Kate is a lesbian but she hasn’t made a pass at her.

“Isolde is going to be a great plumber,” she says. “The customers love her – and not just coz she’s fit.”

Isolde smiles a smile I haven’t seen before: a smile of genuine happiness.

Arnholm doesn’t approve of her new profession and tells her that she could do much better. Isolde tells him to fuck off whenever he brings it up -- which is quite often. It makes me think that Arnholm preferred it when Isolde was not doing anything with her life.

One Saturday evening, I find a casket with Ellida’s name emblazoned in gold letters on it hidden behind a stack of books on a shelf. Isolde is playing COD with Jack on the PS3.

“How did these get here?”

Isolde pauses the game with her controller.

“What are those Dad?” Jack says.

“They’re my mum’s ashes,” Isolde says.

Jack’s eyes widen. “You mean they burnt her to death?”

“She was already dead, dumbo,” Isolde says.

“Oh.”

Isolde throws down the controller and runs out of the room. Jack worries that he’s upset her, but I reassure him that he hasn’t. I find Isolde face down on the bed in her room.

“You need to say sorry to Jack, Isolde. You really startled him. And those ashes, we should scatter them. We should say goodbye to her,” I say.

No reply.

I leave the room, but later, I see her sneak up behind Jack as he is playing a computer game and tickling him. He screams in delight. Then she crouches to his level and says: “I’m sorry Jack for being mean to you. It wasn’t you. My mum died, and I’m still very upset about it.”

Jack pats her hair and says: “I wouldn’t like it very much if my mum died either.”

Later on, after Jack has gone home with Hadley, I catch her smoking outside in the starlit, weedy garden. I thank her for not doing it in the house when Jack is staying. She doesn’t say anything.

“You know, the more I think about it, the more I think I would like to hold some kind of memorial service for your mum. I never got to say goodbye,” I say.

“The funeral was shit. There was only my Dad and grandparents there. It was at the crematorium. I was off my face. I was sectioned after that.”

“That’s all the more reason to give her a proper goodbye then.”

* * *

It’s lucky we’ve got our boots on because the ground is really muddy. It rained a lot last night: George and I listened to it thrumming on the skylight of his new top floor flat. We both felt depressed then but the glorious sunshine of this May morning has lifted our spirits. We’ve walked all the way from Dorchester, sauntering down more or less the same route Thomas Hardy would have taken as a boy jaunting back from his Dorchester school to his remote rural home nearly eight miles outside the town. There are a few more flyovers and big roads to traverse than in Hardy’s time, but you can still feel the haunts of ancient peace here.

Hardy’s cottage, where he was born and grew up, is now a National Trust house and has been spruced up a bit too much for our liking. It is, well, a trifle twee.

“This place has none of the grit of Hardy’s time!” George says.

Nevertheless, we take a good look around it, learning more about the great man’s childhood.

“It’s the poems that I really love,” I say, as we sit on a bench amidst the profusion of plants and gaudy flowers in the garden. I get out my battered copy of his selected poems and read “At Castle Boterel” to George. The poem describes Hardy’s journey as an old man to visit the places in Cornwall where he courted his first wife Emma, who has just died. My voice becomes edged with emotion as I read the last three verses:

Primaeval rocks form the road's steep border,
And much have they faced there, first and last,
Of the transitory in Earth's long order;
But what they record in colour and cast
Is - that we two passed.

And to me, though Time's unflinching rigour,
In mindless rote, has ruled from sight
The substance now, one phantom figure
Remains on the slope, as when that night
Saw us alight.

I look and see it there, shrinking, shrinking,
I look back at it amid the rain
For the very last time; for my sand is sinking,
And I shall traverse old love's domain
Never again.

“I thought about this poem when I was in Brighton with Jack, a while back. It was raining as we were heading up the slope of Trafalgar Street and I thought about the places I went with Ellida.”

“And there was one phantom figure remaining on the slope?” George says.

“Exactly!”

“Spooky!”

“Yes, it was!”

“And sad.”

“That too.”

“Do you think we’ll traverse love’s domain again?” George says.

“We might do.”

“I doubt it.”

We shut the wooden gate behind us and walk up an incline towards a heathery swathe of ground, which reminds me of Hardy’s Edgdon Heath, except that it’s pretty small compared with the cosmic Egdon. Then we stride into the delicious shade of the deserted Puddletown wood. We’re grateful for the solitude amidst the trees. After pushing our way through branches in search of a path, we find what the guide book says is an old Roman road, now grassy and surrounded by ferns.

We come upon a sky-reflecting pond in a clearing, glinting in the shade of an ancient oak tree. We sit down on the oak’s gnarled, exposed roots and have our picnic: ham and cheese sandwiches, Dorset apples and water. It’s simple fare but tastes great.

“The skylight in your flat is cool. It was nice listening to the rain falling on it last night,” I say.

“Mmmnnn,” George says, clearly not so sure.

“It’s a great flat; it’s very central and you’re near to the kids.”

George chucks the core of his apple into the pond and watches the ripples come towards us. “Yes, that’s true.”

“I think the one thing my therapy sessions have taught me: better glass half full.”

“That’s banal bollocks and you know it. Let’s face it, we’ve both fucked up our lives – we’re more than half empty. And Luke has too. He might have a nice partner, but he’s got a crappy part-time job and no money.”

“I spoke to him the other day and he said he was happy with his new woman.”

“There will be another one soon. He’s a serial monogamist. A love addict I think.”

“Don’t say that George! You never used to think so pessimistically. Things haven’t gone perfectly but there’s everything to play for. We’ve just had this amazing walk. We’re here talking.”

“She’s divorcing me, Francis. And Hadley is divorcing you.”

I don’t reply immediately. I don’t want to tell George that things are really improving on the Hadley front. Eventually, I say: “The therapy has helped me.”

“It’s made things worse between me and Elaine.”

“Why?”

“She insists I’m gay.”

“She’s got to concede you’re bisexual at least?”

“Yes, but she says I’m more gay than hetero. That’s her line. She doesn’t realise that whole thing wasn’t about sex, it was about stress. Some men buy a very fast car or go sky-diving, I did that.”

I know it’s pointless to say anything. This is a conversation I’ve had too many times with George recently. Instead I watch the sun dapple the lush leaves of the tree and look at the water in the pond. I think: what would Ellida do in this situation? She’d say something like: “Fuck this for a laugh, let’s go swimming!”

I begin to strip off my clothes.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going swimming.”

“You can’t do that! Someone might come by!”

“That’s funny coming from you!”

George considers and then takes off his clothes too.

And then being the two middle-aged freaks in underpants that we are, we jump into the pond. My head plunges underwater and I am nowhere and everywhere; the stinging cold of the water annihilates all my thoughts. When my head pops out into the sunshine, I see that George is swimming frantically – and laughing.

In the long light of the summer solstice, a procession wends its way up a chalky path on the Sussex Downs. The university campus glimmers below us. We are all carrying paper lanterns which throw strands of shadows across our faces. At the head of the pageant there are a number of musicians – a flutist, a clarinetist, an oboe player, and a bassoonist – who are playing an ethereal tune which draws us all into the woods. I am walking at the back with George, Luke, Mercy and Hadley; in front of us are Ellida’s parents – Leif and Hilde – who are holding hands and stalking way ahead is their grand-daughter, clasping a casket.

We reach a familiar clearing. It is dark now. We hang the lanterns from the branches of the trees and the place becomes ours: the lantern-lit air, the woody smells and the rustling of the leaves send me back to the night of the play.

We haven’t planned anything particularly ceremonial; only a running order of people who should speak. But first we make a bonfire: Luke and George have brought wood, fire-lighters and paper in their rucksacks. The musicians continue to play in the background, while the rest of us gather more wood. George nurtures the fire and the clearing dances with light. Leif and Hilde smile and Isolde squeezes my hand.

“This was the right thing to do,” she says.

We all gather around the fire, open bottles of wine and fill our paper cups.

“To Ellida,” Mercy says first.

“To Ellida!” everyone else says.

Then Arnholm calls us all to attention. The musicians fall silent.

“I want to introduce you all to my recently finished composition, *Flight*, which many of you will know about, but never heard in its entirety. I started writing it many years ago, and it is only five minutes long, but I have realised as I was walking up here that this piece is actually Ellida in a piece of music. This is the closest I can get to her. I have never loved anyone like I loved her. Sometimes she was very nice to me, but sometimes she just flew away, away, away into the air. But like a homing pigeon, she always came back to me. I hope when you listen to the music, you can hear her flight. The music is Ellida’s flight and no one else’s. On another level, I think Ellida was my flight, she enabled me to fly, and the best moments for me are when I remember her energy, and her love of life, and let it flow through me. I think you’ll find my music may do this for you...”

Mercy whispers in my ear: “Nice to hear that he hasn’t lost his modesty.”

The music plays. The arpeggios which had seemed so haunting when he played them on the piano now seem fuller; the woodwind ensemble give his harmonies real flesh and humanity. Its effect is powerful: I can feel Ellida’s hands stroking my face, her breath on my bare back as she combs out all my long, knotted hair, the wetness of her cunt as she moves up

and down on top of me. The music is unsettling in this way: sexual, sensual and sad. Then I begin to listen on a more intellectual level. I realise now it's an unusual piece of music because the flute and the clarinet which normally get all the tunes have a purely harmonic role, while the bassoon takes the melody. And what a melody it is! It is pure Ellida! Soaring, violent and unpredictable. You never know what's going to happen next.

We clap loudly when it finishes and Arnholm looks pleased. Who was the love of Ellida's life? Him or me or neither of us? I feel a curious sense of calm about it all.

After downing two cups of wine far too quickly, I step forward. As they did with Arnholm, George and Luke hold their lanterns around me so that my face is visible. I say: "Isolde and I had this idea that we would say goodbye to Ellida here. This place was really where I first got to know her, or, should I say, she got to know me. I took far too many magic mushrooms and she looked after me here while I had a very bad trip."

"Yes, she certainly did look after you!" Mercy says. "You took off all your clothes and you were running around like a pervert!"

Even Ellida's parents and Arnholm laugh. Now I feel grateful that Hadley and I decided that Jack shouldn't come along. He is staying with friends in London: Hadley and I have the weekend to ourselves. Tonight she's staying in a hotel but I am hoping to spend the whole day with her tomorrow: we'll have breakfast together in a great café I know near the seafront and walk by the sea.

I say: "Ellida loved it here and so we thought it would be a good place to scatter her ashes. I know she might have preferred the sea, but we wanted to do it here because it is very quiet and secluded, and we were able to listen to Arnholm's music properly."

I sit down beside Hadley. Her eyes shine and she squeezes my hand. And continues to hold it under the cover of the darkness.

Isolde stands up, wielding a spliff. I can tell she's already quite stoned, but thank God she's not completely gone, as her speech proves: "I watched my mum die. I looked after her. It was the hardest thing that I've ever done in my life, but also the best. I finally got to talk to her. To hear about her life. I know I had seen her when I was smaller, but I never really connected with her. She was often away. And then just when I was really close to her, she was taken away from me. I have written this poem about her."

We all look at each other with a degree of surprise – and concern. Isolde throws her spliff on the ground, stamps out the fiery butt end, pulls out a crumpled piece of paper from her pocket and begins:

You were the girl who made lanterns
For the play in the woods
Who rescued wild, damaged men
And seduced them with your bubble-gum poems
And your crazy talk about ecstatic love
I never knew you then

As the person I am now
But I wish I did
Because I think I would have been your best friend
I only knew this wild, raging figure
Who would sometimes appear at my door
Babbling about climate change and the fecklessness of men
Who berated my Dad constantly
But then would snuggle up
To him in bed

You were never a mother
Until you knew you were dying
And then I would sit by your bedside
And listen to all your stories
About the sea, your dead boyfriend,
The brother who died when you were young,
Your fuck-promises given to your boyfriend
In the towers of moonlit castles

When you died
I didn't know what to do
I had inhabited your dreams and your life
So intensely
That I was without a world
Until finally I began to see that there was
Another life
Another life without you
And so finally I can say goodbye
My
Crazy
Maddening
Lovely
Mother
Goodbye.

Isolde stops. Arnholm claps the loudest of all of us and then hugs his daughter.

“That was a beautiful poem,” he says. He looks at me and gestures for me to come over.

The world is swimming so I don't quite know what he means.

Hadley lets go of my hand and pushes me forward.

I hear George and Luke and Mercy say: “Francis, go to her.”

I put my arms around Isolde's other shoulder. I find my hand touching Arnholm's.

The three of us ruminates upon the bonfire, which burns and burns and burns.

ends

*Building Beauty: the Role of Aesthetic
Education in my Teaching and Writing Lives:*
**The commentary for Francis Gilbert's PhD in
Creative Writing**

CONTENTS

Abstract.....	203
Introduction: research questions and rationale.....	204
Part I: What is “aesthetic education” and why might it be useful for teachers and writers?	206
1.1 Language, narrative and autobiography: towards a theory of aesthetic literacy.....	206
1.2 Being a teacher and writer	218
1.3 The school matrix	223
1.4 Aesthetic autobiography as a form of escape	227
1.5 From aesthetic appreciation to aesthetic autobiography	229
1.6 What is “aesthetic education”?	235
1.7 Reconfiguring teacher and writer identities within an “aesthetic” context.....	237
Figure 3	240
1.8 From aesthetic learner to aesthetic educator.....	241
1.9 Bringing the threads together: re-visiting teacher and artist identity	244
Figure 4	245
Figure 5	246
Figure 6	251
Part II: What happens when the tenets of “aesthetic education” are put into practice?	253
2.1 My methodological approach: what I did in the classroom and why	253
2.2 The context of the school.....	257
2.3 Exploring multiple identities: George’s fractured selves.....	257
2.4 Ambivalent “feminine” and minority identities: Anita’s story	261
2.5 The alternative self: Eloise’s constructed alter-ego	267
2.5 Emerging “masculinities”: the train enthusiast.....	269
3.1 Conclusions.....	274
Bibliography	277
Appendix:	282
A.1. My writing which inspired students’ responses.....	282
A.2. Interviews	284
A.2a) George interview 28 th May 2012.....	284
A.2b) Anita interview June 2013,	288
A.2c) Eloise interview June 2011	289
A.2d) Albert interview June 2013	295
A.3. Student aesthetic autobiographies.....	300
A.3a) Anita’s aesthetic autobiography	300
A.3b) George’s autobiographies	301
A.3c) Eloise’s aesthetic autobiography	303
A.3d) Albert’s aesthetic autobiography.....	305
A.4. Relevant Field Notes	307

Abstract

The first part of this commentary explores concepts surrounding “aesthetic education”. It looks at the ways in which my perceptions of myself as both a teacher and writer have changed, and explains why I now view myself as an “aesthetic learner”: someone who is constantly learning about what works and does not work artistically. I make links between the processes involved with writing my thesis for my PhD in Creative Writing, a novel entitled *Who Do You Love?*, and the practices occurring in my teaching. While explicating this, I draw out theoretical lessons, positioning my own practice as a writer and teacher in an “aesthetic tradition”. I define “aesthetics”, in brief, as an established way of viewing the world from an artistic perspective.

I situate myself in the “aesthetic tradition” by providing an autobiographical context for my ideas, describing and analysing significant moments in my teaching, writing and personal life. Thus, in the first part of the commentary, I explore my own life as a teacher and writer: I explain how, after over a decade as a successful teacher but an unpublished writer, I found sudden success by writing a best-selling memoir about my early teaching experiences. I analyse how and why the mainstream media asked me to commentate upon many educational issues of the day, and I examine why my views about education changed radically. I then contextualise my personal experiences by scrutinising the wider political and educational climate that informs teachers’ practice at the moment. This critique leads me to suggest an alternative approach based on my practice as a writer and the lessons I have learnt from reflecting upon my own artistic practices when writing *Who Do You Love?* and other books. As a result of my reflections upon my own practices as a writer, I postulate that I am able to reconfigure my identity as a teacher and writer into that of being an “aesthetic learner”: I attempt to show that when one thinks of oneself as an “aesthetic learner” – someone who is constantly honing and re-making one’s perceptions and one’s art – then many of the problems and stresses of seeing oneself as a teacher or a writer fall away; I contend that, because we are often our own harshest critics, it is the learner him/herself who should learn to be the ultimate judge as to whether their work is successful or not. I argue that when one situates both teaching and writing in an aesthetic context, both practitioners and theoreticians can possibly step outside the narrow discourses which regulate the educational and publishing worlds.

Building upon these ideas about “aesthetic education”, the second part of this commentary aims to examine the benefits of teachers using their own autobiographical writing in the classroom. I explore the ways in which the search for aesthetically satisfying art necessarily leads to the blurring of truth and fiction in autobiographical writing: I argue that teachers can

help students improve their autobiographical writing if they provide students with the tools of fiction – such as adding ‘made-up’ dialogue, creative descriptions of people/places etc. -- when writing about their own lives. Furthermore, I suggest that when teachers share their own pertinent autobiographical episodes then pupils are more willing to respond in an engaged and passionate fashion; I argue that this fosters a culture of “reciprocity” (Oakley, 2005: Claxton, G., Chambers, M., Powell, G., Lucas, B., 2011) whereby students willingly complete the work, rather than doing it out of a sense of obligation or obedience. In developing my argument, I suggest that autobiographical writing can be therapeutic in classroom contexts.

The data sources for this commentary are my life and four case studies involving my pupils: two eleven-year-olds, George and Anita; and two fifteen-year-olds, George’s brother, Albert, and Eloise.

The methodological approach is that of *bricolage*: chiefly, the commentary combines ethnographical observation with interviews and discourse analysis, similar to that pioneered by Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1980). I also examine quantitative studies that look at the therapeutic dimensions of autobiographical writing. Theoretically I draw on Freire’s concept of “conscientization” (Freire, 1996, p. 49) in order to critique the “banking” concept of education which would close down opportunities for pupils to write freely about their own lives: for Freire conscientization (sometimes translated from the Portuguese as ‘critical consciousness’) is a process whereby both student and teacher become aware of the social, cultural and political world they are part of and the oppressive ideological forces that are at work in their immediate sphere. Drawing upon the theories explored in the commentary’s first half, the second part of the commentary not only investigates what happened when I shared my own writing with my pupils but draws out larger theoretical points about the connections between teaching, learning and writing.

Harvard style has been deployed throughout the commentary.

Introduction: research questions and rationale

Since I became a student teacher in 1989, I have struggled to reconcile my identities of being a writer and an educator; these identities have been both competing and conflictual. Initially, I saw pursuing a teaching career as a way of financing my writing; I felt that I’d have enough time during the holidays and weekends to write novels. During the first decade and a half of my career, from 1989-2003, I rarely perceived there to be many links between my teaching and writing. Indeed, I deliberately eschewed writing about anything connected with school during that time. But this all changed when, by chance, I met a publisher, Rebecca Nicolson, at an informal gathering and discussed my teaching experiences with her. Interested by my stories, she asked me to write a book for her publishing house, Short Books. The process of

writing about my teaching in a humorous and dramatic style was illuminating for me: it was the first time I began to see strong connections between my teaching and artistic lives.

This commentary explores these connections in some depth, placing them in the context of my own life and a theoretical framework which builds upon various aspects of aesthetic philosophy, as well as touching upon the work of Foucault (Foucault, 1980) and Freire (Freire, 1996), two separate philosophical standpoints, when relevant. By analysing my own personal experiences as a teacher and writer, my commentary explores and attempts to answer these questions:

First, what is “aesthetic education” and why might it be useful for teachers and writers?

Second, what happens when the tenets of “aesthetic education” are put into practice?

The first part of the commentary deals with the first question; in order to do this I examine different aspects of my teaching and writing careers. First, I discuss my experiences of being a student, teacher, writer and parent in a brief account of my life. I point out that my success as a writer about schools meant that I was co-opted into other ways of thinking about education which were restricted and narrow-minded. I then explore what I call “The School Matrix”; this is a concept, inspired by the science-fiction film *The Matrix* (Wachowski, 1999), which attempts to describe the feelings of persecution that many teachers suffer from in the current educational climate. I proceed to argue that writing autobiographically about my experiences as a teacher enabled me to escape from rigid ways of thinking about education. My next section explores why it is important to develop one’s aesthetic sensibilities before writing about one’s life in an artistic fashion; this leads me on to discuss some definitions of “aesthetic education” and ask what it is for different thinkers such as Spivak (Spivak, 2012) and Pateman (Pateman, 1991). Building upon the work of Foucault, Spivak and Freire, I put forward the case that both teachers and writers could re-think their identities and consider themselves “aesthetic learners”: I offer some arguments as to why this might be productive. This section explores in depth my role as a teacher and a writer, possibly showing that my skills and success as a writer have helped me teach autobiographical writing. I finish the first part of the commentary by situating my practice as a teacher and writer in an “aesthetic context” (this is something I explain later) and argue that both student and teacher should be perceived as “aesthetic learners”.

The second half of the commentary illustrates what happened with some of my students when these theoretical ideas were put into practice. It focuses upon four case studies (pupils I taught) and how and why they developed their autobiographical writing skills under my tutelage. There is George who was, at the time, an 11-year-old who presented challenging behaviour in the classroom context: I show what his autobiographical writing reveals about his fractured sense of identity and how some modes of autobiographical discourse appeared to

help him develop emotionally and academically. There is 11-year-old Anita who was marginalised in the class because of her race: I reveal how her autobiographical writing enabled her to explore her ambivalence about conforming to certain gender stereotypes. There is Eloise, a 15-year-old, who was studying for her GCSEs: her autobiographical writing appears to show a sophisticated mediation between real and imagined identities and was possibly a therapeutic experience for her. My last case study is Albert, George's older brother, who wrote about being lost on a school trip: his autobiographical writing and subsequent interviews reveals him to be searching for a new masculine identity. Finally, in my conclusion, I argue that close textual analysis of my students' work and my interviews with them have enabled me to draw out pedagogical and aesthetic lessons that have empowered me to improve my practice as a teacher and writer.

Part I: What is “aesthetic education” and why might it be useful for teachers and writers?

1.1 Language, narrative and autobiography: towards a theory of aesthetic literacy

The seeds of my writing life were sown when I listened as a child to what Harold Rosen labels “minimal autobiographical utterances” (p. 60). Rosen writes of this particular phenomenon:

The least regarded, the least studied form of autobiographical acts is the single utterance, which while it is itself not a story, points to a larger narrative. Although it scarcely gets a passing mention it is one of the most pervasive of autobiographical acts, exemplifying more than any other kinds of text the inescapable, always present autobiographical-ness of spoken discourse... (Rosen, 1998, p. 60)

There is no doubt in my mind that my mother's “minimal autobiographical utterances” provoked many questions in my mind as a child that I tried to address through my writing when I was much older. From ages of six until my late teens, after her troubled divorce from my father, my mother would make sweeping pronouncements about members of my family such as “Your father wanted to put me in prison”, “Granny (my paternal grandmother) was terrible to me when you were a baby”, “My father ruined my life” and when she was particularly fed up with me, “My life would be so much easier without you”. My mother never fully fleshed out these bold statements, choosing not to elaborate upon them but leaving them there to linger. As Rosen points out, autobiographical discourse of this ilk tends to “further an argument, furnish an instance, shift a debate from the abstract to the concrete” (p.

60); at a narrative level, what my mother was telling me were tantalising fragments of her autobiography. She would often elaborate upon them, reciting incidents in her life when these other family members had upset her, but as I grew older I began to realise that they were only “one side” of the story; that there might be another competing narrative which could well counter-act her judgements; different ways of seeing the same events. Her comments had a profound psychological effect upon me. The French psycho-analytical philosopher Lacan argues that a child acquires language by hearing its care-givers speak. As the child listens, he/she moves from feeling and sensing the world as a whole into a process of naming the world which necessarily means that the child becomes separated from his/herself and the world. Once the child acquires language he/she can label him/herself as a name, a child, a person; the child becomes an object in the discourses supplied by the parents (Bailly, 2009, p. 68). Lacan, like many linguistic philosophers since Saussure, viewed language as an “arbitrary” system of signs in the sense that he perceived that there was no inherent link between the sound of a word, a signifier, and the thing it refers to, the thing it signifies, the signified. Random sounds are assigned to the things they signify; there is no logical reason why a furry animal with four legs is called a “cat” for example. Lacan asserted what Belsey calls the “primacy of the signifier” (Belsey, 2002, p. 15). Once a child becomes inducted into this world of signifiers, he/she necessarily becomes alienated from him/herself; he/she begins to use the pronoun “I”, an arbitrary signifier which suggests “self-hood”. This sense of self-hood institutes the autobiographical discourse which he/she will use for the rest of his/her life.

For me, as Lacan points out is the case with many children (Bailly: Belsey), the adoption of this autobiographical discourse brought with it a heavy freight of psychological pain. I was inducted into a pre-existing familial milieu which was fractured and troubled. Because my parents separated when I was young, my mother dominated my early life and enfolded me in a familial discourse which made me feel ashamed of the “I” that spoke in my head; I became aware “I” was the by-product of my father and my father’s family, who were, in my mother’s eyes, trying to ruin her. Thus autobiographical utterances for me were particularly emotional and I was aware from an early age that talking about my father and his family in a positive fashion was expressly forbidden in my mother’s company and, as a result, forbidden in my own head as well. Things were complicated by the fact that I enjoyed the holidays I spent with my paternal grandparents and the rare time I spent with my father.

My mother’s utterances took a central “abstract idea” – that she had been wronged, mistreated, bullied, abused – and frequently made them concrete, illustrating them with fragmented anecdotes. As her eldest child, born in 1968, after my parents’ divorced in 1974, I bore the brunt of these autobiographical utterances. Until their divorce, my parents were quintessentially aspiring middle-class: my mother was a piano teacher and later a primary school teacher, while my father, having earned a PhD in microbiology at Cambridge

University, was a research scientist. After various affairs and frequent bust-ups, including violent ones which I witnessed, my mother divorced him in 1974, remarrying my stepfather a few years later. After that, my father was not permitted to see my brother and myself for a number of years, except when we were in the care of his parents in their rural Northumbrian home. He went to work in America, researching the nature of motor memory by experimenting on the brains of live monkeys. Giving up this research and retraining as a businessman at the London School of Economics, he returned to the UK in the early 1980s and, after much legal wrangling, saw my brother and I once a fortnight on Saturdays.

The quasi-fictional autobiographical stories I shared with my mother were essentially “made-up, negative” epiphanies, in which I was frequently obliged to manufacture feelings and perceptions that did not correlate with my underlying perceptions. For example, I would say that my paternal grandmother’s harsh tone of voice had made me realise that she was a terrible woman (this was not true – I loved my grandmother), or that the shape of my father’s face and nose had suddenly disgusted me (again not true). At one point, my mother encouraged me to rename my father “Pie-Face” because we agreed that he had a revolting face like a squashed pie; my brother and I had to call him that from that time onwards in her company.

These manufactured epiphanies fascinate me now; I can see that I learnt how malleable the world is; even the stuff of heaven – my glorious holidays with my grandmother – could be contorted into the stuff of nightmares if I willed it to be so. I perceive my mother in a “Deleuzian” light now; my mother chained me to what Deleuze calls “opinions”; “opinions” according to Deleuze are restricted, constricted ideas which direct a thinker into narrow, prejudiced ways of thinking. They contrast with “concepts” which open out the world, providing solutions to problems (Colebrook, 2002, p. 16). I had a “concept” of my grandmother as a person who freed me to think imaginatively, to feel happy, but I was co-opted by my mother into having a much more restricted opinion of her as a selfish, mean person.

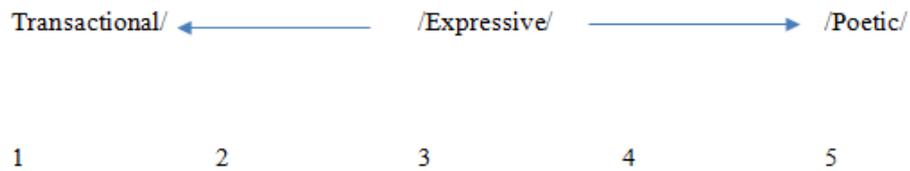
I did not discuss these issues with my father or his family until I was fifteen. By then, I was secretly plagued by doubts and anger. In tears, I confronted my father about all the horrible things my mother said he had done to him. He sat me down and told his side of the story as best he could: his version seemed more reasonable than my mother’s, more honest, more contrite, and ultimately more believable. Thus I began to flesh out the details of my mother’s autobiographical utterances into more fully developed oral narratives which I would tell initially my grandmother and father. I felt extremely guilty about telling them such negative things about my mother – but the taboo nature of the discourse also energised my talk.

Later on, at university, I told them yet again to my closest friends and most fully to the person who is fictionalised as Ellida in my novel. I didn't write them down. I believe that telling these stories where I explored both my parents' perspectives on the divorce enabled me to gain a more rounded identity for myself.

So, for me, autobiographical discourse acquired an "aesthetic" quality in the sense that talking about my family was fraught with emotional difficulties and yet certain words like "Granny" – who I loved but could never talk about – were "luminous"; they glowed with the magic of that person. This, for me, gets at the heart of what I mean by "aesthetic"; it is anything – a word, a moment in time, a poem, a piece of music etc -- which provides someone with an "affective", transformative experience (Pateman, 1991). There are certain discourses which particularly lend themselves to the aesthetic because they are loaded with feelings and sensations which linger beyond words; they take people participating in the discourse beyond what Lacan calls the "symbolic" – the verbal/linguistic – into the "Real", the "ineffable and the unimaginable" (Bailly, 2009, p. 98), a place beyond words. Poetry is possibly the most obviously aesthetic verbal discourse because it announces its emotional qualities with the very label "poetry". The genre carries with its thousands years of cross-cultural poetic baggage which means that anyone familiar with poetic discourses necessarily expects heightened language and to enjoy an "aesthetic" response.

But it would be problematic to say that all autobiographical discourse is "aesthetic" because the "aesthetic" only exists as a form of "difference" from other modes of discourse. As poststructuralist thinkers have pointed out, language is a sign system which creates meaning through difference (Belsey, 2002, p. 10). When providing a taxonomy for children's writing in primary school, James Britton in *Language and Learning* (Britton, 1992) outlines a taxonomic continuum which could also be applied to autobiographical discourse in general. Having explored the manifold functions and purposes in speech and the ways in which children learn to deploy many different ways of speaking and listening, Britton explores the ways in which the development of speech is vital for children to be able to write. In particular, he focuses upon what he calls "transactional, expressive and poetic forms of writing" (Britton, 1992). The transactional is usually informative, factual and conceptual in nature, answering the needs of a "transaction" – a request for information, a demand for a response while the "expressive" can sway towards either the transactional or "poetic"; it can answer a request for information in a more personal, emotional way than a purely transactional dialogue or it can, at times, not have an utilitarian purpose and be more an expression of pure feeling, "heightening or intensifying the implicit". (Britton, 1992, p. 177). Here is his diagram of the continuum (Britton, 1992, p. 174)

Figure 1 Britton's writing continuum



On reflection, I can see that the autobiographical utterances that I became part of as a child could be viewed through this continuum. The life I led with my mother as a child was usually transactionally prosaic in nature, as it is with most parents: I answered her requests to behave, dress and conduct my life in a certain way, and she answered my needs to be fed, clothed and watered etc. My recollection is that these transactions were not terribly expressive; I never received the sense, for example, that my mother's fed me out of love or affection – although she may have felt this way. There was a sense that doing things like feeding your children was just what you did if you were a parent. The discourse at the dinner table never invited me to “aestheticise” what I ate by getting me to reflect upon the textures and tastes of what I was eating or to aestheticise these occasions by viewing them through emotional lens. If I was to rank my relationship with my mother in terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Petty, 2014, p. 51) I would say that she provided the needs at the bottom of the hierarchy: the “physiological needs” – food, water etc -- and the “safety needs” – freedom from pain. Those higher up the hierarchy – belongingness and love needs, esteem needs and self-actualisation needs – were not, in my view, met by her. Her autobiographical discourse was shaped by the absence of love, esteem and self-actualisation. Indeed, much of what she said in her most bitter moments was that various other family members had denied *her* these very things; people had loved people other than her, she'd been constantly criticised and undermined, and she'd never been helped by anyone to realise her potential. She'd become trapped in a life of mediocrity because her needs hadn't been met. These autobiographical reflections were deeply expressive, full of angry and bitterness.

As I have said until I was fifteen, I had very few outlets at home to express my emotions about how I honestly felt about various situations and people in my life but I found that the creative writing and reading exercises provided in primary school enabled me to develop what might be termed “aesthetic literacy” which helped my “esteem” and “self-actualisation” needs: writing stories, poems and autobiographical accounts as well as responding to other people’s poems and fiction often gave me the chance to express my feelings about my family situation, albeit in a sublimated fashion. When I was seven and eight years old, I can remember vividly crying as I listened to my junior school teacher read Ted Hughes’ *The Iron Man*, Clive King’s *Stig of the Dump* and Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* to us. The same teacher asked us to write lots of poetry, stories and autobiographical accounts; I remember writing nonsense poems which I laughed at, autobiographical accounts about what I did in the holidays and stories about terrible monsters. Until I had had this teacher, I had struggled to read and write and had been considered “backward”, but she liberated me; I remember feeling free in her presence and the reading and writing came easily as a result. Words on the page lost their “random” quality and became meaningful. A thirst to be expressive in my writing meant that I ceased to see it as a chore, an obligation, but as a joy and a form of liberation. This, for me, gets to the heart of what I mean by “aesthetic literacy”; it is inherently motivating because it is a literacy which seeks to provide us with artistic outlets to express feelings; it is inherently expressive.

To become aesthetically literate, children need to be inducted into the genres that lend themselves most easily to the aesthetic -- poetry, dance, drama, music – but this is not to say that other subjects like maths and science do not have aesthetic elements. Numbers can be infused with poetic and expressive qualities just as much as poems. And it may well be that teaching the so-called “sciences” from an aesthetic perspective may make them much more accessible and motivating for children; it is striking to note that the very best scientists and mathematicians appear to speak in a highly poetic way about what they do. Aesthetic literacy involves drawing attention to the magic and wonder of whatever subject is being discussed. Mark Johnson in his paper “Dewey’s Big Idea for Aesthetics” writes of Dewey:

One of the most distinctive tenets of Dewey’s philosophy is his claim that the *quality* of an experience is the key to an adequate philosophical understanding of human mind, thought, language and value. This provides the basis for Dewey’s seminal contribution to aesthetic theory – his Big Idea – which is that every *fulfilled experience is individuated by a pervasive unifying quality*. (Johnson, 2013)

Johnson argues that Dewey’s concept of an aesthetic experience enables someone who undergoes one to feel connected to the “whole” of the aesthetic event; it is a connective experience in that it ties together the emotional, the intellectual, the psychological and non-linguistic. It is a “coming together” of language and that which is beyond language. It has a “unifying” quality. This was true for me when I felt so charged by listening to my primary

school teacher read the texts I've mentioned; I connected powerfully with the narrative, the characters and the situation, feeling that they were a part of me; the text and myself were "one". It was the way that I found profound meaning in the language of the stories which enabled me to do this. Above all, becoming comprehensively aesthetically literate involves the learner becomes profoundly aware of the emotional and connotative effects of language. To return to Britton's continuum, to become aesthetically literate, the learner must move beyond viewing language as purely a transactional medium and needs to perceive language's expressive and poetic qualities.

The sentiments expressed in Wallace Stevens's poem *Angel Surrounded by Paysans* are relevant here:

"Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,

Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,
And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone

Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,
Like watery words awash..." (Stevens, 1972, p. 354)

Stevens' "necessary angel" is the angel of poetic perception who enables us to see the world "cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set". To foster aesthetic literacy the educator must provide the learner with opportunities for them to move beyond thinking in a "stubborn, man-locked" fashion about the world, and enable them to see language as a fluid, magical medium; "watery words awash". Providing students with epiphanies through reading them powerful, relevant literature – like *The Iron Man* etc – is vital if the learner is going to be freed from the "stubborn, man-locked set" of the prosaically transactional. Stevens takes a 'post-structuralist' view of language, recognising its exceptionally elusive and transient character, it is "awash" with "watery words".

But there is a further element to nurturing aesthetic literacy which is political in nature. As Freire points out in order to construct significant meanings from texts the reader needs to "read the world" in a political light. The reader needs to see how he or she is a political agent in a world that probably is oppressive in some way or other. So far, I have mainly concentrated upon examining the psychological context I emerged from which led to me finding an expressive outlet for my psychological pain in my reading and creative writing. As I became increasingly aesthetically literate during my teenage years, I became aware that I was being oppressed by having either having my voice marginalised or suppressed in the

family home. My opinions on things were not welcome and when expressed were seen as disruptive and offensive. Having been at state primary schools where I was encouraged to read and write creatively, I was moved to a minor private school which offered very few aesthetic outlets; it was a relentless diet of learning facts, writing analytical essays and taking exams, which were set every term. I was frightened of failure; I knew that I could expect no support from my parents and that my only real chance of escape was to bury myself in my studies. I gained power and agency by achieving well academically. But I felt oppressed and sought outlets for my anger by listening to the songs of Bob Dylan, The Smiths and The Beatles, the literature of Salinger, Herman Hesse, Kafka and Sartre, the films of Werner Herzog and Francis Ford Coppola. These texts and their authors became important educators for me and they still are: they spoke for my sense of alienation and doubt about the world I lived in; they validated my anger and incomprehension; they articulated pain and love and loss. I think of them as my parents; they've been more reliable and honest than either of my actual parents. To see them through a Deleuzian lens, I could say that they are my "virtual" parents: for Deleuze both the "actual" and the "virtual" are "real". While the "virtual" may not have concrete existence – my "virtual" parents did not provide for my physiological and safety needs in the way my actual parents did – they did provide for my "self-actualisation" and "belongingness" needs, the needs that Maslow puts at the top of his hierarchy. They were "real" parents in this regard. While my concept of say, Bob Dylan or Morrissey, is a projection based upon what I know about them and their work, and what I want them to be for me, that projection in Deleuzian terms is real. They are part of my "virtual" world.

When I was a teenager, I entered into a dialogue with these texts and "virtual" people in my head; this was both an emotional and an intellectual dialogue. I was conscious of the powerful feelings that they provoked within me, forcing me to dwell upon their images, their lines, their cadences, their music; I began to read the world through the lens of these texts and still do. I found a couple of friends at school who shared similar passions and together we would talk about how these texts connected with us. On one level, my friends and I assisted each other in becoming aesthetically literate. Freire said in an interview:

Dialogue is the sealing together of the teachers and students in the joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object of study. Then, instead of transferring the knowledge statically, as a fixed possession of the teacher, dialogue demands a dynamic approximation towards the object. (Smidt, 2014, p. 90)

This "joint act of knowing and re-knowing" is central to aesthetic literacy. A work of art, an emotional experience or a special moment needs to be shared with people, to be communicated to be fully realised; to be known and re-known. The concept of "sharing experiences" is significant because the idea of sharing means that one's "aesthetic judgement" is not imposed upon other people; for example, an aesthetic literate person should not be

claiming that his/her judgement about the worth of a work of art over-rides everyone else's. Rather an aesthetic judgement about a work of art is an invitation to a dialogue about it. Aesthetic literacy is what Paul Gilroy calls "convivial" in that diverse views about art/life are explored in a democratic spirit, with everyone's voice and perspective being valued. It is the opposite of the oppressive ways in which aesthetic judgement was used during the colonial era to impose hegemonic ways of thinking upon the colonised (Williams, 2012, p. 21)

Although we did not realise it at the time, the dialoguing about art/literature/music that my friends and I did at school had a political significance that we were not cognisant of at the time. When my friends and I talked about the art we liked, we dialogued in an emotional way about lines of songs we liked, parts of movies we enjoyed and moments when we realised that the world around us had strong connections with what we were reading. For us, art (I use this term in my thesis in its broadest sense) provoked what Freire calls "conscientization" or critical literacy (Smidt, 2014, p. 22). This was particularly the case with our reading of Kafka's *The Trial* (2008) and Huxley's *Brave New World* (1977) which made us feel we were cogs in an alienating, random bureaucratic machine. This, for me, is part of becoming aesthetic literate; the political cannot be separated from the emotional because aesthetic literacy involves reflecting upon why you are feeling a certain way.

But, as I will show later on in the commentary, it was not until recently that I perceived that the political is inextricably intertwined with the aesthetic; my process of "conscientization" was never fully realised until I read Freire and Foucault's work when I commenced my PhD.

To sum up this first part of the commentary, it is worth outlining the key components that constitute what I view as "aesthetic literacy" in the following chart:

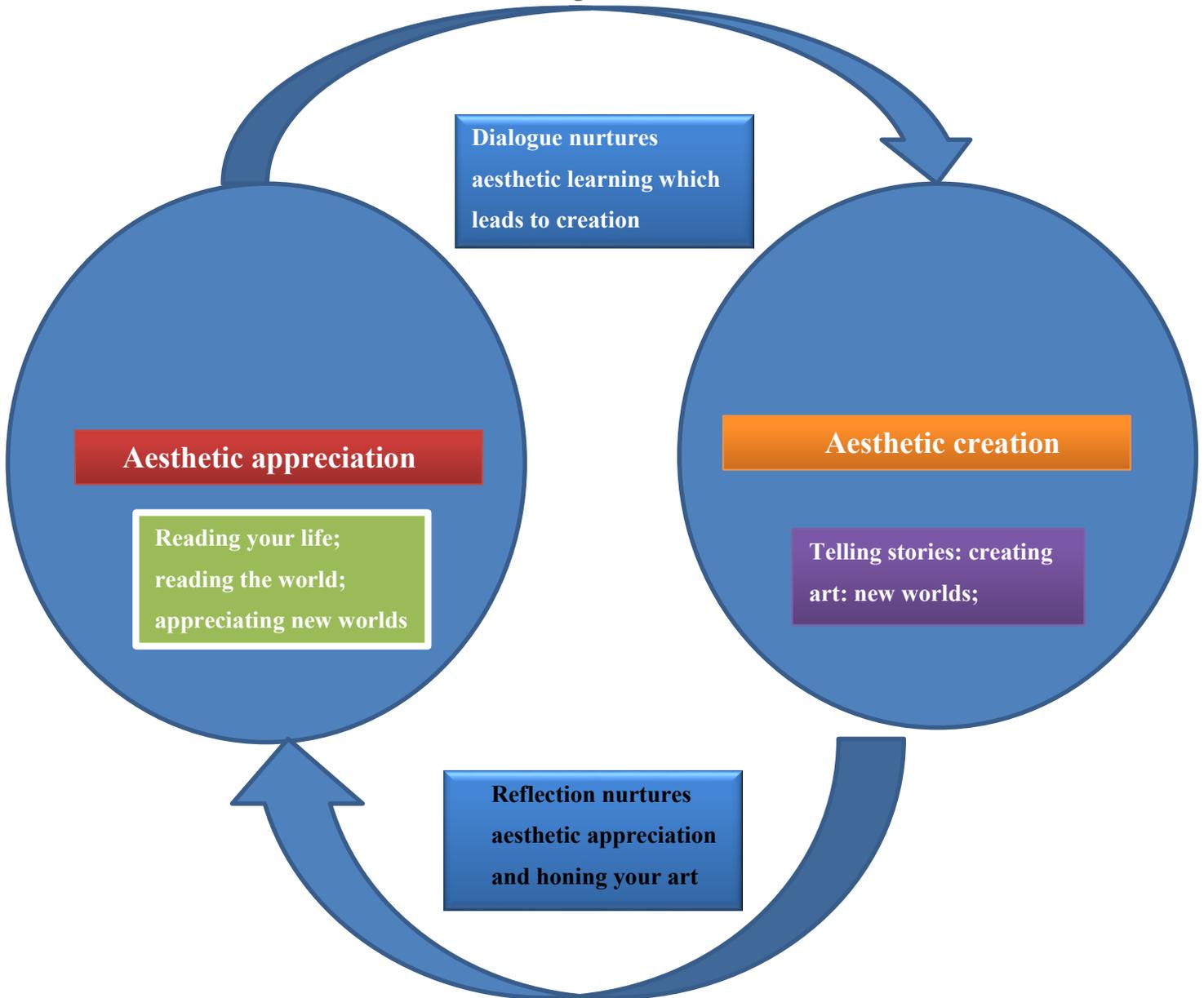
Figure 1

Components of aesthetic literacy	Relevant Thinker
Autobiographical utterances: an appreciation of the aesthetic emerges from autobiographical discourse	Harold Rosen
The child becomes both reflexive and alienated when he/she learns to use his/her care giver's language to place him/herself as an object in the world, an "I".	Saussure/Lacan
The child through the use of expressive talk and later writer learns to articulate emotions, to reconstruct special moments; the child reads the world and then the text.	Britton/Freire
The learner becomes aware of the connotative and poetic power of language	Barthes/Labov/Bruner
The learner enters into a dialogue with people about their aesthetic experiences; a democratic aesthetics is established	Freire/Bakhtin/Gilroy
A process of "conscientisation" occurs where the learner becomes cognisant of the political implications of the aesthetic and the transformative effect of seeing/reading the world with a critical consciousness.	Freire/Foucault

In order to draw these facts of aesthetic literacy together, it could be useful to see how they might fit into a larger structure. I would like to suggest that there are two inter-connected “umbrella” terms in which they could fit into: aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic creation. Aesthetic appreciation is intimately tied up with the Freirean notion of “reading the world”, being awake to the wonders around you, placing yourself in the context of the manifold worlds that any human being inhabits (Smidt, 2014). However, I would like to argue that an aesthetic appreciator actually reads many worlds because they live in the realm of the aesthetic which is always pushing the boundaries of what we know and feel. An aesthetic appreciator reflects upon new realms of experience continually; the way a sky is different from yesterday’s sky, the way the same piece of music is interpreted differently by a different musician, the way a science fiction writes conjures up a new universe. An aesthetic appreciator is aware that are constantly living in what Deleuze calls new and emerging “planes of imminence” (Colebrook, 2002), new versions of the present moment, and is aware of how our experience of the world is constantly changing. New worlds are constantly emerging. The aesthetic creator, the artist, is manufacturing these new worlds for the aesthetic appreciator to appreciate. A dialogue occurs between the aesthetic appreciator, the reader/audience etc, and the creator and a new experience comes into being; both appreciator and creator learn something new about themselves, about the world, about new realms of experience, about new worlds as a result. Later on in the thesis, I explore the concept of aesthetic learning in more depth.

Thus aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic creation become symbiotic processes which might be represented in a diagram like Figure 2

Figure 2



1.2 Being a teacher and writer

Having outlined what I feel are the key components of aesthetic literacy by drawing upon my early life, I will now explore what happened in my working life as a school teacher for over two decades using some of my points about aesthetic literacy as a theoretical underpinning. I read English at Sussex University (1986-89), gained a Postgraduate Certificate in Education in English at Cambridge University (1990), and a MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia in 1991, where two famous novelists, Malcolm Bradbury and Rose Tremain, taught me. I had had dreams of becoming a writer but realised after doing the MA that I was unlikely to make a living out of it. During the 1990s, I taught, for the most part, 11-18 year olds in various all-ability, co-educational state secondary schools in London.

From 1989-2003, being pressurised by the constraints of time and an unenlightened curriculum, I held fast onto a “banking concept” of education: that I had a certain amount of knowledge that I had to funnel into my pupils’ heads. Paulo Freire writes in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

The banking concept (with its tendency to dichotomize everything) distinguishes two stages in the action of the educator. During the first, he cognizes a cognizable object while he prepares his lessons in his study or his laboratory. (Freire, 1996, p. 61)

This is what I was trained to do and still, some years later, am currently instructed to do: to identify specific “blobs” of information – what Freire calls “cognisable objects” -- to impart to the pupils I teach. My business was to carry out the prescriptions of the National Curriculum; a central belief of Freire’s was that pedagogy becomes oppressive when it is prescribed. He writes:

Every prescription represents the imposition of one individual’s choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber’s consciousness. (Freire, 1996, p. 29)

Thus Freire perceives that in teacher-centric classrooms the pedagogue plays the role of “oppressor” and the pupils, “the oppressed”. I adopted what Freire characterises as an “oppressive” model of education. Most of my lessons, during my early career, were teacher-led, and involved me trying to transmit knowledge into my pupils. Occasionally, I would get children working in groups, but most of the time I would attempt to get my pupils to conform to my “consciousness”. I achieved the illusion of success, congratulating myself upon superior exam results, but the reality was that I was asking my pupils to do imitations of my essays and responses.

I dichotomised my life by separating off my teaching and writing. During the evenings and weekends, or whenever I had time, I would write fiction which was entirely unconnected with my teaching career. I did not want to think about the stresses of the classroom, but chose to

escape into narratives about runaways, would-be rock stars, engravers, New York business people and aristocratic Hungarians. I wrote six novels in total between 1990-2004. I tried to find publishers for them but did not succeed, although I did acquire an agent. The diversity of my subject matter reflected a writer who was struggling to find a subject and a voice. Looking back at that fiction now, I can see my writing was not fully realised or confident. I do not regret this: being committed to writing meant that I learnt a great deal about creative processes, the world around me, and myself. As William Blake says in his *Proverbs of Hell*, “If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise” and “the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom” (Blake, 1979, p. 89). These proverbs chime with me; I was excessive and foolish in my focus upon my writing, locking myself away to write during my free time in my twenties and thirties when I should have been getting out, but I found a degree of wisdom from doing it. After having so many manuscripts rejected, I learnt to motivate myself and expect no reward for what I was doing, other than the internal reward of entering a fictional world. I learnt the value of negative responses, of making mistakes, of failure; I saw the worth in humility.

This is something that some commentators have noted is often missing in both secondary and higher education. Students are nurtured by teachers who will not give them the chance to fail; the teacher effectively “scaffolds” failure out of the picture by doing things like providing such detailed essay plans that mean the student never has a chance to produce anything that doesn’t look like a decent essay. While some right-wing commentators (Phillips, 1998) have attacked the teaching profession for this phenomenon, I have noticed that it happens because of the exam system; a teacher’s pay packet and professional standing, and sometimes his or her job, is at risk if students fail to achieve the requisite grades. This means many teachers feel compelled to provide overly detailed essay plans in order to minimise these threats.

I gave up teaching in 1998 and trained to be a journalist, but was not particularly successful; I wrote a number of book reviews and feature articles, but my heart was not in it. I missed the classroom. I returned to teaching on a part-time basis later in 1998 and continued to write my fiction and journalism in my days off. However, I was drawn back into teaching full-time again in 2002 after every mainstream publisher rejected my novel, *Promenade* (2000), a historical novel set in war-time Hungary. It was a bitter blow: I had researched the novel in depth, found a respected agent to represent it, and even had it accepted by one publisher, who subsequently went bankrupt.

Ironically, it was after this that I found real success as a writer. In 2003, my writing career was transformed when I was asked by Rebecca Nicolson at Short Books to write a memoir about my teaching. She was impressed by the off-the-cuff stories I told about my teaching when I met her fortuitously at an informal lunch. As a result, I wrote *I’m A Teacher, Get Me*

Out Of Here (Gilbert F. , I'm A Teacher, Get Me Out Of Here, 2004). Using some diary entries and my memory, I told the story of my teacher training in 1989 and teaching in a failing comprehensive in Tower Hamlets from 1990-1993. Published in 2004, the book struck a chord; it was serialised on Radio 4 as Book of the Week, and propelled me onto the national stage as a commentator on education. I wrote newspaper articles for *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Guardian* and other magazines. Having been trained as a journalist, I knew how to “churn out” a quick article on more or less any topic. I was flattered to be asked to comment on a wide range of educationally linked topics, and rarely said no if an editor required a piece. I also appeared a great deal on the TV and radio, including BBC Breakfast, ITN and Channel 4 News, giving the “teacher’s view” on issues such as poor parenting, indiscipline in schools, mobile phones in the classroom and exams. Given the constraints of the media, my answers were invariably short but I spoke honestly and clearly.

I was given substantial advances to write my books *Yob Nation* (Gilbert F. , Yob Nation, 2006), about anti-social behaviour in the UK, and two guides for parents to schools, *Parent Power* (Gilbert F. , Parent Power, 2007) and *Working the System* (Gilbert F. , Working The System: How To Get The Very Best State Education For Your Child, 2009).

From 2002-2008, I was also Head of English in a large suburban comprehensive, and the parent of a small child. I worked ridiculously hard, filling my evenings, weekends and holidays writing my books and being with my family, and my week days dealing with my departmental duties. With hindsight, it is not surprising that I “cracked”. I hurt my back very badly running with my rucksack loaded with my laptop on the way to school. The pain was agonising but instructive; it told me that I had to stop the life I had. In 2008, I resigned my Head of Department post at school, thinking I’d just give up altogether, but my headteacher, who was relatively sympathetic to my plight, offered me the chance to work part-time and carry on with my writing.

I had a nagging feeling that for all my wise words about education, I was not certain that I was actually saying things that were valid or reliable. I had persistently advocated in my early articles that schools should be more authoritarian places, that there should be more emphasis on terminal examinations and less on coursework, and that the grip of central government on educational policy should be loosened.

But my own experience as a teacher and parent were not bearing testament to much of what I was saying. One of the side effects of my media success was that it boosted my confidence and made me much more relaxed and less authoritarian as a teacher. I found that my relationship with my pupils was much better as a result. As Head of Department, I got rid of all written coursework at GCSE in 2005, with the pupils doing terminal exams instead. While this was easier to administer, it clearly had an effect upon the quality of teaching and

the sorts of A Level students the English department was admitting; they hadn't learnt to be independent in the way they might have done if they had completed more coursework.

Looking back, I can see that part of my material success as a writer was due to the fact that my observations about teaching and state schools fed discourses which endorsed the elitist world views held by the white, patriarchal cabal who dominate the "higher" echelons of British society. I am not exaggerating when I describe the people running the country in this way; both my own experience of meeting such powerful people and research shows that public life is still dominated by privately educated white males who, by and large, send their own children to private schools (Sutton Trust, 2012). As Millar (Millar, 2009) points out, this elite, many of whom run the media, have every interest in presenting state schools in a negative light because they've opted out of the system themselves. I didn't fully realise this at the time and my agenda certainly was not the same as theirs. I wanted a public outlet for my stories; I was flattered by the attention, and I felt I could make some important wider points about education.

My writing from that time (2004-2009) consistently presented inner city state schools as being places of disorder and "otherness". While many right-wing columnists and journalists had shown schools in poor areas in this way, I had the virtue of actually being there in the early 1990s, although my current school was in an affluent area in outer London. Furthermore, while some teachers had spoken in this way in the media, I had the skills of a writer: I could humanise an issue by telling a story about a pupil. Illustrative of this is my comment piece for the *Daily Telegraph* (Gilbert F. , The Daily Telegraph Opinion, 2004) in which I criticise the Labour Party's policy of inclusion by pointing out that one "rogue pupil" ruined a year's worth of my lessons by constantly misbehaving. The inclusion policy in the school meant that I couldn't have him removed from the classroom. This was all true, but I realise now that I didn't explore the wider context of this issue; it was not the policy of inclusion that was wrong but the fact that I was teaching an exam-driven curriculum that was not appropriate for a disturbed pupil of this type. There were not the resources to hand to help me teach him; he really needed a teaching assistant in the classroom with him. I now firmly believe that having "inclusive" classrooms is vital if we want to have a cohesive society. But this was not the message the *Telegraph* wanted me to send. Much of what is written in the paper reinforces the idea that social hierarchies are necessary and productive. It articulated this theme in an "educational light" by asking me, at that time, to write the article because I argued that excluding disaffected, marginalised students from mainstream classrooms was the only way to maintain "standards", but the subconscious concept the paper, and many other media organisations want to send, is that we need to maintain inequitable class structures. This was not an issue I'd thought deeply about at the time; I simply believed I was telling things "as they were". I now can see that many of my other articles fell into this "trap"; while

I was always telling the “truth” as I saw it, my representations of chaotic state schools neatly fitted into a wider social agenda the elitist press want to promote.

I also had deep-rooted personal reasons for writing these articles; from 2003-2008, my wife and I had decided to educate our son privately at a socially exclusive prep school in the City of London rather than placing him in our local inner-city primary school. Possibly, it salved my conscience to write dismissively about inner-city state schools, although this was not at the forefront of my mind when I wrote the articles. However, when I went part-time and began picking my son up from school in 2008, I realised that he was unhappy and being poorly educated. I’d been too busy to notice this before. The snobbish, elitist atmosphere of the school irritated me; I did not like the way pupils’ music grades and successful applications to “top” private senior schools were posted on the noticeboard. But most of all, I was concerned at the way my seven-year-old had been relegated into bottom sets for English and Maths, and was being ordered to get on with practice entrance tests in silence. He was also being bullied and the school were dismissive of my complaints about this and his lack of academic progress: it was clear that they felt these issues were my problems, not theirs.

As a result, my wife and I decided to place our son in the local primary school. To our delight, he thrived there and proceeded to attend the local secondary school, Bethnal Green Academy (BGA). This experience combined with my educational research at Goldsmiths, which commenced in 2009, and my alarm at the narrow educational agenda being pursued by the Coalition government, precipitated a paradigm shift in my views. I ceased to view education as being about the transmission of knowledge but began to see it much more holistically. For example, it matters more to me now that my son can walk down the street in his area and say hello to all the children, and feel happy and part of the community.

These experiences were partly why I set up the blogging website the Local Schools Network (www.localschoolsnetwork.org.uk) with educational campaigners Melissa Benn, Fiona Millar, Henry Stewart and Janet Downs, which aims to promote the cause of non-selective state education. The website has enjoyed great success, with recent figures showing that it attains roughly 25,000 unique visitors every month.

It was in this context that I began to ask myself some very fundamental questions about the purposes and aims of education. As I have shown in this section, my professional and personal experiences had challenged firmly held beliefs about who has the authority to judge what should be valued as knowledge, and forced me to think carefully about why education was important and what it was for. I realised I needed to make stronger links between my practice as a writer and a teacher, and consider how I might think more creatively about these practices. My research into aesthetics helped me perceive how I might make connections between these practices because I saw that if I could understand the aesthetic processes I

underwent as a writer in order to hone my work, then I could apply these ideas in the classroom context.

1.3 The school matrix

What I term “The School Matrix” in this section is an analogy which compares what goes on in schools with the film *The Matrix* (1999). In this science-fiction movie, the hero realises that he is living in an entirely computer-generated world, that everything he sees and feels is a fiction that exists to control its members, who are, in reality, imprisoned in chairs on an alien planet with electrodes attached to their brains. The makers of the Matrix have set the parameters of the world and no one seems even to be aware of them: the computer-generated fiction forms the fabric of reality so vividly that no one is conscious that they are being deceived. This is possibly what has happened in schools. Centralised bodies such as the government, Ofsted, and the exam boards have set the agenda, controlling school practices by forcing teachers and pupils to internalise prescribed regulatory discourses (Atkinson, D., Brown, T., England, J., 2006) such as the Ofsted lesson observation framework, exam syllabi and the National curriculum. I have spent much of my adult life trying to convey my thoughts and feelings in various different forms, whether in fiction, journalism or memoirs. In school, as opposed to the publishing industry, fiction is scarcely regarded as a credible form of representation at all, except when it is penned by “great writers” and studied as part of the curriculum. Instead, certain evaluative and regulatory discourses have been invested with huge power and authority.

While the Labour government (1997-2009) increased spending on state schools, it relentlessly pursued a centralised, “technocratic” agenda which multiplied the “regulatory discourses” which controlled not only how teachers behaved in their classes, but also their thought-processes and feelings of self-worth. In *Regulatory Discourses in Education* Atkinson discusses the ways in which trainee teachers are co-opted into accepting “mechanised” approaches to teaching. He writes:

Within such a bureaucratic and political regime teaching as a body-in-practice becomes highly mechanised towards particular specified achievement targets... We have here then a contrast between significant psychosocial discourses of students learning to teach and the official politico-bureaucratic taxonomy of discourses of training. (Atkinson, D., Brown, T., England, J., 2006, p. 93)

Atkinson argues that trainee teachers tend to adopt regulatory discourses provided by the politico-bureaucratic taxonomies rather than seeing themselves as affective, active bodies-in-practice (embodied creatures) who can make choices about their pedagogical approaches and encourage their students to make choices too. He illustrates this vividly when he discusses a

beginning teacher, Angela, who has had to deal with challenging behaviour in one of her classes and criticises herself for allowing students a choice of activities:

Angela blames herself, that is to say she blames her planning and organisation of the lesson, which she interprets as flawed and unsuccessful. For her, giving this class choice is perceived as a mistake. (Atkinson, D., Brown, T., England, J., 2006, p. 65)

Developing Atkinson's argument, one could suggest that trainee teachers – and teachers generally -- often find themselves adopting the regulatory discourses of the “politico-bureaucratic taxonomy” in order to manage the challenges of teaching – it is the “privileged” discourse, the perceived “right way”. Thus teachers frequently narrow down their own pedagogical choices and impose the same agenda upon their pupils by narrowing down their choices too.

Most insidious of these was successive governments' sponsorship of Ofsted, the school inspectorate. During my last decade of teaching, I've lost count of the number of times a teacher has made a comment about Ofsted which has, in some shape or form, a regulatory discourse embedded within it. Phrases such as “What would Ofsted say?” or “We're due for an Ofsted soon” and so on pepper teacher talk in schools, and are nearly always laced with feelings of anxiety, fear and threat. One of the things that has troubled me the most is the culture Ofsted has created around lesson observations; until recently, it judged lessons from 1-4, but abandoned this grading system after a review revealed it was ineffective at raising teaching standards (Cladingbowl, 2014). The grades were:

1 = outstanding

2 = good

3 = satisfactory/requiring improvement

4 = unsatisfactory (Cladingbowl, 2014)

When a new headteacher was appointed to my school in 2007 he immediately instituted this framework for lesson observations so that line managers could judge teaching on this scale. Until then, teachers had had a blank piece of paper to write their lesson observations on when doing performance management and other observations. No grade was required. I was a Head of Department (HOD) when I was first observed under this new regime and given a “1” by the headteacher and Deputy Head in 2007 – I can still remember this! As a HOD I had a great deal of status within the school; my sense of professional pride at getting a “1” was enormous. As former QCA director, Mick Waters, notes (Gilbert F. , How Ofsted Quietened Its Critics By Inventing the Outstanding Category, 2013) it was a very clever trick of Ofsted's to invent the “outstanding” category, both with regards to school judgements and lesson observations, because it quietened many of its critics since a significant proportion of schools and teachers were lauded with this wonderfully encouraging sobriquet. The conferment of this judgement

upon me certainly silenced any qualms I had at the time about the labelling system. However, my research for this commentary changed my attitude. First, Atkinson's critique of schools (Atkinson, D., Brown, T., England, J., 2006) shows quite clearly that these sorts of gradings are there primarily to subjugate teachers' minds to a "higher" authority and have the net result of stripping them of autonomy. The gradings are a successful exercise in centralised power and are taken with the utmost seriousness because teachers internalise these categories and begin to view all their professional practice through the Ofsted grading lens. Second, I noted recently (Gilbert F. , *How Ofsted Quietened Its Critics By Inventing the Outstanding Category*, 2013) when Ofsted inspected our school, teachers informally discussed the gradings handed out by the inspectors; the few teachers who received "1" soon made these judgements public and were clearly viewed as superior to teachers who hadn't received the accolade. Many teachers now may feel their professional identities are best endorsed when they receive the "outstanding" category from Ofsted.

Viewed from a Foucaultian perspective, Ofsted's judgements appear to be more about the dominance of a "depersonalised power" than about improving the quality of teaching. In *English At The Core – Dialogue and Power in English Teaching* (Griffiths, 1992), Peter Griffiths invokes Foucault's description of the Panopticon in order to describe the ways in which social control happens in schools. Griffiths explores Foucault's ideas about Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon prison at several points in the book, drawing parallels between the warders in Bentham's prison and the people asked to monitor behaviour in schools. Griffiths discusses pupils who are asked to monitor each other in small groups (Griffiths, 1992, p. 14); investigates the ways in which teachers monitor pupils (Griffiths, 1992, p. 16); and here, he writes about how teachers themselves are monitored:

...the warders are constituted by the process of observation just as much as are the prisoners, and are themselves subject to a complex process of review and assessment. The director of the institution silently monitors the work of his subordinates; in his absence, his family, friends, visitors, or servants can undertake the task. A visiting inspector can tell in a moment if all is properly in order. Furthermore, in the society that Bentham envisaged, it was the right of the general public to inspect the institution, and to determine if it was being well managed. The art of management, we can say, is thus simultaneously developed and deskilled; management assumes an ever more central role in the conduct of events, whilst the necessary skills are broken down and diffused throughout the system rather than located and concentrated in the person of specific individuals. The Panopticon was an instrument not of tyranny but of democracy, in which all the employees are accountable to those outside. Thus even the director is the object of viewing, as well as a viewer, and is subjected, by and through his own actions, to the effects of a depersonalised power. (Griffiths, 1992, p. 81)

This idea of "depersonalised power" is perhaps even more pertinent today than it was when Griffiths published his book in 1992; information technology has made the discourses that shape Ofsted formidably powerful because everyone can now know an Ofsted judgement from a quick search on the internet. "Warders" (in the form of headteachers and managers)

can easily access digital profiles of teachers, the latest Ofsted criteria, and reports on schools. Furthermore, the true power of the Panopticon is the mere threat that a warder may see you behave inappropriately. Similarly it only needs the threat of inspection, not the inspection itself, to construct a docile workforce: the regulatory discourses of Ofsted hold everyone in their grip in schools.

But as a result of all the changes in digital technology during the last decades, the analogy of the Panopticon may not be the most telling comparison. As I have already outlined at the beginning of this section, a more contemporary, incisive analogy might be to compare the framework of judgements about schools with the science fiction film *The Matrix* (Wachowski, 1999). Recently, Ofsted have disbanded their grading system but it is clear that if gradings are eradicated, they will be replaced with a more effective monitoring tool: teachers will continue to be viewed as agents who need their minds colonised by accountability measures.

Once in the “School Matrix”, it is very hard to escape from it because the language used to assess teachers and pupils is almost entirely centrally prescribed by outside agencies such as Ofsted and the exam boards. While agencies like Ofsted seek to “professionalise” teachers by providing a system of universal assessment for them, I would argue that teaching needs to be viewed more as both a craft and an art. It is a craft in that there are certain “evidence-based high-impact, low effort teaching” strategies that have been “proven” by quantitative assessments to work across all sectors (Petty, 2014, pp. 65-68). Somewhat ironically, these more “scientific” studies have been largely ignored by Ofsted who remained wedded to the regulatory and “unproven” discourses of control and judgement that I have discussed above. But I believe if a craft is to be found within teaching, it needs be “evidence-based” with both quantitative and qualitative evidence taken into account in the way that Geoff Petty argues for in his *Evidence-Based Teaching*. I use the word “craft” as opposed to “science” because there are methodological issues connected with assessing the success of teaching strategies in a quantitative fashion which are not the remit of this commentary and I feel, as a consequence of these methodological problems, that it is better to call the institution of “evidence-based teaching strategies” a form of honing a teacher’s “craft” rather than a science, which invites all kinds of other issues in the way that the term “craft” possibly does not. This is not to say though that there is not an “art” to teaching; this is a much trickier concept to define than “craft”, which, for me, is about the adoption of certain well-tested teaching strategies. For a teacher to construct an “art” to teaching, he/she must necessarily be an artist and use his/her artistic processes to inform the way he/she teaches. The next sections of this commentary will explore this in more depth.

1.4 Aesthetic autobiography as a form of escape

My two teaching memoirs were written to communicate what it *felt* like to be a young teacher in modern state schools: to avoid embarrassing people I had to fictionalise those I had encountered, sometimes changing genders and attributes. To make the books entertaining and meaningful, I chose to dramatise key turning points. Although my writing in no way has the literary quality of the canonical “aesthetic autobiographers” that Suzanne Nalbantian (Nalbantian, 1994) critiques, her observations could apply to my autobiographical books about school:

The autobiographical novelists drew first from their personal everyday life, cultivating perceptions selectively which could then be transposed into their fiction. A primary facet of their art can be said therefore to be an activity of perception. Then comes the leap to what is literary. In the passage from self-observation to self-recreation, life facts were transferred to structures dictated by concepts of aesthetics. (Nalbantian, 1994, p. 49)

This is true of my teaching memoirs. After writing very dry, factual first drafts, I found that the material just didn’t live on the page and that I needed to highlight Wordsworthian “spots of time” (Wordsworth, 2009a, pp. Book XI, 258-278), key moments of realisation, in order to make the reader feel what it was like to be in the classroom: to capture its excitement and terror, its joys and disappointments.

I discussed some of these dramatisations earlier, particularly those published in the broadsheet press, which offered narratives that endorsed hegemonic ways of thinking about education. However, it could be argued that my two memoirs, overall, contradict and challenge clichéd negative stereotypes about state schools. Above all, these texts present teaching as an experience in which both the emotions and intellect are inextricably intertwined. My aestheticizing of my experiences reveal teaching as an embodied, visceral and emotional experience. While the books may be laced with discourses that are politically suggestive, I wouldn’t say that an overt message permeates the books. Possibly my search for “aesthetic truth” – my quest to find suitable words to express my emotional journey – meant that I avoided making explicitly political points and thus avoided well-worn clichés about schools.

Furthermore, I now realise that my dramatic descriptions of my life as a teacher were a form of escape from “official” representations of the classroom experience. While the Ofsted observation framework for describing lessons is an exercise in centralised power, the creative writer’s description of teaching is an exercise in personal power. By writing about the multitude of feelings I had as a young teacher, I was providing validity to those emotions. I was saying that I was entitled to have them. Such portraits of an emotional landscape are not even considered in the Ofsted framework, which while it purports to be objective and descriptive is, in fact, just as subjective and judgemental as my vivid literary anecdotes -- but

maybe less honest. When people read my portraits of classroom chaos no one is under the illusion that I am trying to be objective, but when comments are situated in the context of scientific-looking grids on official government documents, they feel these explanations must be objective. Later on in my commentary I talk about the creative writer's terror of the blank page. The creative writer is constantly aware of both the "nothingness" and "absence" of embodied human experience as well as the multiplicity of choices that are ahead of him/her. The blank page is a perfect metaphor for this. The Ofsted observation framework offers no such feelings of "terror"; the observer is always directed towards a list of set criteria that he/she ticks off. The creative writer has to shape a new world out of the blankness of the page and thus has more chance to be original, but has to undergo a much more painful emotional and intellectual journey as a result. The Ofsted framework has been set up to take the "emotional" and "aesthetic" out of judgements about teaching and learning. The whole point is that the Ofsted inspector should not become visibly emotionally engaged – and yet they are without realising it. The creative writer is propelled outside of tired ways of thinking by the process itself which demands an emotional and aesthetic response, while the inspector is always being held tightly within the clutches of the Matrix.

My success as an educational writer meant that when I embarked upon a PhD in Creative Writing in September 2009, I was intending to write another education book, this time based on my school days. I'd been accepted onto the course to pursue this project, which was provisionally entitled *I'm A Pupil, Get Me Out Of Here*. However, the death of an ex-girlfriend provoked a desire to write about her. My supervisor, Blake Morrison, was a little taken aback by my sudden change of course, but agreed that I could go ahead and write the book after he'd seen the first chapters.

As I began to write about my ex-girlfriend, whom I call Ellida in the PhD thesis, I realised that I was twisting all sorts of factual details – names, places, events – in order to dramatise the narrative, to tell a "truth" deeper than the facts. As a result, I decided to term the work an autobiographical novel rather than a memoir. Furthermore, I have toyed with labelling my work "life fiction": narratives consciously moulded from life.

I found it liberating not to be writing about school. The PhD afforded me the chance to explore the "other" or "alterity" in my life: this had the ironic effect of increasing my interest in my teaching. In writing the thesis, I found myself returning to a state which I'd enjoyed before I'd ever had any success as a writer. I was able to enter an entirely "other" world, a realm where I was flung back into the past and I was re-creating my student days. I was back in the damp basement flat I inhabited with two other students; my heart was thumping again as I wondered what would happen with my love life. I was re-living some of my most formative sexual experiences. I was in an "ungraded", "uncategorized" world, where bodily

experiences and emotional journeys took precedence, where abstract thinking was a game to be talked over in smoky rooms.

Concomitantly, while working on this educational commentary with the guidance of my PhD. supervisors, I unearthed a language to explore educational experiences which lay outside many of the regulatory discourses that I'd found so oppressive. Reading researchers such as Harold Rosen (Rosen, 1998), Paulo Freire (Freire, 1996), Caroline Steedman (Steedman, 1982) and Norman Denzin (Denzin, 1992), helped me realise that representing experience was not only highly problematic but sometimes not best approached by deploying specious quantitative data. Indeed, having learnt about various "Quantitative Methods", I realised that even experts persuaded by the quantitative approach have severe reservations about both the validity and reliability of the Ofsted lesson observation criteria and exam results (Fidler, B., Earley, P., Ouston J., Davies, J., 1998).

1.5 From aesthetic appreciation to aesthetic autobiography

At the heart of my critique is the notion that both teaching and writing are "arts". It is worth reflecting upon what I mean here by "art" because I am using the term in a broad sense. By "art", I am referring to an activity which involves creative thinking, doing and appreciation. To this extent, my definition is a wide one and embraces every kind of artistic endeavour; any practice which makes a conscious effort to make something meaningful could be construed as "art". As I have argued already, I believe it is important to view teaching as an artistic endeavour, to see that one deploys one's creative skills to deal with the complexities of the classroom situation and that there is an "art" to teaching. However, I would not call all teachers "artists" while I may like to say that there is an "art" to teaching. For the purposes of my research, I have called teachers "artists" (teacher-artists) when they are engaged in a discrete artistic endeavour which they use to inform their teaching; this is what I mean by a "teacher-artist". This could be an artist in any field: writer, painter, musician, dancer etc.

The philosophical discipline of "aesthetics" is relevant to my research because it seeks to explore definitions and implications of art. The philosopher Gordon Graham states that the question which lies at the heart of the study of aesthetics is: "What is it that we expect to get from art?" (Graham, 2005, p. 4). His question is valid to ask in this context because I am investigating what I am expecting to acquire from my own art, and what I expect my pupils to gain from reading my art. Aesthetic philosophy provides a way of thinking which lies outside many of the functional, technocratic discourses that can distort judgements about education and art. This is because it has to investigate in some depth the ways in which art provides pleasure and a sense of beauty in its multiplicity of forms. This necessarily propels its theorizing into the realm of embodied experience. The contemporary German philosopher

Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gadamer, 1986) perceives that the artist and the mind of the audience are mutually engaged in creative activity. He writes:

A work of art... demands to be constructed by the viewer to whom it is presented. It is... not something we can simply use for a particular purpose, not a material thing from which we might fabricate some other thing. On the contrary, it is something that only manifests and displays itself when it is constituted by the viewer (Gadamer, 1986, p. 126)

Gadamer goes on to argue that art is form of “serious” play in which both the audience and artist participate (Graham, 2005, p. 16) the audience crucially have a creative role when constructing an image of the work of art in their minds. To this extent, Gadamer’s aesthetic theory has strong links with John Dewey’s child-centred theory of education, which argues that children are active learners who construct knowledge rather than passively imbibe it (Hickman, L., Neubert, S., Reich, K., 2009, p. 8). This socially constructivist vision has its roots in aesthetic theory, which seeks to explain experiences which frequently lie outside language. The argument is that students construct knowledge actively by “doing”: by writing, by speaking, by drawing, by doing their own experiments, by creating their own art under the guidance of the teacher. When learning a new topic, students’ constructions are often “weak” (not firmly embedded in the mind) and may be erroneous to begin with; it is the job of the teacher to correct mis-conceptions and promote deep understanding; this is done by a number of strategies such as dialoguing with students, providing feedback, insisting that key concepts are articulated repeatedly by learners and presented in different ways and forms (Petty, 2014, p. 39).

This said, some aesthetic theory has been a powerful driving force for promoting passive learning as opposed to the constructivist model I’ve just outlined briefly. As Gilroy points out, during the last century members of a white, patriarchal elite became self-appointed guardians of culture and aesthetic sensibility issuing dictats as to what is appropriate to be termed “high art” and what is “low art”. Paul Williams comments in his analysis of Gilroy’s work:

European aesthetics believed that European culture provided the template on which theories of art could be built, and those theories explicitly excluded forms of black culture...Blackness and black forms of culture had been unwittingly shut out of English cultural studies by its repertoire of critical terms (Williams, 2012, p. 21)

Ben Highmore further endorses Gilroy’s issues with aesthetics as a discipline:

To enter the world of philosophical aesthetics, particularly in the period of the British Enlightenment, is to be plunged into a world that is riven with incompatible values, gendered assumptions and class antagonisms. (Highmore, 2011, p. 21)

F.R. Leavis’s *The Great Tradition* (Leavis, 1948) most powerfully set out this argument. As a Cambridge academic, he believed that he had accrued superior aesthetic knowledge which justified his telling people what they should and should not be reading. Popular culture was

vilified or marginalised -- as were “minority” voices. Leavis not only set the agenda for what was read in our schools and universities, but also played a part in shaping the nation’s reading habits. Re-reading his book, I am struck by the similarities in his tone and approach to that of a particularly confident Ofsted inspector; he is utterly certain in his own judgements as to what is “outstanding” literature, and has the same forensic analytical skills of a “good” inspector, backing up his praise for his favoured writers with much evidence with the ways in which they fulfil his criteria for “great” literature. He carried out the ultimate “Ofsted” inspection of English literature, but dig deeper and you see much of what he says is glorified opinion dressed up in “factual” clothing. Leavis is particularly mocking of the “aesthetic tradition” of Walter Pater which seeks to suggest a work of art is great without providing “an intelligent account of its perfection of form” (Leavis, 1948, p. 8). It could be argued that *The Great Tradition* (Leavis, 1948) marks the first serious attempt to “professionalise” and “regulate” aesthetic judgements, making them the province not of the *flâneur* or dandy but the academic. I would like to argue that there is a place for teachers to prescribe certain texts for students but I would like to see teachers being given much more autonomy in this area; a teacher may feel that he/she should teach some of the literature which forms part of Leavis’s canon because of a number of factors: his/her own subject knowledge, the aptitude of the students, their social background etc. But this needs to be left to the teacher’s judgement; he/she may decide that there are more suitable texts. Teachers need much more autonomy in deciding *what* knowledge they want students to construct for a number of reasons; first because as Freire shows the imparting of knowledge can become oppressive if it is irrelevant for students and second students learn very little when they’re demotivated and uninterested. Teachers are in a unique position to decide the best knowledge to share with students because they can enter into a dialogue with them about it and see what texts are developing learning and what texts are not.

Similar voices in other artistic spheres played an important part in telling people that the realm of aesthetic judgements was best left to the experts. The shadow of the “expert judgement” is cast before every artist. Even if artists may reject their ideas, they often still secretly crave their approbation.

But, as I have attempted to show, there is a democratic approach to aesthetics which is more egalitarian. This is the socially constructivist method which views both artist and audience as mutually constructing works of art in their minds (Gadamer, 1986, p. 126). Situating one’s methodological approach in such a tradition enables one to make judgements about art but without necessarily insisting that everyone should accept them; one can say whether something is good or bad art, but this is always issued with the caveat that other people in different contexts may think very differently.

As a teacher I have noticed how pupils are consistently denied the right to make judgements about art, and that when they do arrive at judgements that are contrary to existing hegemonic thinking, this is viewed as disruptive behaviour. For example, pupils have sometimes told me that some literary text we are studying is “boring”. There was a time when I would punish a child for saying this, saying it was not acceptable to issue such lazy judgements. Recently, I have sought to question students further, and have asked them to justify their opinions within an aesthetic framework which they construct for themselves by asking them to reflect upon the films/music/art they like and why they like it. In such a way, they build up their own discourses of appreciation. Taking this “Freirean” approach – encouraging students to develop their own critical vocabulary by using their own lives as starting points -- gives them the right to make judgements and the room to develop their own critical vocabulary. Sometimes, when they really think hard about a text, they change their minds as well. They certainly seem to appreciate my willingness now to let them voice their opinions.

The importance of affording children the chance to articulate their aesthetic judgements no matter how limited they may seem to be encourages what Highmore calls the “sociality of passions”. Highmore writes:

In essence aesthetics names... the sociality of passions as they circulate in ways that are interpersonal and transpersonal. This is a material world made up of seemingly immaterial forces (such as ambition, pity and pride). If aesthetics has come to name the ordinary and extraordinary productions and experiences associated with art (or the arts), it also, more fundamentally, names a world of rising and diminishing intensities of affect that congregate and dissipate in society. (Highmore, 2011, pp. 23-24)

So, I have argued that aesthetics offers a chance for the “intensities of affect” – emotional responses to art and the world -- to be named and shared within interpersonal and transpersonal contexts.

Above all, giving students the chance to reflect upon their lives and view them in an “aesthetic light” – to see the beauty in their own lives if you like -- helps them in many ways, not just educational. In the last twenty years, psychologists, medical practitioners, teachers and therapists have amassed a growing body of evidence which shows that writing about one’s life can have beneficial effects – particularly when a writer pays careful attention to aesthetic effects. In *The Writing Cure* (Lepore, 2002) Lepore and Smyth write of the “tremendous success” of writing interventions with in medical settings:

In Pennebaker’s ‘expressive writing’ manipulation, people write several times for about 20-30 minutes on their deepest thoughts and feelings related to a stressful event. This brief intervention often produces highly revealing, and sometimes poignant, personal accounts of stressful life events...Findings from numerous experiments suggest that the writing exercises also confer a wide array of benefits, including improved lung functioning in asthma patients and reduced symptoms in rheumatoid arthritis patients,

reductions in emotion and physical health complaints, and enhanced social relationships and role functioning. (Lepore, 2002, p. 5)

The leading figure behind much of this research is the psychologist James Pennebaker (Lepore, 2002), who has overseen and conducted a number of experiments investigating the beneficial effects of expressive writing. His approach has been overwhelmingly quantitative; using control groups, he has sought to prove that writing can confer health benefits within certain contexts. However, as he himself notes, for all the evidence that he has amassed, Pennebaker recognizes the problems inherent in assessing the success of the “writing cure”:

Across dozens of studies, researchers have used physician visits, immune markers, absentee rates, school grades, and other objective markers as dependent variables... An all-too-often unspoken secret about these measures is that they are terribly, terribly messy. (Pennebaker, 2002, p. 285)

In other words, Pennebaker has to resort to personal testimony rather than quantitative data to suggest that writing is therapeutic. My approach is qualitative and lends itself more readily to examining and analysing the ways in which this type of writing can be beneficial. However, even though my methodological approaches are very different to Pennebaker’s, we appear to arrive at similar conclusions. Pennebaker writes:

Across multiple studies, it is beginning to appear that individuals who develop good stories and who are able to change their perspectives from one writing session to another are the ones most likely to show health improvements. The linguistic analyses, then, suggest that people need to change or grow over the course of writing. (Pennebaker, 2002, p. 289)

Pennebaker’s idea that “people need to change or grow” during the writing process is important to consider on a number of levels. It suggests that writers need to reflect upon how their thoughts and feelings about their lives are changing as they write; this is something that I believe is endorsed by my case study on Eloise in the secondary part of my commentary.

In his book *The Aesthetic Understanding* (Scruton, 1983) the philosopher, writer and composer, Roger Scruton suggests that the exploration of “aesthetic experience” has a very real practical purpose:

It is possible to conclude that aesthetic experience also has a peculiar practical significance: it represents the world as informed by the values of the observer. In the light of a theory of the imagination we can explain why aesthetic judgement aims at objectivity, why it is connected to the sensuous experience of its object, and why it is an inescapable feature of moral life. We can then fit art into the gap that aesthetic experience leaves for it. It is, we find, the appropriate object of aesthetic interest; moreover it possesses features – among which representation and expression are but two—which mark it out as an object of irreplaceable value in the lives of rational beings. (Scruton, 1983, p. 13)

Scruton argues that art has “irreplaceable value” because it offers the chance for “expression and representation” amongst other “features” and that “aesthetic judgment” is inextricably entwined with both the creation and appreciation of art. Art, then, for Scruton, is created and

appreciated by people with aesthetic sensibilities. While I may argue with Scruton as to who has an “aesthetic sensibility” and who has the right to judge what is classed as “art”, it is difficult to disagree with Scruton’s fundamental premise that artists – i.e. writers, poets, sculptors, musicians, painters etc. – seek to create art which can lay claim to be “aesthetically pleasing” in some shape or form, aiming to “represent the world as informed by the values of the observer” and conveying a “sensuous experience of its object”. For a story-writer, achieving art which is “aesthetically pleasing” means writing a “good story” which represents the world in a way that is “informed by the values of the observer”, although it may well challenge those values. This has “irreplaceable value” in Scruton’s eyes.

Pennebaker’s findings are tentatively reaching towards similar conclusions; the autobiographical writing interventions that are effective with sick people, that achieve “irreplaceable value”, are so because the patient has shaped a narrative which is aesthetically pleasing. The patient has engaged in a dialogue not only with their own illness but also with the ways in which their illness should be represented; he or she has considered the form, tone, timbre, imagery that his/her autobiographical writing should take, even if this unconscious. They have considered the world as “informed by the values of the observer” as Scruton would say. The patient is not only speaking of and to their illness, they are speaking to the traditions of story-telling which have engaged in similar subjects. Thus issues connected with personal growth and therapy are inextricably tied up with aesthetic considerations. Indeed, one could develop this argument further and say that a writing-therapist’s job could be in part that of an “aesthetic engineer”, helping a patient shape the “formless emotion” of their lives into “good art”, art which embraces subtlety, nuance and attention to form.

The discourse of aesthetics is one that enables the teacher-artist to make connections between his/her teaching and art. As we have seen, permitting and nurturing aesthetic responses from pupils is an important first step towards them developing their understanding and appreciation of art. By encouraging students to “aestheticize” their own lives by writing autobiographically, the teacher is encouraging an artistic response amongst his/her pupils. In both cases, the teacher-artist is using “aesthetics” as a way to join the dots between teaching and art; the discourse of aesthetics provides the teacher with a language that embraces both artistic and educational endeavour without reducing either to technocratic, “tick-box” procedures. Aesthetics fosters artistic evaluation among the students without being reductive, and inspiring students to “aestheticize” their lives lifts relatively mundane autobiographical writing tasks to the level of artistic undertaking.

1.6 What is “aesthetic education”?

In the previous section, amongst other things, I looked at the ways in which well-written autobiographies helped patients overcome their illnesses. This indicates that the teachers of autobiographical writing should not only consider the cognitive development of their students, but also take into account their aesthetic and therapeutic growth. Aesthetic education, as opposed to cognitive education, has been sorely neglected because it does not sit easily inside the “school matrix” (1.2) which feels compelled to measure learning in a quantitative fashion. This makes it all the more important to establish a firm theoretical grounding for it in a 21st century context.

In her collection of essays, *An Aesthetic Education in an Era of Globalization*, Gayatri Spivak writes:

Globalization can never happen to the sensory equipment of the experiencing being except insofar as it was always implicit in its vanishing outlines. Only an aesthetic education can prepare us for this, thinking in an uneven and only apparently accessible contemporaneity that can no longer be interpreted by such nice polarities modernity/tradition, colonial/postcolonial. Everything else begins there, in that space that allows us to survive in the singular and unverifiable, surrounded by the lethal and lugubrious consolations of rational choice. Other kinds of institutional knowledge assume this base implicitly. (Spivak, 2012, p. 2)

Spivak identifies an important element of “aesthetic education” here; that it should enable us to inhabit “that space that allows us to survive in the singular and unverifiable”. Perhaps wisely and, no doubt deliberately, Spivak avoids defining what “aesthetic education” is; such definitions may, of course, mean that one can’t inhabit a “singular and unverifiable space”. Nevertheless, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider what we might mean by “aesthetic education”. Pateman (Pateman, 1991) provides a useful set of definitions here:

The aesthetic denotes a mode of response inherent in human life which operates through the senses and the feelings and constitutes a form of intelligence comparable to, through different from, other forms of intelligence, such as the mode of logical deduction. If these propositions stand, it becomes clear that the aesthetic is a much broader category than that of the artistic; it includes all manner of simple sensuous experiences from, say, the pleasure of tasting food to enjoying the breeze on one’s face. (Pateman, 1991, p. 7)

Pateman’s broad definition chimes with what Nalbantian (Nalbantian, 1994) labels as “aesthetic autobiography”. As has been discussed, Nalbantian perceived a strong link between writers’ lives and their representation of them in their fiction. Joyce, Proust and Woolf all seek to render representations of “simple sensuous experiences” in their work because they too see their own lives as “aesthetic”. At the very heart of their artistry is an approach and perception to life itself.

Thus one could argue that an aesthetic educator’s job is to facilitate such an approach to life within the minds of his or her pupils; it is only when students start appreciating the “tastes

of food” and “breeze on their faces” that they can begin to write in interesting ways. This approach is very different from instrumentalist notions of education which state that students merely need to learn a set of rules or follow a pre-set formula in order to become good writers. An aesthetic educator seeks to re-orientate the perceptions of a student; he/she seeks a revolution in the head.

The dancer and teacher Donald Blumenfeld-Jones (Blumenfeld-Jones, 2012) says this of aesthetic education:

Whether we desire it or not, students live bodily in school, albeit non-aesthetically (because non-intentionally). Such lived experiences may be productive of an “understanding” or educative outcome, but only if we can become aware of our educated bodies. Aesthetic experience, because it focuses on the senses, is particularly well positioned to aid us in coming to this experience (in both a critical and generative way). The arts, as an already well-established form of aesthetic living, can provide the specific experiences that lead on to such aesthetic experience...The mind/body dualism is avoided by finding that understanding is ontological as well as epistemological in character... (Blumenfeld-Jones, 2012, p.29)

Blumenfeld-Jones shares with other advocates of aesthetic education, such as Spivak and Pateman, a belief that aesthetic education is not purely intellectual, but rather it is “ontological”: that a central focus is “being” itself. Aesthetic lessons should validate, induct and construct moments of simple enjoyment of the world in students. In this sense, “aesthetic education” is political because it lies outside much the regulatory discourses that inhabit education; it is not instrumental, it is not about getting this or that grade, writing this or that essay, it is about affording students the chance to appreciate the world they construct in their minds. It is about giving value to these moments, possibly more value to them than the fictional grades that dominate their lives.

As I’ve already noted, as both a teacher and writer, I am bombarded with regulatory discourses (Atkinson, D., Brown, T., England, J., 2006) which necessarily define who am I and what I should be doing. And yet, as Spivak (Spivak, 2012) points out, one needs to inhabit the “singular and unverifiable” in order to imagine alternatives to existing oppressive social structures. If the artist or teacher is purely mouthing hegemonic, regulatory discourses, then one could argue that he/she is no more than a social functionary, aiding and abetting processes of social oppression. Thus there is a need for the educator/writer to locate him/herself outside pre-ordained social identities which necessarily perpetuate these subtle forms of societal subjugation.

Above all, it is important to stress that aesthetic judgements are not the preserve of an educated, refined elite, but are made by everyone; they are democratic. The musician and philosopher Andy Hamilton writes:

It is not quite right to say that aesthetics is simply a sub-discipline of philosophy, like ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind and philosophy of science. I think

that it has a broader remit...aesthetic experience is essentially democratic. ‘Aesthetic’ is a semi-technical term – like, for instance, ‘self-consciousness’ and even, perhaps, ‘perception’ – which has come to denote a philosophical sub-discipline. But although ‘aesthetic’ is a term of art in more than one sense, what it describes is ordinary and unmythical: an attitude of intensified or enriched experience which Kant rightly described as disinterested, that is, devoid of practical interest. Thus the aesthetic is not the preserve of the ‘aesthete’ or ‘connoisseur’. Aesthetic judgements are ubiquitous – that is, anything can be regarded aesthetically, and by anyone – and democratic. (Hamilton, 2007, p. 1)

1.7 Reconfiguring teacher and writer identities within an “aesthetic” context

One of the most liberating identities I’ve found, both as a teacher and an artist, is that of a learner. Guy Claxton (Claxton, G., Chambers, M., Powell, G., Lucas, B., 2011) has researched this area in depth and has found that once teachers consciously adopt identities as learners, they are much more effective, even within the restrictive confines of our current education system. For example, Claxton argues that it is only when teachers make mistakes in front of their students and visibly learn from them, that they model to students the sorts of learning processes which are vital in order to become active learners. He writes that effective teachers should be modelling these sorts of practices:

Cheerfully acknowledging when we don’t know the answer to a question we are asked...

Being happy to share with students the task of finding things out

Pausing and thinking aloud when lessons do not go according to plan.

(Claxton, G., Chambers, M., Powell, G., Lucas, B., 2011, p. 82)

Extrapolating some of Claxton’s ideas to the artistic domain, I’ve perceived that when I write I am an “aesthetic learner”. As I write, read my work, re-read it, and re-work it, I am constantly learning, not only about the processes of writing, but also about myself, my culture, my attitudes towards language and the discourses that speak to and for me. An important thing I learn as I write is *what* I want to communicate. Sometimes this is not very clear to me until I have written it down, but when I re-read my writing – which I always find a difficult and painful process – I begin to realise what I want to say to other people and I become conscious of the sorts of things I want them to feel when they read my writing. With reference to my Creative Writing PhD thesis, the novel *Who Do You Love?*, I wrote it because I want my readers to undergo “aesthetic experiences” as they read my work: I want them to feel the shock I felt when I saw all the trees which had been felled by the 1987 hurricane (Gilbert, 2015, Chapter 2); I want them to feel my crazy enthusiasm at putting on a “mad-cap” mime play that was performed in the woods (Chapter 4); I want them to have a sense of what I felt back in the days when I was a student, but also to reflect on that student figure in

the way that I look back at him with humorous affection. I want my readers to go on the “aesthetic learning journey” that I have gone through while writing the book.

In other words, I want my readers to learn – in the broad sense of the term -- *with me* as they read my book. Therefore one could argue that the act of both writing and reading is primarily an educative process; that the identity of the learner supersedes the identities of writer and reader.

I’ve found that “re-configuring” my identity as a writer has helped my writing considerably. To call oneself an “aesthetic learner” as opposed to a “writer” affords two major conceptual shifts:

It situates one’s professional identity within an educational context

It enables one to claim leverage over other art forms and experiences which may, on the surface, lie outside the province of writing.

To deal with the first of these points, I’ve found that labelling myself as a learner has taken much of the fear out of writing. I no longer feel that I have to live up to the daunting tradition within which I write; I’m no longer competing with Shakespeare, Thomas Hardy and my illustrious contemporaries; I’m no longer trying to present myself as “brilliant” in my mind; I’m no longer obsessed by how I am thought of by the outside world. Like many other writers, I’ve found it crushing and demotivating to think of all the writers who are “better than me”.

I’m a “learner of writing”, not a “writer”. Every moment I write, I’m learning something more about writing. I’m not taking a “curtain call” every time I write or even giving my final performance, I’m rehearsing. The importance of perceiving myself in this way was brought home to me when I taught first year Creative Writing undergraduates at a prestigious university for a term. When I asked them who among them thought of themselves as writers, all of them confessed that they would feel “frauds” until they were published. I’ve published numerous books and still feel ambivalent about being a “writer” in a worldly sense. The problem is that when you feel you have to “be” a writer, you worry that you won’t live up to expectations. The “fun”, the “playfulness” and the joy can leak out of the process. Sigmund Freud in his essay ‘Creative Writers and Daydreaming’ (Freud, 1908) writes:

The creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of fantasy which he takes very seriously – that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion – while separating it sharply from reality. Language has preserved this relationship between children’s play and poetic creation. (Freud, 1908)

So, in other words, it is only when a writer enters into a child-like state of play that he/she can access his/her “fantasy” world. For Freud, writers are borderline neurotics who need the safety valve of creative writing in order to function in the everyday world; thus the process of writing is therapeutic, providing both the writer and reader with a sublimated form of

autobiographical confession, similar to that which a psychiatric patient might give to an analyst. However, it is my contention that the burden of being labelled a “writer” can inhibit the “play”; to take Freud’s analogy further, one could argue that a child stops playing properly when they feel they are being judged. Doing a Creative Writing PhD helped me personally because I no longer felt the burden of having to get my work published: the course itself justified my writing. Thus, the educational context of the PhD enabled me to re-think my writing priorities and re-discover my internal fantasy world. Subsequent to doing the PhD I had published a number of very functional books which I hadn’t enjoyed writing but I felt obliged to write because I was a “writer” in that genre. So in my own case becoming part of institution of higher education was liberating; I became a learner, not a writer. However, this is not a straightforward issue; Roz Ivanic says in her book, *Writing and Identity – The discursual construction of identity in academic writing (1998)*:

...mature students feel alienated and devalued within the institution of higher education. Their identities are threatened, and they respond either by attempting to accommodate to the established values and practices of the context they are entering, or – more radically – by questioning and challenging the dominant values and practices, and recognizing the possibility of change. Such painful and sometimes desperate personal accounts place an urgent responsibility on the academic community to provide adequate theoretical understanding of ‘identity’. (Ivanic, 1998, p. 9)

Possibly being a PhD student who had published a great deal already meant that I haven’t suffered feelings of being “devalued” at my university, but I can certainly understand how it might happen. I have had to “re-configure” my identity as a learner within this context and have found, as I’ve stated, this quite inspiring. But I can see how embracing this “learner” identity is not without its challenges. Being called a writer is much more high status than being labelled a learner. Indeed, I’ve noticed that since I’ve published books about education, I’m treated with a great deal more respect than most teachers; as I’ve already pointed out, I’ve spoken on TV and radio countless times as an expert on educational matters, and written numerous articles.

The chart below itemises some of the oppositions and synergies between writer and learner identities:

Figure 3

Writer identity	Aesthetic Learner identity
<p>Social: High status, particularly if “published”; being a writer is often a public role; it demands public performance; publishing; a writer enters into a dialogue with their readership.</p>	<p>Social: Learners have low status within many institutions, and wider society; a learner enters into a dialogue with himself/herself; considers a readership.</p> <p>Aesthetes are perceived as “rarefied”, “dandies”; the “Other”; being a learner and aesthete is an internalised state of mind.</p>
<p>Historical: freighted with the burden of past writers: a writer must “negotiate” and often compete with writing cultures.</p>	<p>Historical: learners are largely “unburdened” by a past tradition; learners negotiate with what they have to learn.</p> <p>There is a long tradition of “aesthetes” but it is “arcane” and little known in wider public realms.</p>
<p>Epistemological: a writer is an expert; there is little latitude for mistakes; a writer works in the forms/genres he/she is used to; there is a right and wrong way of doing things; knowledge is objective, “essential”; a writer judges.</p>	<p>Epistemological: a learner is never an expert; a learner embraces his/her mistakes; knowledge is an ongoing process of construction; a learner experiments, innovates, experiences within a fluid framework; constantly evaluating and being evaluated.</p>
<p>Ontological: the writer behaves and acts the role of the “writer”; this involves promoting his/her own writing; being an expert practitioner.</p>	<p>Ontological: the writer behaves and acts in the role of the “learner”; this involves listening and learning from people.</p>

There was a time when I believed my own press and felt that I was an expert, but I found this identity did, at times, inhibit my ability to innovate, listen and take advice. I was an expert, I didn’t need to listen to anybody; I had nothing more to learn. And yet I couldn’t help but feel a fraud. I’ve found that accepting that I’m constantly learning to write and teach – and always will be – has made me much more receptive to new ideas, better able to deal with criticism, and happier overall.

1.8 From aesthetic learner to aesthetic educator

It could be argued that it is only by undergoing this “aesthetic learning journey” that I can become an “aesthetic educator”; because I’ve undergone an aesthetic journey and “know” of its processes I’m better able to nurture similar processes in my students.

Conklin, writing in *Aesthetics and the Problems of Education* (Conklin, 1971) draws a distinction between learning and knowing within this context. He says:

Learning enables one to cope with sensory phenomena, while knowing transcends the sense and has no purpose beyond itself. To use Plato’s way of speaking: learning can provide right (or wrong) opinion about the world of appearances, while knowing provides certainty and wisdom pertaining to the world of forms. Knowing is considered infinitely more valuable than learning; knowing is both a cause and a result of intense personal involvement and commitment; knowing is the highest kind of aesthetic experience.

The personal involvement and commitment to be found in the act of knowing have been explored at length by Michael Polanyi. He shows that knowing requires the creative integration of whatever evidence or propositions are available. Knowing always goes beyond the data. No proof ever forces the acceptance of its conclusion; rather, a successful proof expresses a truth in such a convincing way that whoever wrestles with the problem comes to agree with its conclusion. (Conklin, 1971, p. 539)

Conklin’s ideas here have a strong connection with Spivak’s notion of aesthetic education affording learners the chance to have “singular and unverifiable” experiences. One doesn’t have to subscribe to Plato’s essentialist modes of thought to agree that “knowing” might possibly be a form of “wisdom” in that it embraces both meaning and meaninglessness; it is both about understanding language and experiencing that which is beyond it. While as a writer I maybe an “aesthetic learner” – constantly refining my conceptions of what is aesthetic – I will also be simultaneously a “knower” in Conklin’s definition of the word. I am absorbing the totality of the moment that I am writing: I am constructing words, characters, stories and emotions in my mind, I am experiencing the moment that I am writing: the light at the window, the texture of the keyboard I’m writing on, the feelings inside my body etc. I am “knowing” the moment I’m in, drawing them together into a world of meaning and non-meaning, simultaneously experiencing sense and no-sense.

A writer who is a teacher should aim to be an “aesthetic educator”; that is, nurture both an aesthetic sensibility within his/her students and a desire to create aesthetic objects. This idea of the aesthetic educator has, as we have seen, a long tradition, which dates right back to Plato. Recently, this approach to education has been under sustained attack; education in the arts has either being marginalized or deleted from the curriculum altogether. The Finnish researcher Pasi Sahlberg labels the system which has pushed aesthetic education to one side with the acronym “GERM”: the Global Education Reform Movement (Sahlberg, 2012). The GERM movement is a scheme that seeks to enforce standardized testing upon all children,

with assessment structures being used to measure teacher and school performance as well. As Sahlberg argues, it leads to a schooling system that side-lines the very thing that should be at the heart of our education system: a sensitivity to the individual needs of the student. In this sense, it is the opposite of what “aesthetic education” aims to be in that its starting point is not what the student knows but what the student *should* know. The GERM does not start with the student, but with the teacher. In contrast, the aesthetic educator begins by giving students the permission to explore their own aesthetic experiences.

There is little room in the curriculum for students to explore what lies outside language, to reflect upon the emotional timbre and physical nature of their lives, but since doing the project I’ve found that “psychic” spaces have opened up in which an “aesthetic” sensibility has shaped my interactions with my students. This could be simply wandering around the playground during break and listening to the noises of scraping of chairs, chattering children, watching the reflections of the sky against the window panes. Or it could be stopping to talk to a student or teacher in a “non-instrumental” fashion, asking them how their weekend was, or the music they like. I did this before I reflected upon aesthetic education, but previously when I asked such questions it was always as a preface to the “real business” of teaching; it was a form of introduction, a warm-up before the show began. Now it has become, at times, the “show” itself. What is left unsaid is just as important as what is said. Feeling the “quality” of the communication, the emotional timbre, the intangibility of the contact is significant. And I can see my students appreciate it too. One student said to me with a grin: “You’re interested in our lives, aren’t you sir?” He felt that this was unusual, but it made me reflect that our education system is not structured upon a premise of “interest” in students’ lives. It is predicated upon what Spivak terms “the lethal and lugubrious consolations of rational choice” (Spivak, 2012, p. 2), the “singular and unverifiable” is afforded little space in the regulatory discourses that pervade our schools today. I’ve found enlisting the assistance of my “aesthetic sensibility” has helped me enjoy my teaching more. By valuing my own aesthetic experiences, I’ve discovered I value my students’ as well: when discussing our experiences, we are equals.

The “value” of equality is at the heart of a meaningful “aesthetic sensibility”; one is interacting with other human beings and refusing to subscribe to the notion that they are what Kant calls a “means to an end” (*The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, p. 438). It is only when an educator perceives that the person he or she talking to is his or her equal that he or she can genuinely take an interest in that person; thus aesthetics is inextricably bound up with the moral (Scruton, 1983, p. 13).

Armed with an “aesthetic sensibility” I’ve shaped my lessons around nurturing a similar spirit amongst my students. This has meant devising learning objectives which embrace the development of skills that are not explicitly academic – such as kinaesthetic, musical, and

inter-personal skills. The educational psychologist Howard Gardner argued for such an approach in classrooms in his *Frames of Mind – The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983); subsequent research (Gardner and Hatch, 1989) indicates that while there are issues concerning the validity and reliability of measuring Gardner’s multiple intelligences, the overall approach is worthwhile. Hatch and Gardner write in their conclusion:

...the goal of detecting distinctive human strengths, and using them as a basis for engagement and learning, may prove to be worthwhile, irrespective of the scientific fate of the theory. (Gardner, 1983, p. 9)

Situating Gardner’s work in an “aesthetic framework” side-steps some of the problems connected with validity and reliability because the realm of the aesthetic often can’t be measured in this way; once one accepts an aesthetic way of looking at the world, then one necessarily must embrace the tenets of Gardner’s ideas.

This is certainly the case regarding my own teaching. I’ve found that thinking in an “aesthetic fashion” about intelligence has made me re-think even analytical tasks such as essay writing. For example, we are expected to teach Shakespeare at Key Stages 3 and 4 and ask our students to write essays on his work. I used to teach this in a “top-down” manner: pupils would listen to a tape-recording of the play with me pausing the tape at key junctures and explaining what had happened, then they would write an analytical essay on some theme or technique. Now I show students different film versions of the relevant Shakespeare play and guide them to modernise a scene, often helping to act the scene out in the drama studio. They then write an essay about how and why they modernised the scene. Less language is explained but students are much more actively engaged in the work; they are required to construct their own versions of Shakespeare, turning the concepts, characters and some language from the play into something that is explicitly their creation. I video their productions and they evaluate their success. A dangerous aesthetic pervades this approach because it implicitly suggests that they have the “power” and the “right” to adapt Shakespeare’s ideas into something they find entertaining. Having published articles on this pedagogical approach (Gilbert, 6th April 2011) I realised that there is considerable resistance to this method because it dares to suggest that Shakespeare’s plays are not “timeless classics” containing “eternal truths”. It implicitly acknowledges that students construct their own ideas about Shakespeare whether we like it or not, and that there is no “essential” Shakespearean text that has to “transmitted” in an uncorrupted state to our students.

By asking students to translate Shakespeare into a modern idiom, there is an inherent notion of trust there: trust that they will arrive at a worthy translation, that they won’t “desecrate” the Bard. For me, it is the literary equivalent of handing a child a valuable, fragile, ancient vase to examine and explore: they could drop it and shatter it into pieces. However, I feel an aesthetic educator should give children the chance to handle treasured

“aesthetic objects” such as the words of Shakespeare, by doing things like translating it, performing it, editing it. Many other teachers would disagree: children don’t have the right, knowledge or skill to change the words of Shakespeare in any meaningful way. This is where the idea of a “community of learners” is important: by working in groups and with the teacher, children can come to a communal understanding of Shakespeare, which is mediated through their own experiences.

This concept of “communal learning” is very important for the writer and lecturer, bell hooks. In her chapter ‘Keepers of Hope’ (hooks, 2003) hooks quotes the educator Ron Scraggs because he talks about “trust”, a vital element in developing communal learning:

The single most important realization has been the need to establish a genuine sense of community based on trust – in my teaching practice and in my administrative work – and not just expertise and knowledge...Many professors and schoolteachers working with diverse populations are challenged to recognize the importance of genuine commitment to the well-being and success of all students and not simply those deemed worthy because they come from privileged backgrounds. (hooks, 2003, p. 109)

This point brings me to another important aspect of aesthetic education; the idea of trust. I have seen this numerous times when students perform modern versions of their scripts: they place the action, characters and themes of Shakespeare in places they recognize and know about, using their own words – and invariably they love doing this. Is this Shakespeare? Well, yes and no. The language has gone, but the characters, the narrative structure, the themes, even possibly the underlying discourses of Shakespeare are frequently there. Indeed, one could argue that the “cultural capital” of Shakespeare is there (Webb et al, 2002, p. 44) because my pupils often remember the components of a play (plot, characters, themes etc) very vividly precisely because they have performed a version of it in their own idiom; they are imbued with a sense of enthusiasm, an awareness of the characters and the stories of Shakespeare long after they have stopped studying him. In stark contrast, when I have lectured to students at considerable length about the meanings of specific words, I have found that they have not enjoyed the experience: I have not trusted them to find out about him by themselves and this has had a significant impact upon their feelings about the Bard. While in the short-term they may have learnt about the meanings of the words, they were not left with the mental attitudes which nurtured a life-time love of his work, in the way that the “play” groups were.

1.9 Bringing the threads together: re-visiting teacher and artist identity

So while there is room for an “aesthetic” approach in the English curriculum, it needs to be fought for. Fortunately, there are a few organisations which support what I am terming

“aesthetic education”. The National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) funds and promotes “professional” writers to go into schools; these may or may not be trained teachers; some of these writers have a genuine interest in nurturing students’ writing by getting them to write about their own lives. The National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE) has promoted the National Writing Project (NWP) in this country; this involves trained teachers coming together in writing workshops and writing together. They then go back to their classrooms and use some of the techniques they’ve learned in the workshops on their students (Gilbert, TES, 2012). These two movements share a common desire to publicly proclaim the role of the artist within a teaching context, thus legitimatising aesthetic education in a largely hostile educational landscape.

Jeffrey in his report on creative education (Jeffrey, 2005) offers four models of the teacher-artist; they are a good starting point for exploring the ways in which the aesthetic educator can step outside oppressive social roles.

Figure 4

<p>1. The teacher as artist</p> <p>The creative practice of the teacher has a personal and institutional dimension: an inner conflict in the formation of teacher identity that, skilfully channelled, can be highly creative. Such inner conflict and dialogue can be characterised as play, deviance, bending the rules, engaging in dialogue with learners.</p>	<p>2. The artist as educator</p> <p>The artist’s role is on the boundary between institutional learning and less formal, perhaps more ‘real’ and situated learning. The artist brings a portfolio of knowledge, ideas, technical skills and abilities that are complementary to each other.</p>
<p>3. The artistry of teaching</p> <p>Pedagogy is fuelled by the cycle of research-planning-action-reflection theorised in the notion of reflective practice. The teacher is seen as making ‘artistic’, fine judgements about learning.</p>	<p>4. Artistic work (process and product) as a model and educator</p> <p>The skilled facilitation of participation in creative practice. It involves attention to the work of making art, gives value to creative products (works of art) as exemplars, models, resources, and tools for exploration and questions.</p>

Jeffrey’s taxonomy has made me reflect upon my various identities as a teacher. All four of these categories are relevant to my own practice. There was, and is, a conflict about my identity as a teacher (category 1) which is encapsulated by the questions: am I a writer who happens to be a teacher? Is this my primary identity in the classroom when I am sharing my

writing with my pupils? Or can the two identities sit comfortably side by side with each other? In some ways they can if I am working within a Freirean model of education, but in other ways, they can't: my practice sits uncomfortably outside the regulations imposed upon me by a "high-stakes", exam-driven system. Category 2 is relevant because I am imparting some of my artistic knowledge to my pupils. With regards to category 3, I would be happier to say that I am employing artistic intuition rather than "fine judgements" to inform how I inter-act with my pupils. Lastly, category 4 is applicable because, as we will see in Part II, I use my own artistic work as a resource for my pupils.

As a result of this rumination upon my role as an aesthetic educator, I have shown that there are a series of inter-meshing identities which I am constantly traversing and occupying simultaneously. This is worth reflecting upon for a number of reasons. First, it makes it clear that when a teacher/writer shares his/her art with students a much more complex dynamic develops than that of the simple teacher-pupil relationship. The teacher/writer both concedes the authority of the role of the traditional teacher but assumes another one; the act of sharing an artistic production, which has been produced by an aesthetic learner, invites aesthetic judgement upon the behalf of the student. The student becomes as much an appreciator of art as the teacher. A shifting dialectic occurs in which the aesthetic educator becomes an aesthetic learner once again as he or she listens to her/his students' reactions to the piece of work. Furthermore, when the student starts to construct their aesthetic productions, they are no longer in the position of being mere pupils, they are artists and aesthetic learners.

I feel I can now situate two emerging identities more fully: that of the artist/student as "aesthetic learner" and the teacher as "aesthetic educator". I can now reconfigure Jeffrey's taxonomy of the "teacher-artist" in my own terms:

Figure 5

The writer as aesthetic learner	The writer as aesthetic educator
Explore their own passions/interests in their art.	Stimulate students to explore their own interests/passions.
Are aware that their learning about writing is never finished or fixed.	Educate students to be aware that writing is a continual process of "play".
Are learning about their own interests/unconscious desires/their lives all the time.	Encourage students to reflect upon what they are learning about themselves.
Rejects traditional hierarchies about writing.	Abandons terminology about "good" and "bad" writing, replacing it with investigations into aesthetic responses: "What do I like about this writing? What do other people enjoy?"

I am arguing here that the aesthetic educator is always an aesthetic learner in a number of situations. Perhaps most importantly this occurs during the actual process of artistic creation.

Reflecting upon this “artistic learning”, not only from the creator’s perspective, but also from that of the pedagogue enables one to consider the sorts of aesthetic processes students could or should undergo themselves. First, my freedom as an artist is important to consider. This freedom to chop and change is rarely afforded to students in school settings, although most creative writing courses at university allow it at certain points – as I’ve already pointed out -- happened to me on the PhD with my supervisor allowing me to change the topic of my thesis. I know as a teacher how difficult classes can be to manage when you say to students: “write what you want”. There’s a lot of pen-chewing and faffing around, and often not much gets written. But should the aesthetic educator be designing his or her lessons so that they include these moments? It is certainly a simulacrum of the sorts of situations one encounters a great deal in life outside school. Claxton argues that teachers should provide students with these moments to ponder a multiplicity of options: teachers should be designing the curriculum so that children become “stuck” (Claxton, G., Chambers, M., Powell, G., Lucas, B., 2011, p. 101). The problem of the blank page has confronted all artists and yet I worry that my own students have not ever felt this because I’ve already provided them with a plethora of prompts and inspirations.

The novelist Margaret Atwood once wrote: “blank pages inspire me with terror” (Keyes, 2003). Maybe students need to experience some of that “terror”?

The aesthetic educator has the pedagogical tools to deal with these moments, watching students “chop and change”, and “get stuck”, because there isn’t an instrumental work ethic pervading the learning situation; many regulatory discourses have been suspended, the only regulation is that students should produce a “story”.

Second, in my own writing life I find that I resent the straitjacket of genre. Again, this contravenes many of the regulations that are imposed by institutional writing programmes. In school, the National Curriculum states that students need to learn to write in specific genres; now this doesn’t necessarily mean that they have to do this all the time, but the net result of the regulations is that this often happens. As I’ve already noted when examining Nalbantian’s notions of aesthetic autobiography, I found at the beginning of my PhD that I had to abandon the genre of memoir because I was consciously inventing so much in order to create a life-story which was “aesthetic”. Above all, when I was writing my first draft of *Who Do You Love?*, I found that I was enjoying the “flow” of writing, of being immersed in a different world. There is a very important lesson here; a primary reason why I write fiction is to enjoy this “virtual reality” sensation that putting words on a page can do. Once a writer is “in the zone”, this sensation is extremely evocative and life-enhancing.

Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes in *Flow: The Psychology of Happiness*:

The optimal state of inner experience is one in which there is order in consciousness. This happens when psychic energy – or attention – is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action. The pursuit of a goal brings order in awareness because a person must concentrate attention on the task at hand and momentarily forget everything else. These periods of struggling to overcome challenges are what people find to be the most enjoyable times of their lives. (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 6)

Csikszentmihalyi is referring here to any activity that might encourage “flow” but what he says is particularly relevant to writing. He clearly pinpoints here why sustained bouts of concentrated writing can have such a powerful effect: it assists bringing “order in consciousness”. It involves overcoming challenges and is also a “realistic goal”. The process of writing can be, as he points out, can be one of the most “enjoyable times” of one’s life.

Why is this? Well, for me, the act of fictionalising my student life in *Who Do You Love?* gave what had seemed insubstantial and “throwaway” real “substance”; this was not only because of the physicality of the words on the page, the pages of the book, but also because it felt as though I had built a “memory palace” in my head to which the words were a door. Reading the text for me now opens the door to who I was, who I wanted to be, who I didn’t want to be, enabling me to construct afresh a more complex image of myself.

This is the “aesthetic learning” experience that I want to foster in my students. It is perhaps one that they’ve never had before in school, where lessons are often broken up into “bite-sized” chunks with little time to become immersed in something. I see “flow” happening most often when students are doing drama; you can see this vividly when a whole group become engaged with a topic and talk only about that. Some students, clearly inducted by their upbringing and, to a lesser extent, their schooling, are able to “switch off” from the distractions around them and immerse themselves in the writing of a story or the reading of a book. The pressure of an exam can inculcate this form of concentration as well, but the trouble with this is that there isn’t the “voluntary” element to it; they have to concentrate or face failure. The aesthetic educator wants to foster this sort of concentration voluntarily.

Reflecting upon my own experiences, I realise that I relish writing because I’ve enjoyed success with it; I know I can do it. Getting students to reflect upon what they are good at and think about how they concentrate when they’re really enjoying something is a first step. Many students feel that they are “bad” at writing and are failures (Holt, 1995). The aesthetic educator has to attempt to “decontaminate” writing from its negative connotations. In order to do this, I’ve found it is important to both stimulate and encourage risk-taking.

When writing my novel, I’ve found that I consistently rely upon a few forms of stimulation. For me, music is tremendously important. I listen to it as I am writing, particularly the soundtracks of movies, or very repetitive music without any singing or words.

I find that listening to music very quickly gives me an “immersive” experience and takes me to a place that I want to be. For the first year of writing *Who Do You Love?* I listened over and over again to the soundtrack of the movie, *The Ghost and Mrs Muir* (1947). I found that the beginning of the album with its 20th Century Fox drum roll which immediately bleeds into the evocative romantic theme tune always brought back the memories of being a student in Brighton. Of course, it was also affording me the imaginative space to construct new ideas about those times. It also provided a familiar, easy ritual that accompanied the beginning of my “writing time”. There are problems with motivating myself to write because I find that initial period just before I am writing difficult; I think to myself “How am I going to do this? What am I going to say?” But the thought of listening to the music encouraged me to sit down and begin writing.

While listening to music has greatly assisted me in writing the book, it was my ability to conjure characters, to dramatize conversations, to create believable situations that really fired the novel. I found that my character – based on a real person -- began to take life once I felt free enough to invent her; I made her more extreme than her “real-life” counter-part. My character took on an agency of her own when she was heavily fictionalised. This made me realise that students need the permission to make things up – even when they are writing autobiographically.

One of the hardest things for students to do is to create believable, vivid characters which live beyond common stereotypes. I believe that Ellida and my narrator do this. But how and why? And what can I learn from the processes of writing them that might be applied to my teaching?

Above all, the experienced writer always has an eye on avoiding stereotypes. A writer constructs complex characters by closely observing people. However, writers also rely on “generic images” to quickly sketch out a scene for a reader. The skilled writer then “plays against” expectations, having established in the reader’s mind a familiar or believable “set up”. For example, when I wrote the opening section of Chapter 2, *After the hurricane*, I was aware that the three students in the scene, Francis, the narrator, and his two flat-mates, conformed to many people’s stereotypical views of male students: dope smoking, pretentious, obsessed by girls and so on. This was because there is “truth” in these stereotypes; nevertheless I was hoping to create a “nuanced” picture of these students through the use of detail and dialogue.

If one was to extrapolate some pedagogical lessons here, we could argue that an aesthetic educator needs to insist upon “rigour” in order to foster an “aesthetic” spirit in students’ writing. A major criticism of “child-centred”, “arts-based” approaches to education is that they don’t put high expectations upon students, but if a teacher enables students to look beyond generic patterns, to play with “genres” and to subvert stereotypes, a rigorous

education is required. Lots of reading, observation, thought and sharing of work is needed. The student needs to enter a “dialogue” with the world that his/her text inhabits. The Russian philosopher Bakhtin (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination -- Four Essays*, 1981) argued strongly that texts exist only when a reader enters into a dialogue with them. He wrote:

The idea is a *live event*, played out at the point of dialogic meeting between two or several consciousnesses (Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader – Selected Writings of Bakhtin*, Medvedev, Voloshinov, 1994, p. 98)

For Bakhtin, a text only becomes “live” when it is being read, when there is a dialogue between reader and text; it is this which forms the dialogic imagination (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination -- Four Essays*, 1981). Professor Robin Alexander developed a pedagogical interpretation of Bakhtin’s ideas which is relevant here when he formulated the notion of “dialogic teaching”. Alexander writes:

Mikhail Bakhtin was neither a psychologist nor a classroom researcher. But his lifelong application of dialogism to literature, history, culture, politics and human affairs generally maps convincingly onto pedagogy. And so it should if I am right in my claim that pedagogy and culture are inextricably linked... (Alexander, 2005)

Applying Bakhtin’s ideas to education, Alexander postulates that a teacher must help his or her students to enter into a meaningful dialogue with the relevant cultural context. This is what an aesthetic educator should be enabling; he/she should be encouraging students to explore the relevant texts in their field, particularly after first drafts have been committed to paper. The actual finished work shouldn’t be the ultimate goal of the pedagogy, but rather the process. This process should be a political one; the aesthetic educator, as has already been argued, needs to make students look beyond hegemonic discourses, to engage in a meaningful dialogue with the characters they create and the texts that have influenced them.

As I show later on in this commentary, one of my student case studies, Eloise, wrote a fictional autobiography, which explored a possible traumatic upbringing she might have endured if her social circumstances were different. This was heavily influenced by the soap operas that Eloise had watched (Gilbert F. , *Field Notes and Interview Transcripts*, 2011-2014). In writing this text, she was entering into a dialogue with these influential cultural texts and re-working the stock characters and situations of these soap operas into the context of her life. If she had continued her aesthetic education, which was not possible because of the constraints of the GCSE course she was doing, one might have encouraged her to return to these soap operas and research them in depth. George, another case study discussed later on, wrote movingly and simply about a happy trip to an ice-skating rink with his mother; he might have been given room to research more into his mother’s life because it is clear the central dialogue he wanted to have was with his mother. A teacher who was free from the constraints of the curriculum may have guided him towards studying texts that explored

mother/son relationships as a result. These students could then have re-read their artistic work and considered developing their stories still further. Allowing students to re-visit work after they've left it for a while is clearly fruitful; in the writing of my PhD Creative Writing thesis, I found returning to my work after a break one of the most productive things I could do: I could perceive issues I'd never seen before.

Thus an investigation into artistic processes can be fruitful in developing a potent pedagogy. My categorisations might be summarised in this fashion.

Figure 6

The artist as aesthetic learner	The aesthetic learner as aesthetic educator
<p>Stage 1: Dialogue with self: What do I want to write? Why? Inspirations derive from striking “life” experiences; researches chosen area.</p>	<p>Stage 1: Dialogue with self: Fosters questions amongst students: what interests me? Where do my enthusiasms lie and why? Encourages students to explore striking “life” experiences; to research them in depth.</p>
<p>Stage 2: Dialogue with the page: How am I going to write this? First drafts: the writing “flows” with little internal “criticism” or editing.</p>	<p>Stage 2: Dialogue with the page: Encourages students to plan and sets up conditions where the writing/art “flows”. Very little criticism of “surface” concerns such as spelling, punctuation and grammar, mostly encouragement to write and finish a draft.</p>
<p>Stage 3: Dialogue with culture: Why have I written this? Puts the text to one side, and then enters into a meaningful dialogue with the text, re-reading it, researching other relevant cultural contexts.</p>	<p>Stage 3: Dialogue with culture: Encourages the students to consider the reasons why they have written their texts. Fosters the conditions whereby a meaningful cultural dialogue can be had with the text they have produced; facilitates research into relevant areas.</p>
<p>Stage 4: Dialogue with hegemonic discourses How am I going to subvert cultural stereotypes? How am I going to step outside oppressive ways of thinking?</p>	<p>Stage 4: Dialogue with hegemonic discourses Encourages students to subvert stereotypes, to re-work texts so that they are unusual, striking, different, & original.</p>

What I am attempting to show in this chart is that by “re-configuring” my sense of self, by calling myself an aesthetic learner, I have been able to take a much more positive, pro-active approach towards my creative writing and my role as a teacher. Crucially, I have afforded

myself the room to make mistakes, to experiment, to be aware that I am constantly learning, that I am continually re-working and reflecting upon my artistic and pedagogical practices.

Part II: What happens when the tenets of “aesthetic education” are put into practice?

2.1 My methodological approach: what I did in the classroom and why

The heart of the project was seeing the extent to which my own writing would inspire my pupils' writing. I decided to read aloud some extracts from *Who Do You Love?* which were about my childhood: being bullied at school; my parents' divorce and the time when my mother forced me to take a lady's handbag to school (see Appendix A.1.). My field notes (Gilbert, 2011-14, see Field Notes 1 in Appendix) show that this piece of autobiographically-inspired writing and my oral rendition of it grabbed my pupils' attention. They laughed at the spectacle of me carrying around a lady's handbag and being called 'Pilk' – the nickname I was given by my fellow pupils at school. They also enjoyed hearing about me punching another pupil in the face and breaking my thumb. I travelled outside my comfort zone as a teacher with this story because I showed that I was capable of subversive behaviour and that I could tell stories that didn't have an explicit moral. In her book *Teaching To Transgress* (hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, 1994) bell hooks argues that emancipatory pedagogy requires teachers to take risks:

In my classrooms, I do not expect students to take any risk that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share. When professors bring narratives of their experiences into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators...most professors must practice being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body and spirit. (hooks, 1994, p.21)

Having “scaffolded” a number of smaller writing tasks (Bruner, 2006), which involved giving the students a clear plan of what was expected (Daniels, 2005, p. 132), the pupils embarked upon writing longer writing tasks with a surprising degree of enthusiasm. My Year 7 pupils completed a number of different autobiographical extracts. The ones relevant for the purposes of the thesis are the writing task which was inspired by bringing in something to eat into the classroom that would trigger off a memory of when they ate this thing on a significant occasion. The students were allowed to make up a memory if they wished to do so (see Appendices A.3a and b). They were also encouraged to write a “straight autobiography” detailing when and where they were born and relevant details about growing up (see Appendices A.3b and c). They were encouraged to fictionalise these autobiographical details if they wished to do. This is what one of my case studies, Eloise, particularly enjoyed doing (see Appendices A.3c); I analyse her work in depth later on. My Year 10 students were also

asked to write an autobiographical piece about being alone (see Appendices A.3d). Ironically, it was the prescriptive rubric of the now defunct English National Curriculum (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2007), which insisted that pupils should be writing fiction for the “Writing to imagine, entertain and explore” component (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, p. 96) that initially forced me to ask pupils to fictionalise their lives: the requirement for this coursework unit was that students wrote fiction – non-fiction was not allowed.

In her study on the influence of literature on story-telling by young children, *At the Very Edge of the Forest* (Fox, 1993), Carol Fox writes about how autobiography is a “deeply problematic category” because “if the children do make references to their actual lives they are usually transformations from life to a fictional form” (Fox, 1993, p. 15). Her study of their story-telling is, in one sense, a celebration of the narrative techniques young children deploy to fictionalise their lives: their desires, their fantasies and anxieties. Fox writes:

...the subject-matter of most is the children themselves, not in terms of events which happened to them, but in terms of the ways they felt about things, or their extensive explorations of their own family situations. In this sense all the stories must be profoundly autobiographical, even those which are retold from books, since these have obviously been repeatable for the child because of their meaningfulness... The children make up those stories to reflect their own life situations. And they are present in the children’s telling and transformation of stories, for the children recreate books and life into a new metaphors for their experiences. (Fox, 1993, p. 21)

Fox notes that while there may be little factual autobiographical information in children’s stories, there is often “extensive exploration of their own family situations”. This is important to stress because it shows that autobiographical content can pervade children’s stories in unusual and unexpected ways. Her relatively “loose” definition of “autobiographical” is very similar to mine and links with my ideas about “aesthetic education”: I wanted my students to consciously “aestheticize” their lives; to use the tools of fiction to dramatise their lives in an “aesthetic manner”; to construct stories by “lying about themselves”. I wanted my students to question the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction; to see that even the most “truthful” texts can be forms of fabrication. This meant that I had to teach all my pupils to weave fictional elements into the narrative of their lives. To do this, I told my pupils that they could invent and fictionalise details about their lives if they wanted to – as long as it was “realistic”. I did this for a number of reasons. First, it gave my pupils parity with my own writing; I had fictionalised a great deal in my own memoir, so why couldn’t they? As I’ve already discussed, I believe that both teacher and pupils are “aesthetic learners”: once teachers realise that they are not the authority on any given subject, then they are released from the strictures of the “banking concept” of education (Freire, 1996). Second, it tied in my notions of providing my students with an “aesthetic education”; to enable them to see that they can actively and creatively shape new identities in their own writing which expand their notions

of what life is: autobiographical writing is a representation of experience and a new experience in itself (Nalbantian, 1994). Taking this social constructivist approach (Daniels, 2005, p. 279) to autobiography means that I believe we actively construct new identities for ourselves when we write about our lives.

I opted to carry out Action Research because it provided an effective method for collecting data. Using the Action Research model developed by Cohen (Cohen, 2007), I initially set out the aims and objectives of my Action Research, which were, as I've already stated, to address these research questions:

First, what is "aesthetic education" and why might it be useful for teachers and writers?

Second, what happens when the tenets of "aesthetic education" are put into practice?

As is the case in Action Research, I, the researcher, was an active part of the research itself because I taught the lesson that generated the relevant data. Then, following Cohen's Action Research precepts, I refined my pedagogical practice and research after reflecting upon it, and after that the cycle started again. Kemmis and McTaggart (Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., 2000, pp. 567-605, 595-6) suggest that Action Research should follow a 'spiral'; that it should be cyclical in nature. It should aim to revisit the key problems involved and check to see if solutions have been found. They suggest:

Spiral of self-reflective cycles of:

Planning a change

Acting and observing the consequences of the change,

Reflecting on these processes and consequences, and then

Replanning

Acting and observing

Reflecting, and so on. (Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., 2000, pp. 567-605, 595-6)

My Action Research followed the Kemmis and McTaggart cycle which is basically the same as the one promoted by Cohen. I gathered data from two main year groups at the comprehensive school where I was teaching: Year 7 (11-12 year olds) and Year 11 (15-16 year olds). I chose these two different year groups because of the different contexts involved. The Year 7 group were at the beginning of their secondary school career and their curriculum was less prescribed than the Year 11 group I was taking, who had to follow the strict rubric of the GCSE English course. This, I felt, would give me a good cross-section of data: I would be able to explore my research questions in the light of different ages and different pedagogical contexts, but still within the same setting.

My methodological approach when dealing with my data was to deploy “bricolage”. Kincheloe writes in *Rigour & Complexity in Educational Research* (Kincheloe, J., Berry, K., 2004):

The bricoleur is aware of deep social structures and the complex ways they play out in everyday life, the importance of social, cultural, and historical analysis, the ways discursive practices influence both what goes on in the research process and the consciousness of the researcher, the complex dimensions of what we mean when we talk about ‘understanding’. In this context the bricoleur becomes a sailor on troubled waters, navigating a course that traces the journey between the scientific and the moral, the relationship between the quantitative and the qualitative, and the nature of social, cultural, psychological and qualitative insight. (Kincheloe, J., Berry, K., 2004, p. 4)

Kincheloe’s points here illustrate that the bricoleur is rigorous because he or she “triangulates” the evidence he or she is dealing with, drawing upon different disciplines to analyse the data. The bricoleur’s freedom to deploy discourse analysis as well as social, cultural and historical analysis brings richness to his or her research. Furthermore, the bricoleur perceives the exploration of representation to be an important enterprise; Kincheloe, and other bricoleurs like him, argue that a “symbolic interactionist” (Denzin, 1992) framework enables the researcher to examine the ways people interact with the world and its symbols. This can lead to the researcher scrutinising people who are marginalized. Norman Denzin writes:

Constantly preoccupied with the daily, ritual and enforced performances of stigmatised identities (race and gender), the interactionists speak always to those persons who occupy powerless positions in contemporary society. (Denzin, 1992, p. 29)

Bearing this in mind, I selected four “outsiders” to look at in detail. These were pupils who exhibited unusual reactions to the autobiographical project and had stigmatised identities within the context of where I teach because they were either perceived to be badly behaved or “different”. George, 11 years old, was labelled from the outset as a “problem child” by the school because he did not conform to classroom rules; his classmate, Anita, was the opposite in terms of behaviour but coming from an Indian background meant she was the victim of both overt and covert racism. Albert was George’s 15-year-old brother; while he was not as openly defiant as George, he rarely completed much work. His classmate Eloise was similarly disaffected; she did not see the point of school and was more concerned about appearing attractive than learning anything. I chose these four because of their “outlier” identities and their contrasting ages and genders.

So to sum up, my epistemological framework is predominantly to use the discourse of aesthetic philosophy to situate my observations; my methodological approach is “bricolage”, employing a variety of qualitative research methods to analyse my data; and the method used to generate the data is Action Research.

2.2 The context of the school

The school where the study was conducted was a mixed-sex comprehensive in outer London, regularly topping the examination league tables and judged “good” by Ofsted. Most students who attend the school come from “aspirational” homes; over a quarter are from ethnic minority backgrounds, while the majority are from white working class and lower-middle class backgrounds. There are relatively few children on Free School Meals (FSM), less than 10%, and the students who are FSM, like my case study George, often find it difficult to conform to the school’s expectations. The school selects 10% of students according to their aptitude in sport and the rest by distance to the school or if they have a sibling who attends the school. The problems that children encounter are often connected with having “pushy” parents, who are very demanding and highly controlling. It is rare to encounter poor behaviour in classes but there is a sizeable minority of students, like George, who are “demotivated” for a variety of reasons. I will explore the reasons for George’s disaffection in the next section.

2.3 Exploring multiple identities: George’s fractured selves

The son of divorced parents, George was a difficult pupil, frequently in trouble with his teachers and rarely “on task” during lessons. His school days were punctuated by constant low-level disruption: chatting when he shouldn’t have been, refusing to work, and, on some occasions, engaging in fights. Even though he was the most reluctant author amongst my case studies, George exhibited a number of different selves in his writing. All my students wrote at much greater length than they had in other work; they appeared to be highly motivated by my autobiographical stories. As a teacher, I had presented a number of different identities to them in my writing (2.1 & Appendices A.4.) and my talks to them (2.1): a “figure of fun”; victimised, violent student; and a child of divorced parents. Reciprocity (Oakley, 2005) played an important role here: I had given something of myself, and now the pupils were willing to give something back. My autobiographical writing opened the doors to visiting different selves. bell hooks (hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, 2003) writes in her chapter ‘Democratic Education’:

Conversation is the central location of pedagogy for the democratic educator. Talking to share information, to exchange ideas is the practice both inside and outside academic settings that affirms to listeners that learning can take place in varied time frames (we can share and learn a lot in five minutes) and that knowledge can be shared in diverse modes of speech. (hooks, 2003, p. 44)

For me, sharing parts of my life with my students opened up a conversation with them that happened both on the page and during discussions around school. My confession about “Pilky

and his handbag” (Appendix A.1. & 2.1) opened up numerous conversations about bullying, about school, and about the complex nature of morality: was I right to punch my persecutor? (See Field Notes in Appendix) The learning that took place was varied and possibly not immediately obvious to a “traditional teacher”: some pupils learnt teachers are like them; some thought deeply about violence and victimisation; other learnt about how to tell a good story, how to narrativise their own lives.

George enjoyed the story in particular; and would frequently mention it during the following years. Because he was a reluctant learner in the classroom context, I sat down with George and worked for some of the time as his amanuensis as well as a co-creator of his stories, questioning him about his environment, which he recalled in vivid detail. Steedman’s comments in *The Tidy House* (Steedman, 1982) are relevant here. Steedman was anxious to see beyond children’s technical errors in their writing:

The obvious and superficial differences between the child and adult writing – the spelling errors, the handwriting – are distracting to the reader, partly because they promote the indulgent smile, and partly because they deflect attention from interpreting the text. (Steedman, 1982, p. 27)

Eradicating the distractions that Steedman talks about, I was able to reveal George’s autobiographical imagination. He wrote about a taking a trip to the Michael Sobell Sports Centre with his brother, Albert, and their mother. The trip was poignant because his parents were divorced and he lived with his father, seeing his mother at weekends.

I was struck by the simple, descriptive beauty of some of his sentences. For example, he wrote about getting a drink in between trampolining: “If I was thirsty I had a Ribena (sic) or a hot chocolate I liked it how the machine put the cup down then poured the chocolate into the cup then the boiling water.” This sentence seemed to defamiliarise the whole process of getting a drink from a vending machine, turning it into a thing of transformative wonder, seen fresh through a child’s eyes. There is embedded in the passage a Hardy-esque nostalgia, an idealization of the past, perhaps best represented by the sentence: “This was back in the time when my brother was nice to me.” My reading of the poetry Thomas Hardy wrote following the death of his wife informs my reading of this sentence, because it seems as if Hardy tapped into a fundamental structure in the human mind -- that there is a tendency to colour the past with deeply-felt meaning. There is a sense that George’s sentence suggests life was better when his mother was present; there was play, sustenance and a safe but “fun” setting. Thus, he was “aestheticising” his life by dwelling upon a particular moment.

In another lesson, I asked my pupils to write more conventional autobiographies because I felt that many students were struggling with dramatising the scenes in sufficient detail. So I decided to back-track and ask George to write his life-story using a prompt sheet that I gave all my students. During this lesson, George was back to his normal behaviour: he

“misbehaved” and wrote that he hated me – which he then deleted. He wrote in his second paragraph:

My parents are called brain badomda and agustos qumbie. My dad Brain badomda works as a truck driver. My mum qumbie is a priest in the Church of England.

There is an inversion of sorts going on here: George’s father, who he renames Brain badomda, used to be an official in the Church of England, while his mother, “qumbie”, was, at that time, without a job. It is interesting that he gave his mother his father’s occupation and gave his father the job of “truck driver”, which connoted clearly for George low status and intelligence (Gilbert F. , Field Notes and Interview Transcripts, 2011-2014). When I sat down beside George as his amanuensis, we wrote this together:

My first memories are of going to the toilet. I remember pooing myself and having to run to the toilet and get my Dad to change my nappy. He was smiling and laughing about it all, saying ‘Who is a poopy boy!’

My first accident was when there was a big child called Michael who lived two doors away from me. On the first day of nursery, Michael beat me up. He got his dummy and stuck it up my nose.

My first day at school was a problem because I farted in the lesson. I like to fart.

There’s a kid who lives in my house and we adopted him he’s names albert. the worst teacher ever is ---- (NOTE: a deletion was made here). By some kid (sic)

George laughed when he wrote this, but embedded within this apparently deviant response are some important concepts. Firstly, there is the theme of George being a victimised child, with his father calling him a “poopy boy” and Michael (a fictional character) beating him up. Secondly, there is a real sense of confusion about identity; the first person narrator becomes “some kid”, and there’s a lack of clarity about who else George is engaging with, whether it is his father, Michael, or “albert” (his actual brother), or the teacher; there’s no clear narrative thread.

His ambivalent relationship with his brother is revealed in the last paragraph, where he claims “albert” has been adopted. Interestingly, he is using the pronoun “we” in connection with the adoption, suggesting his parents and he have acted as a family unit to adopt “albert”. The line “the worst teacher ever is...” was where he wrote my name and then deleted it, after being told off; something now which I can see could be construed as an oppressive act but it perhaps reveals that the project was difficult to manage at times and presented many challenges to me as a teacher. George’s jokey low self-esteem is crystallised by his signing off: “By some kid”.

In many ways, George reveals that what Jerome Bruner says in *Acts Of Meaning* (Bruner, 1990) is valid:

The first universal is human reflexivity, our capacity to turn around on the past and alter the present in its light, or to alter the past in the light of the present. Neither the past nor the present stays fixed in the face of this reflexivity. The ‘immense repository’ of our past encounters may be rendered salient in different ways as we review them reflexively, or may be changed by re-conceptualisation. The second universal is our ‘dazzling’ intellectual capacity to envision alternatives – to conceive of other ways of being, of acting, of striving. (Bruner, 1990, p. 109)

George’s reflexivity is a testament to Bruner’s fundamental point: his unique psychology means that he is frequently re-evaluating his past and present, constantly changing the identities of himself, his brother, and his parents in his mind. The psychological ruptures in George’s family perhaps necessitated this. For him, his family may have had no fixed, stable identity. Furthermore, his destabilised view of his family possibly led him to envision alternatives in much the way that Bruner suggests. Steedman in *The Tidy House* (Steedman, 1982) talks about the links between imaginative play and writing, seeing that writing facilitates the kind of re-conceptualisation that Bruner talks about because it enables the writer to see events from different perspectives. She writes:

The act of writing in childhood bears an obvious relation to the imaginative play of children – which we do know a great deal about – and its role in enabling them to see a situation from differing perspectives. But writing, unlike play, lets children watch and act from two perspectives simultaneously. (Steedman, 1982, p. 28)

With her project, she asked the children to think of putting themselves in the shoes of a variety of characters. Reading *The Tidy House* (Steedman, 1982) made me think that George would have definitely benefited at this juncture with writing things from his parents’ or his brother’s point of view. This may have helped him free his thoughts. The piece he wrote was locked into his own perspective, laden with value judgements about his brother in particular.

John Holt in *How Children Fail* (Holt, 1995) examines a number of pupils who exhibit similar traits to George. He makes a distinction between intelligent children and other children – he doesn’t label them “stupid”, although this is possibly an implication of what he says:

Intelligent children act as if they thought the universe made some sense. They check their answers and their thoughts against common sense, while other children, not expecting answers to make sense, not knowing what is sense, see no point in checking, no way of checking. Yet the difference may go deeper than this. It seems as if what we call intelligent children feel that the universe can be trusted even when it does not seem to make any sense, that even when you don’t understand it you can be fairly sure that it is not going to play dirty tricks on you. How close this is in spirit to the remark of Einstein’s, “I cannot believe that God plays dice with the universe.” (Holt, 1995, p. 88)

My investigation into George convinced me he fitted what Holt defines as “intelligent”, but that he certainly didn’t feel the “universe” could be “trusted”; that it was going to, and had, played “dirty tricks” on him. This fundamental distrust was probably at the root of why he did not try hard with his studies. This is perhaps why he focussed upon the simple event of his

mother watching him trampolining as his key autobiographical incident; this isolated occasion had coherence, had the richness of meaning, while so much else in his life didn't. His ability to "aestheticize" this moment showed that he was able to use "remembrance of things past" as way of reclaiming the important things in his life, that he could become an "aesthetic learner" if focusing upon the right material. However, he really struggled to "aestheticize" the wider spectrum of his life; he became very distracted when not focusing upon "small moments" or what Wordsworth might call "spots of time" (Wordsworth, 2009a, pp. Book XI, 258-278). Nevertheless, even when his writing deliberately veered away from being "factually accurate" about his life, it was profoundly autobiographical in the sense that Carol Fox refers to (Fox, 1993, p. 48).

Of all the case studies, I feel that Freire's concept of "conscientization" was most valid with regards to George in that I, as pedagogue, was changed by working with him. My research had a profound effect upon me. It made me see just how difficult his position was; over the years I came to realise that he was bullied by his older brother, Albert, and was separated from the person closest to him, his mother. Tragically, his mother died a year after the autobiographical project, and then in Year 11, he was permanently excluded from school for behaving inappropriately in school uniform on a train: he ripped a train seat from its moorings and took it home. His reasoning was that he wanted to give it to his brother, Albert, who was a train fanatic. It transpired that this autobiographical project was one of the few places in school when he could express himself; I didn't teach him in subsequent years but heard many reports of his poor behaviour. For me, his alienation from the school system showed that students like him must be nurtured in a "Freirean" environment in a consistent fashion. The autobiographical project showed that he could be engaged with the work if he felt it was meaningful. However, an interview with him in 2014 revealed that little of what he did in school subsequently meant anything to him. In a Foucaultian sense, he exhibited profound "resistance" to the "regimes of truth" that confronted him on a daily basis in school (Mills, 2003, p. 42): he wouldn't conform to both the written and unwritten "school rules"; he hardly wore the correct uniform; his haircut was often non-regulation, he rarely completed homework; he was frequently sent out of lessons for misbehaviour; he bullied other students and he often spoke rudely to teachers, and on some occasions threw missiles at them (Gilbert F. , Field Notes and Interview Transcripts, 2011-2014).

2.4 Ambivalent "feminine" and minority identities: Anita's story

Anita was a bilingual student from an Indian background, and was in a minority in her Year 7 class. In their analysis of what it means to be bilingual in a mainly white English secondary school, Cline and Abreu write:

Speaking a minority language when attending a mainly white school begins to look like an ethnic identity assault course. (Cline and Abreu, 2005, p. 551)

While the metaphor of the “ethnic identity assault course” is not entirely appropriate for Anita, who conformed without any dissent to the rules and regulations of the school, it does give us an insight into what happens when ethnic minority students do not conform: they encounter many obstacles and difficulties. In my interview with her, Anita spoke about her awareness of what happened to you if you do not conform (Gilbert F. , Field Notes and Interview Transcripts, 2011-2014) and revealed a deep fear of being ostracized. While the teachers at the school praised her for her effort, in other ways she was having a challenging time. Her female classmates told me that the white boys in the class regularly bullied her by calling out her name in a derogatory fashion. I had noticed a version of this. These boys, cautious not to appear racist, would call out her name using a stereotypical Indian accent, thus emphasising her “otherness”.

At the beginning of the year, I spent some time counselling her because she was regularly crying about the work: she felt that she did not understand it and believed she could not do it. She claimed that “doing well” would mean she would be “OK” (Gilbert F. , Field Notes and Interview Transcripts, 2011-2014): a Foucaultian analysis of this might suggest that she felt her academic achievements might compensate for her lack of status and stigmatized identity (Foucault, 1980). Cast out from significant social interaction amongst her peer group, she sought approbation from the teachers by being “good” (Gilbert F. , Field Notes and Interview Transcripts, 2011-2014).

Carrie Paechter (Paechter, 2006) suggests that it is only when one adopts “masculine” traits that one can construct power for oneself:

There can be no hegemonic femininity, because being in a hegemonic position is also about being in a position of power; it is about being able to construct the world for oneself and others so that one’s power is unchallenged and taken (more or less) for granted as part of the order of things. Hyper-femininity, on the other hand, is a powerless position, one that is defined by the absence of the power inherent not just in hegemonic masculinity, but, by virtue of the patriarchal dividend and the dualistic construction of masculinity and femininity, all masculinities. (Paechter, 2006, p. 255)

My interview with Anita revealed a child who wanted to succeed, who wanted power over her life and destiny, and was looking for ways to do this. She was passive, compliant and internalised all of her distress upon herself. In this sense, the autobiographical piece she wrote for me was significant for her because it enabled her to enact another version of femininity that is not usually valued.

This is her story in full:

Sweet memory trigger

This is my memory of a sweet that I used to like and I still do now.

It started in the summer holiday. It had only been a few weeks since we had broken up and it would be 4 weeks until I would be a yr.6. We had only just come back from a visit to Hillding High St. We had gone to a newsagent's shop which was owned by one of my Gran's friends. We came home with sweets in our pockets (Me, my sister and my 2 cousins (both younger than me and my sister, a boy and a girl) and we began eating them the second we got out of the shop. When we got home we still had a fair few left and decided to eat them outside in the sunshine.

My little sister loved liquorice strings and had eaten all of hers. She started nagging me for some of mine. I laughed and called her a greedy-guts. She didn't take it as a joke and started tugging at my liquorice (sic). I held on to it; I wasn't giving up. I got so annoyed with her I snapped "You want them so bad, you can have them!" and I let go. They weren't very springy but they pinged back and hit my sister on the face. She (sic) howled and stormed away. I got told off later but I didn't really care because it was worth the look on my sisters (sic) face when the sweets hit her.

For all its awkward punctuation and simplistic lexis, this story has a tight structure and an effective denouement; "it was worth the look on my sisters (sic) face when the sweets hit her". All of the preceding information builds up to this last line. This pay-off is instructive for a number of reasons. Firstly, it indicates an ability to tell what Pennebaker might term a "good story" or anecdote; this is important because Anita reported in her interviews (Gilbert F. , Field Notes and Interview Transcripts, 2011-2014) with me that she had greatly enjoyed the project. Secondly, the evident enjoyment of her sister's suffering has some links with the story that I told the class about punching a bully in the mouth; implicit in this story's denouement is the notion of reciprocity because there's the same subversive message that violence has its pleasures. Thirdly and most importantly, there's real evidence here that Anita is constructing an identity for herself that is different from her valued "feminine" persona. Anita told me in an interview that she had "made up" the incident (Gilbert F. , Field Notes and Interview Transcripts, 2011-2014). The licence to make things up seemed to have liberated her to enact out her fantasy of revenge and to present herself in a different light from the "good sister". When I questioned her further about her feelings when she fictionalised her life, she said:

Well, I feel...I'm not really used to lying much but it's OK to lie like in your writing as long as it sounds real... (Gilbert F. , Field Notes and Interview Transcripts, 2011-2014)

Her use of the verb "lying" to describe her process of fictionalisation indicates that she felt it is indeed a subversive process -- even though she had been given permission by me to do it. Her lying enabled her to enjoy her sister's shock at being "pinged" in the face. It enabled her to construct a more "masculine" persona for herself; a persona that fought back, rather than meekly surrendered, an identity that permitted her to take pleasure in someone else's suffering, and, most crucially, gave her a feeling of power. As Paechter says: "Distancing oneself from stereotypical femininity, on the other hand, is a claiming of power." (Paechter, 2006, p. 257). It could be argued that this autobiographical extract was actually a way of Anita claiming power by constructing a more "masculine" image of herself in her writing: she

does not seek at this point in her writing to conform to the feminine stereotype of being “selfless” – a trait which is both explicitly and implicitly promoted in English primary and secondary schools (Francis, 2000, p. 58).

Anita is exploring troubling aspects of herself here; although the fictional Anita does not openly bully her sister, there is a sense of her covertly harassing her; she calls her “greedy guts”, and it remains ambivalent as to whether Anita deliberately hit her sister in the face. Rosalyn George, in her book *Girls in a Goldfish Bowl* (George, 2007), believes it is important to investigate the covert aspects of power relations between girls of Anita’s age. She writes:

In a society where the rules for girls deny them access to open conflict, battles take place in silence...covert and emotional bullying is not just about not getting caught, but looking like you would never mistreat someone in the first place (George, 2007, p. 73)

The act of writing an autobiography brought these sorts of hidden and nuanced interplays of power relations into the open; it empowers girls to unmask other sides to their personalities which society often requires them to keep hidden. Thus we could argue that autobiographical writing can give girls the space to challenge visible constructions of femininity.

What was important for her was that she had been given permission to do this by a person in authority. In her interview she said:

It’s OK to lie as long as it’s like fixable later...It’s like sometimes when people lie they just like get themselves like into a big like mess and like it’s really hard to get out of it but like you can lie in some places where it’s easy to get out of it. That’s why I don’t lie much because I’m not very good at getting out of it. I found that OK (referring to writing the story) cos like we’re not usually meant to lie with teachers and you’re very like kind of open. As an English teacher cos you let us like do what we want. (Gilbert F. , Field Notes and Interview Transcripts, 2011-2014)

What’s important here is that Anita doesn’t view the process of writing “lies” about herself as morally dangerous. It appears that the nature of the task means that she can explore alternative identities but doesn’t believe she will get herself into a “big mess” which is “really hard to get out of”. She is clearly aware that if she constructed a new identity for herself within other contexts she might find it hard to “get out of” the labels that could be attached to her. Thus this exercise could be perceived as embodying Freire’s notion of “praxis” (Freire, 1996, p. 48); because the process of writing the autobiography was “open” and imbued with the values of freedom and imagination. Anita did not feel like she was going to do anything that might get her into a “big mess”. Furthermore, Bruner’s insistence upon the importance of the “intellectual capacity to *envision alternatives* – to conceive of other ways of being, of acting, of striving” (Bruner, 1990, p. 109) is significant here. This piece of autobiographical writing liberated Anita to imagine a different way of being and acting in the world. The traditional autobiography I asked her to write was more predictable than her first piece. It is too long to show here, but typical of it is the last section:

I have got really good trips Grades (author note: the school's name for assessment grades) so far this year and two certificates for hard work. I have got 30 and 50 merits and I am working towards 75. I haven't got any detentions so far! My life's ambitions are to be successful in school, college, and University, and to be successful in life later with all the great grades.

Anita is constructing a positive image of herself as a "hard worker", presenting herself as someone who has "30 and 50 merits", who has ambitions "to be successful in school, college, and university". A research review conducted by Becky Francis points out that there are real tensions for girls who opt to be academically successful, even though academic success is more socially acceptable for girls in schools than boys. Francis writes:

It was often maintained by pupils that girls were under less pressure than boys to 'dumb down', as girls were less judgemental and more academically oriented than boys. (Francis, Boys, Girls and Achievement – addressing the classroom issues , 2000, p. 31)

Francis argues that pupils who opt solely for academic success without seeking high social status within school are very much "the other", much in the same way homosexuals are in mainstream society (Francis, Boys, Girls and Achievement – addressing the classroom issues , 2000, p. 32). She writes:

It can be argued that boffins constitute queers in the classroom. This argument is lent further support by the tendency we found for pupils to construct Boffins in terms of sexuality – male boffins as effete and/or gay, and female boffins as a-sexual. (Francis, 2000, p. 32)

Anita's construction of herself as a primarily a high-achieving, hard-working academic learner, coupled with her ethnicity, cast her as an outcast or "queer" in the context of the classroom but also freed her from the imprisonment of having to be "hyper-feminine" (Paechter, 2006, p. 255). Read in the light of Francis's research (Francis, Boys, Girls and Achievement – addressing the classroom issues , 2000), her autobiography is an act of defiance against the prevailing culture of the classroom. This said, her thirst for academic success could also be a quest for popularity amongst other girls. Anita did not appear to be a leader amongst her female contemporaries, but she did have a friendship group. Her autobiographical discourse revealed an awareness of the power afforded by covert harassment as well as a strong commitment to academic success, thus indicating someone who was looking to place herself in a powerful position at some point in her life. In her study of female friendships at school, George (George, 2007) writes:

The girl leaders displayed their power in several ways; firstly through their academic ability, secondly through the confidence they had in an unquestioning following from their peer group and lastly also from the explicit support and admiration from their teachers they enjoyed. (George, 2007, p. 130)

Some of my observations about George are directly relevant to Anita; she was seeking greater power through academic success and she was aware of the power gained when she

empathised with a teacher; her autobiography could be perceived as an act of empathy with my own story. This said, she was no leader and certainly was not seeking the “unquestioning following” of her peer group. However, the autobiography did reveal an impatience with her sister, who annoyed her by constantly “nagging” her by asking for sweets. There certainly was a more than a suggestion that Anita would have been happier if her sister had been more “unquestioning”.

A deep-rooted fear of failure haunts Anita’s autobiographical writing. An Equality and Human Rights Commission report (Benetto, 2009) found that 37% of young people in school are afraid that they will fail (Benetto, 2009, p. 32). Perhaps more significantly in the light of what Anita writes about her ambitions is that there is not a strong correlation between female academic attainment and achieving a high status job. The report says:

Girls do better at school than boys at all stages of the National Curriculum. Girls continue to outperform boys, particularly at the higher grades (A*-C) -69.9 per cent of girls achieved five or more grades A*-C compared to 60.9 per cent of boys. Forty-seven per cent of low achievers (no GCSE passes) are white British boys and 14 per cent of low achieving boys (no GCSE passes) are from low socio-economic background. Yet despite having more formal qualifications women’s wages are, on average, 17 per cent less than men’s wages. (Benetto, 2009, p. 24)

It is interesting to note that in Anita’s autobiography, she states her primary ambition is to get “great grades”; this suggests an “absence” in her identity of herself as a learner. The only end point is the external reward of the grade or commendation from the institution; there is nothing else beyond this. Indeed, Anita’s autobiographical writings and my interview with her suggest that she was trapped by the restrictive cultural confines of feminine expectations; on the one hand, she yearned to push her way to the top, but on the other, she was aware that she had to be a caring and empathetic daughter, sister, friend and pupil. George notes:

The girls in this study were positioned within two conflicting discourses; one, where they are being publicly affirmed and rewarded for displaying the feminine qualities of sensitivity and care, and secondly where they have to respond to the demands to succeed in school and beyond. These two conflicting discourses place the girls in an impossible position. (George, 2007, p. 134)

The fictional autobiography has become a place where these conflicting discourses could be explored; Anita could assert a more strident personality for herself by “aestheticizing” an incident in her life. Her situation and work lends itself to a Foucaultian analysis: the autobiographical form afforded her the chance to represent her “resistance” against her image of being a “good little girl”. She was able to show herself as exercising power over her younger sister. Foucault writes:

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain...Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation...Individuals are vehicles of power, not its points of application. (Foucault, 1980, p. 98)

Anita's representation of the power she wields over her sister could be seen from this Foucaultian perspective: as we have seen, she herself is powerless in school and has little authority with older people, but is able to wield it over her sister and is keen to represent herself as doing this. Thus, on one level, she is maintaining the unconscious hierarchy of power: she is confirming to the reader that while she may not conform to stereotypical images of being a "good girl", she is, in fact, only using her power in socially appropriate ways. Perceived in this Foucaultian light, we could see her story as an act of conformity to existing power "nets". She would have possibly shown "resistance" if she had presented herself as rebelling against her parents or the school in her story, but this is not what she chooses to do. Nevertheless, the autobiography is possibly one of the few times when she has exhibited any kind of subversion of her identity as a "good girl" at all (Gilbert F. , Field Notes and Interview Transcripts, 2011-2014). One could say that this may be the beginning of a Freirean "praxis"; if she had been given the chance to write more autobiographical pieces then possibly she may have found the room to unpick some of the "net-like organisations" of power in her life for herself and therefore develop some notion of acting socially to change her subjugated situation.

2.5 The alternative self: Eloise's constructed alter-ego

The most notable aspect of Eloise, 15, was that she was caked in orange make-up and spoke with a strong local accent; she had trouble concentrating in class and, until this project, rarely produced much writing. She was generally friendly, except when upbraided for not working, when she would remonstrate forcefully with teachers, muttering curses at them under her breath. Unlike George, who presented a number of different selves on the page with little or no thought about shaping a coherent piece of writing, Eloise presented a carefully wrought autobiography that was aimed at duping the reader into believing it was true. Let's look at the first extract in her autobiography where she significantly deviates from the "real-life" facts. Her account reads:

One day, when I came home my older sister was there, there was a big family row and now I only see my mum, brother and my sister's baby at the moment. My sister aged 17 had a baby, she called it Latisha and she was a beautiful little girl. However my sister didn't want her so my mum looked after her for a few years and I liked to help. Eventually the baby was put into care my sister moved away to Ilford with her new boyfriend and I haven't seen her since. My mum couldn't work so she got a job in Dagenham (sic), although she found it hard to cope with our small and cramped flat. My mum met a man who she thought she loved although that never worked out, it never did.

I found the concision of this first sentence utterly convincing when I first read it because it was similar in tone to the prose style of the rest of the autobiography. Particularly powerful was this opening complex sentence. Her adverbial phrase 'one day' was in tune with some of

the generalities about time in the rest of the piece and made the ensuing incidents plausible precisely because there was a vagueness about exactly when they happened. It was Eloise's ability to mix vagueness about time with quite specific time-frames that added to the credibility of the narrative; even her mistakes, such as saying that her mum couldn't work and then saying that she'd got a job, gave the piece a confused authenticity. But perhaps this continuity error and the fairy-tale quality to the phrase "one day" should have alerted me to its questionable grounding in "facts". Yet I am still struck by Eloise's beautifully simple yet utterly surprising use of the connective "and" in this first sentence; having used two embedded clauses, Eloise deploys a compound clause which uses anaphora to create a powerful effect; having referred to her "older sister" in the embedded phrase, Eloise implicitly refers to the "sister" again because she is absent from the list: "my mum, brother and my sister's baby". This in itself tells a powerful story and forces the reader to realize that the big sister is chief victim or casualty of the family row. Furthermore, the reference to "my sister's baby" makes the reader realize that the big sister has given birth and is now separated from her child. The deadpan style has a child-like quality but there is a real sophistication of thought there. The sentences that follow are packed with action – again, all recounted in the same simple prose style. Yet, there is emotion, particularly when the sister's child is mentioned. She is a "beautiful little girl" and Eloise "liked" to look after her. The reference to her being put into care appears on the surface to be emotionless, but in the context of what happened before it is tinged with feeling.

In my interview with her, Eloise explained that her story was not true, saying:

But sir, I lied! I wrote it because there are TV programmes where people's lives are actually like that...Cos I couldn't really think of anything else to write. (Gilbert F. , Field Notes and Interview Transcripts, 2011-2014)

Eloise told me that Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called It* (Pelzer, 2000) and TV shows like *Eastenders* were inspirations (Gilbert F. , Field Notes and Interview Transcripts, 2011-2014). But her translation of these popular narratives into a prose "life-fiction" narrative is refined, providing her with a sense of a parallel or possible life she could have led if her circumstances were different. This hints at the power of such an exercise; it enables the writer to access both her own life and other possible lives, real and imagined. There are complexities in Eloise's attitude towards what she has written. I asked her these questions:

FG: Do you feel like your life is a disappointment because you haven't had all this drama?

ELOISE: No, I wouldn't have wanted any of that drama. No.

FG: How did you feel when you were writing it?

ELOISE: I would have felt, I dunno, you think you'd feel sorry for someone who had so much trauma like that in their lives at such a young age.

FG: Yeah, so it sort of helped you...

ELOISE: To feel grateful about your own life I suppose.

My questions are leading here but provide some interesting answers. When I suggested to Eloise that the exercise “sort of helped you...” I was clearly thinking about the original intention of my commentary -- which was to uncover the therapeutic value of autobiography. Eloise duly obliges by saying that the exercise helped her “feel grateful about your own life I suppose”. The phrase “I suppose” is important because it qualifies this point. Perhaps more thought-provoking is this comment: “I would have felt, I dunno, you think you’d feel sorry for someone who had so much trauma like that in their lives at such a young age.” Notice her use of the conditional tense here; she is quite hesitant about what she was feeling while she was writing. Her tentative elaboration of her feelings at that time embraces the complexity of knowing one’s feelings during the process of writing autobiography. She speculates that “you think you’d feel sorry for someone who had so much trauma...” There is a sense that she is aware that she has felt compassion for her fictional alter ego, but this empathetic awareness is tempered with a consciousness that she might not have felt this way. This suggests that writing “life fiction” of this sort enables students to reflect upon not only the different paths their lives might have taken if their backgrounds had been different, but also to explore the complex feelings that occur when one is writing autobiography. Fox’s conception of storytelling as transformed autobiography in *At the Very Edge of the Forest* (1993) holds true here: while much of what Eloise said was not factually accurate, the piece possibly reflected her own life situation, providing her with “new metaphors” for her experiences (Fox, 1993, p. 23). This is why for me, Eloise benefitted from the Freirean aspect of this project. A process of “conscientization” (Freire, 1985, p. 49) happened between teacher and student, whereby my re-telling of the bullying I endured at school prompted a sympathetic creative response in Eloise. Furthermore, it is possible that a form of “praxis” (Freire, 1996, p.48) occurred because Eloise was able to draw attention to the social conditions that some families endure in her writing and so, while the piece had strong elements of soap opera fantasy, there was a social conscience lurking underneath the writing. As a result Eloise was able to feel grateful for her own life.

2.5 Emerging “masculinities”: the train enthusiast

Unlike my other case studies, Albert couldn’t remember my piece about being forced to take my mother’s handbag to school. He offered this reflection upon why he didn’t remember any of it:

Not all teachers obviously say such personal things but um to me because I’ve never been bullied it never had such of a personal effect, but I suppose for someone who’s been

in the same position, I suppose to have a teacher who's had the same feelings that would be quite relevant. (Gilbert, 2011-14)

Albert's lack of identification with me and the victims of bullying is explicitly stated here. He claims he has "never been bullied" and therefore the story couldn't have had such a "personal effect". Embedded within his comment here is the notion of "reciprocity": that if he had had a similar experience he would have found it "relevant" and therefore remembered it. But there's a further emerging issue here: that of Albert establishing with me in his interview, two years after he wrote his autobiographical piece for his GCSE coursework, a more self-consciously "masculine" identity for himself than the one promulgated in his coursework. His piece was about him getting lost during a school trip to Barcelona when he was 12 years old. He had been very reluctant to hand it in, leaving it to the last minute to submit. In retrospect, Albert's focus upon how he was feeling, charting his rising sense of panic in some detail, offered a marked contrast to the person I interviewed who did not refer to his emotions once. This is an extract from the assignment:

At first when I entered the shop I felt safe as I was surrounded by my friends and classmates. I looked around the shop for a very long time, due to being unsure about what to buy for my family and friends back at home. Although unfortunately due to me being in the shop for so long, the rest of my fellow pupils had gone to a meeting that I was unsure of, along with all the teachers too. I found myself unable to talk or ask anyone anything due to me not being very fluent in the language. At this stage, I panicked and rushed to buy things at the tills. I all of a sudden felt very different, as a couple of minutes earlier I had felt secure and safe but now I felt abandoned and was in a state of panic...

Albert talks about feeling "safe" with friends, but is thrown into a "state of panic" and left feeling "abandoned" when his inability to choose gifts for his family causes him to get lost. In his interview with me, he was keen to distance himself from the "boy" he once was; such an incident would not daunt him at all now (Gilbert, 2011-2014). There was the implication that he used to be vulnerable, emotional and needy but he's more of a "man" now. In this sense, he was clearly embarrassed by this historical document of how he used to be, yet proud that he had changed. He told me that he felt:

a lot more confident, the fact that my dad lets me go out and lets me travel has helped me go out and be more confident, and I'm happy now to go out and travel myself and explore new places and stuff so yeah it's good...I definitely enjoy it. It's not everyone's cup of tea...

Albert's story is very much an exploration of how he deviated from a "masculine norm" when he was twelve; he dithered about choosing presents for his family, he needed his friends, he was incompetent, and he was highly emotional. His panic led to him feeling that he could no longer communicate his problems; this was, as he says, partly because he was not able to speak in the language but it was also because he was not thinking very clearly. The people in the shop probably spoke little English. The act of writing this autobiography certainly helped

Albert reflect upon who he once was and who he is now, it helped him perceive his own “growth” as an individual; from that of a child who felt “safe” with friends, to that of a child who felt utterly lost and in a state of panic. At the end of his piece he wrote:

To conclude the experience made me feel very lonely and for the rest of the trip I made sure that I was close or in sight of people I knew and seeing them made me feel more secure. The experience made me feel much different, “an outcast”...

The “Albert” in the narrative did not, in short, exhibit traits that patriarchal society construes as being “masculine”. This was in marked contrast to the Albert I interviewed; indeed one might be tempted to say that he now defined himself in opposition to who he once felt he was. He told me that he had been travelling by himself whenever he can. He claimed he had travelled 25,000 miles in six months in the UK, which he proudly stated is the length of the equator. The little lost boy in Barcelona had been vanquished by his epic feats of solo train travel. He told me that he doesn’t like autobiographical writing:

My main interests are geography and history and factual things. Non-fiction enables you to read and learn about the things I’m interested in... say if you told me to read an autobiography to try and help me to do my own autobiography I don’t think it would really be relevant because people have different histories if you get what I mean...

In some ways, Albert does not conform to the versions of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 2005) that researchers have discovered in English secondary schools (Frosh, S., Pattman, R., 2003). His very public interest in history and geography and “factual things” puts him at odds with many boys who actively dismiss pursuits such as reading fiction as “feminine” (Paechter, 2006). Furthermore, his lack of interest in sport and fashion, removes him from the “cool” lads who embrace these enthusiasms as key markers of social success. In *The Trouble With Boys* (Frosh, S., Pattman, R., 2003) the researchers write:

Although there is considerable debate in the literature over the existence and significance of an organising mode of ‘dominant’ or ‘hegemonic’ masculinity, it is apparent from the interview material provided by these boys that attributes such as ‘hardness’, antagonism to school-based learning, sporting prowess and fashionable looks remain very influential in determining boys’ popularity and also their views of themselves and others as properly ‘masculine’ (Frosh, S., Pattman, R., 2003)

While Albert may not, on the surface, appear to be part of this hegemonic masculinity in his rejection of football and fashion, there are some common threads. He clearly had constructed an identity for himself as “hard” in the way he had travelled so extensively by himself throughout Britain; his quantifying of the thousands of miles he had travelled suggests “yardsticks” were important to him. Furthermore, his enthusiasm for bookish pursuits did not mean he embraced “school-based learning”. While he expressed admiration for his history teacher, this was because he perceived his teacher to be a “maverick”, someone else who stood outside the mainstream. The presentation of himself as a lone, intrepid, record-breaking traveller who had little time for feelings or the irrelevancies of people’s personal lives showed

that he had embraced a number of “masculine” discourses prevalent in our society; he used the language of the fearless adventurer and the informed technician. His ultimate ambition was to work on the railways as an engineer.

Albert was very aware that his identity as a “railway enthusiast” – as opposed to the more pejorative “train-spotter” – meant that he didn’t conform to the mainstream masculine stereotype of the football-loving lad. He told me:

I don’t understand, you get the stereotype, if I asked everyone in the school what’s a railway enthusiast, they say it’s someone with a big book and a nerdy sort of person but I don’t really come across many of them sort of people, they’re just normal people, I mean it’s fine to have an interest in cars, you don’t see Top Gear getting it, I don’t get how it’s different from supporting a football team, men who’ve paid hundreds of pounds, travelled hundreds of miles just to see some men kick a ball around...(Gilbert, 2011-2014)

While Albert doesn’t say that he’s talking about men here, it is clear that he is talking about men. While not revealing their gender, Albert mounts a challenge to the hegemonic masculine group here which is double-edged; his challenge hints a shared masculinity and it also condemns mainstream masculinity. He is dismissive and mocking of boys who are obsessed with football and cars, but also suggests that their interest in these things is very similar to this enthusiasm for trains: railway enthusiasts are “normal” people; their interest in trains is no different from an interest in cars. Then he goes onto to condemn men wasting their money on seeing football.

Central to his discourse is an implicit claim that his enthusiasm for railways gives him the right to enter the hegemonic masculine realm which is currently suffused with discourses linked to cars and football. He both ridicules these discourses and envies the fact that he stands outside them.

For Albert, his enthusiasm for travelling on trains has meant that he’s led a very social life: he knows enthusiasts all over the country and frequently meets them on his travels. His train-spotting has enabled him to become part of a male group.

FG: You’ve got a group of friends you go with...

ALBERT: Oh yeah...friends from all over the country really...I met them in person out and about, communicated with them over the internet. I met them once and then you get talking to them, and then you talk to them, so I have a friend from Cambridge, Ipswich, and then loads from London, Oxford, all over the country really. (Gilbert F. , Field Notes and Interview Transcripts, 2011-2014)

While on the surface there is a sense of a train-spotting community, embedded within his discourse is the idea of dispersal and possibly alienation; his friends are “all over the country”, he can’t talk to them face-to-face but on the internet, and there appears to be so many of them – “loads” – that one feels that he doesn’t quite know who to bond with. Albert, though, does not feel that he travels that much with his brother.

FG: Your brother goes with you too...Is he interested in trains?

ALBERT: Not really...I suppose he goes when he's bored but I didn't feel the need to include it in here because I thought really it's not really relevant to be honest... (Gilbert F. , Field Notes and Interview Transcripts, 2011-2014)

For Albert, writing about travelling with George was not that “relevant”; having his brother George with him is not a notable “fact” – as he perceives it. This was in stark contrast to George who spoke to me at length about all the journeys that he went on with Albert. George’s imagination was more poetical, describing travelling on the Metropolitan Line with Albert in the midst of thick snow or watching planes going over head at Heathrow (Gilbert, 2011-2014). George’s approach embraced a form of “poetics” (Bachelard, 1994), while Albert’s attitude was very much about what might be called “achievement”; Albert was proud of the distance he had travelled and showed a remarkable capacity to retain information about the places he had travelled to. For example, I tested him jokingly at the end of the interview, asking him what station the Great Western stopped at after Newcastle. Albert knew immediately saying, “Alnmouth”. He also knew that Robert Stephenson had built the bridge over Berwick-upon-Tweed. It was as if his mind had made sense and tamed the great wide world by naming it and learning “historical and geographical facts” about it. Albert had a more intensive relationship with this sort of information than with his brother; he was more interested in exploring this side of the world rather than consciously “sharing experiences” in the way his brother clearly enjoyed to do. He is very careful to chart all the trains he travels on, keeping a spreadsheet of them all on his home computer, complete with the relevant numbers, names, times and destinations of the trains. The dominant discourse suffusing his speech and thoughts was “emotionally removed” from the difficulties of forming relationships with family and friends; Albert dealt in facts and figures that he could control, manipulate and overcome. His situation is appropriate for a Foucaultian analysis: for Albert, his obsessive accumulation of facts about trains is about gaining power over a random world, bringing order where there is chaos. In their book, *Social Constructionism* (Lock, A., Strong, T. , 2010), Strong and Lock discuss Foucault’s analysis of how the subject is created and write:

People create new possibilities and at the same time become victims of their creations: they are active in creating the cultural and discursive parameters of their self-subjugation. What Foucault accomplishes here is conceptually important...Selves are manufactured, sedimented with the words that enable them to reproduce themselves. (Lock, A., Strong, T. , 2010, p. 252)

This is particularly relevant to Albert who has created a “new possibility” for himself through his train travel but he has also “self-subjugated” himself, giving himself a punishing regime of travelling in order to manufacture a “new self” which is entirely separate from his mother or brother or any emotional concerns. When Albert told me about his life, he only mentioned his mother once. This was in marked contrast to his brother, George. Albert said:

Err...My...err well...My mum and dad separated when I was four and um I live with my Dad because my mum didn't have...wasn't able sort of like...to look after me and my brother so I live with my Dad. And I still do, so...um...(Gilbert, 2011-14)

Albert's account of growing up was heavily coloured by his father: it was his father who took him to see places of historical importance, who encouraged his interest in history, who set him free. There was no mention of his brother. George, on the other hand, had spoken at length about living with his brother and his relationship with his mother. George's autobiographical piece was about being taken by his mother trampolining with his brother while Albert's was about being alone. Two years after this piece was written, the lack of "relevance" of emotions was the abiding undercurrent of the conversation I had with Albert: his expertise as a traveller now meant he felt was calm, collected and in control at every conscious moment. He regarded autobiography as a worthless exercise:

FG: So actually autobiographies have no particular interest to you?

ALBERT: Unless you have an interest in that specific person. Relating it to yourself I don't think...

FG: What do you mean?

ALBERT: So if I was... say if you told me to read an autobiography to try and help me to do my own autobiography I don't think it would really be relevant because people have different histories and if you get what I mean so...

FG: So it wouldn't fit with you...

ALBERT: It wouldn't be relevant. I don't think.

FG: So you would have been interested in reading an autobiography of someone going on a school trip and getting lost say because that's a kind of common thing...

ALBERT: Mmmm... Yep. (Gilbert, 2011-2014)

For Albert, the world was a place of "facts", of locations, of buildings, of historical events, of times and people, and, primarily, of trains. The discourse of autobiography forced him to think about his feelings and this made him uncomfortable. Yet you could argue that such autobiographical projects are very necessary for people like Albert who become so dismissive of their emotions.

3.1 Conclusions

The first part of this commentary examined in some depth what aesthetic education is and why it might be useful for teachers and writers. It postulated that aesthetic education involves both pupil and teacher becoming "aesthetic learners" which encompasses leaving behind hegemonic notions of pupil-teacher relationships. During the teaching process "conscientization" (Freire, 1996, p. 49) takes place whereby both student and teacher learn about each other and the topic they are covering. When helping students with their writing,

the teacher facilitates primarily the development of aesthetic knowledge as opposed to cognitive knowledge; the aesthetic educator's central role is not for students to acquire certain facts – although this will inevitably be an important facet of the pedagogical approach. The aesthetic educator is, moreover, developing his/her own and his/her student's "aesthetic sensibilities" by guiding students to fictionalise important elements of their lives in the form of prose. Furthermore, the aesthetic educator reveals him/herself as an aesthetic learner who is interested in learning about their aesthetic responses and interests. The aesthetic educator encourages students to play with their lives so that they can achieve aesthetic effects that will both enable them to explore new identities while engaging potential readers. By entering into a "reciprocal" relationship with his/her pupils, the aesthetic educator fosters an environment in which students feel free to experiment with certain fictional techniques such as inventing dialogue, amalgamating and fictionalising people and events they can recall: Eloise's fictional autobiography is a good illustration of this. In such a way, the aesthetic educator is using the processes of the novelist as his/her paradigm. As we have seen, by excavating my own experiences as a writer, I was able to deploy in the classroom some of the significant processes I underwent when improving *Who Do You Love?*. In doing this, I was attempting to "escape from the School Matrix" (1.2) – trying to subvert current educational orthodoxies – and arrive at my own definitions of what education might mean; the primary aim of the project was not to improve exam grades or further my career as a teacher. It was rather an attempt by me to "re-configure" my identity as a teacher and writer and bring together the disparate threads of my writing and teaching identities by viewing myself as an aesthetic learner.

In the second part of the commentary, I show what happened when I engaged with these theoretical concerns within my classroom practice. I analysed four case studies in depth where students had written autobiographical pieces. My analysis reveals a number of salient points. First, it attempts to show how nurturing autobiographical discourses amongst students can help them in a number of ways. Above all, it affords them a rare space to explore their own multiple identities and construct new ways of seeing themselves. My analysis postulates that when students are encouraged to "play" with their autobiographical selves by consciously fictionalising certain elements of their life-story, some students are able to contravene stereotypes: all my case studies presented versions of themselves in their autobiographies that were at odds with hegemonic notions of gender and, in Eloise's case, social class. Contravening ideas of boys being "unemotional" and "tough", George explored a tender moment with his mother. Interviewed a couple of years after the writing of the autobiography, Albert had constructed a tightly hegemonic "masculine" image of himself; however, his autobiography revealed a much more "feminine" side where he presented himself as physically and emotionally lost. Furthermore, Anita was able to present herself as aggressive

in her story in a way in which she never could do in other social contexts. Perhaps most imaginatively, Eloise's fantasy "parallel life" offered a vision of what could have happened if there was a loss of social status within her family.

The act of aestheticizing their lives enabled them to "step outside" the narrow gender and social roles that the hegemonic discourses of society had constructed for them. Thus an "aesthetic education" which allows students room to fictionalise and explore their lives, endorses the central tenets of Paulo Freire's philosophy (Freire, 1996): it is emancipatory in that it liberates students from oppressive modes of thinking about their lives. The project is also Freirean in other ways: it is implicitly student-centred, nearly all of the source material comes from the students themselves, it involves the sharing of stories, with teachers using their own life-stories to foster reciprocity (Oakley, *Father and Daughter: Patriarchy, Gender and Social Science*, 2014) rather than obedience. Moreover, everyone involved is afforded a space to examine versions of themselves that lie outside social stereotypes.

Exploring the ramifications of "aesthetic education" has made me re-evaluate the hegemonic discourses that shape my own life and writing. As I've shown, it has led me re-think of my own identity as a teacher and a writer and the ways in which these two identities were interlinked. Until the project, I had made some clear demarcations between my life as a teacher and a writer, even though I largely wrote about education. I had rarely shared my own writing with my pupils and when I did it was to impose my authority upon my pupils: to show them an example of best practice, a model of how writing should be done. But after I had re-configured my identity as that of an "aesthetic learner", I found myself presenting my writing in an entirely different fashion; I was sharing the writing and the processes of my writing, showing students how I was thinking and feeling about my writing, discussing my anxieties about its form and content. I made myself much more vulnerable, but I also found I was able to step outside hegemonic notions of the teacher as the voice of authority. I then saw that the material I received from the pupils was much richer as a result. I realised that while my writing was very different from theirs, there were "aesthetic synergies" between their work and my own. Furthermore, the project made me question my own identity as a writer; I realised that, above all, I was constantly learning about aesthetic processes as I wrote, that my writing was a way of learning about the ways in which my own unique aesthetic sensibility inter-connected with communities of readers.

My project illustrated that students may work harder on their own stories if teachers share their own life-stories with them. This was borne out in the interviews conducted with the two case studies discussed here. George told me: "I liked it when you told us about your life coz it was funny about the handbag." (Gilbert, 2011-14) Meanwhile Eloise said: "The whole thing was different in a way, I mean when you told us about your life, it was like the whole thing was different. Teachers never normally speak like that." (Gilbert, 2011-14) Three out of my

four case studies reported a strong interest in my autobiographical stories and spoke of them giving them ideas or making them think that they could write about their lives in a more “open” way, as one of my case studies, Anita, described it. Eloise’s fictionalised autobiography was the first piece of independent piece that she had completed for me; until then she’d been reluctant to finish work. This was the first assignment she’d handed in on time. Likewise, George’s autobiographical work was far longer and more detailed than anything he’d done before.

As we saw with George’s writing, the project enabled him to explore a number of different selves in a somewhat chaotic fashion. When supervised closely by me, he arrived at a consistent sense of self in his writing; a child nurtured by a caring parent. Eloise’s autobiographical writing presented a much more carefully constructed self; one which turned out not to be literally true. Nevertheless, this consciously fictional representation of herself and her family enabled her to feel grateful about her own life. Furthermore, in both cases, my relationship with them as a teacher improved as a result of helping them with their life-fiction; their behaviour in the classroom context was easier to manage. This suggests that encouraging students to “aestheticize” their lives in the classroom context has a number of therapeutic benefits, thus corroborating the exhaustive research carried out by Pennebaker et al (Pennebaker, 2002), which is documented in *The Writing Cure* (Lepore, 2002) where quantitative studies showed the effectiveness of patients writing about, as opposed to talking about, their illnesses and the measurable health benefits which ensued. While my research does not investigate issues connected with illness, it does show that on a number of levels, there are some visible benefits when students write autobiographically -- such as improved relationships between teachers and pupils, as well as pupils feeling more “grateful” about their lives. Possibly the most interesting aspect of the project was that the students all had a chance to “re-think”, re-create and create important incidents, characters and situations in their own and imagined lives.

Word count for commentary:

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Appendix:

A.1. My writing which inspired students' responses

NB: This extract was re-written and is different in the final PhD Creative Writing Thesis.

“I may be miserable but for the first time in my life I am learning proper academic fodder, dutifully taking notes at the back of the class and attaining top marks for effort. My surprising academic success doesn't help with the bullying though. Matters are made worse by the fact that my father returns from America and uses the courts to insist that my surname is changed back to Gilbert on the register. It is, after all, my legal name. However, in an attempt to please my mother, I ask for it to be changed back to Wilkinson -- which is what happens. My father returns to court to ask for Gilbert to be re-instated. It is decided at the school that I'll be called Wilkinson-Gilbert. Then after another disagreement between my parents, this is reversed to Gilbert-Wilkinson.

The pupils are gleefully bemused by all my name changes. Suddenly a bizarre and rather inexplicable nickname appears like a wicked fairy in the air: ‘Pilk’. From that day onwards, I am known as Pilk.”

Ellida suddenly laughed. For the first time, I was aware that this story has comic potential. I continued: “I feel quite happy with the name because it sounds like milk, which, in my estimation, is a good, sturdy drink. However, it's about this time that my Adidas sports' bag breaks -- this bag has been my pride and joy, making me feel very sporty and with it -- and I don't have enough money to buy a new one.

On a business trip, my stepfather returns with a free lady's handbag to give my mother: it's a big bag, with lots of compartments and loads of useful pockets for make-up. Feeling generous my mother decides to give me the bag -- and requests that I use it as a school bag from that day onwards. I don't have the money to buy another.”

“Oh no, Francis, no!” Ellida says, her eyes widening with horror and wonderment.

“I try my best to shield the bag under coat when I am going to school and bury it under my chair in the class, but it is no good. The boys notice it. During the first few days, they eye it silently, not quite knowing what to make of it. Then one day, a kid called Andrew Rose sees me carrying it over my shoulder in the playground, making my way to the next lesson. He shouts behind me, ‘There goes Pilkie and his handbag!’ As all the other boys are on their way to the lesson, a strong chant quickly gathers momentum: ‘Pilkie and his handbag! Pilkie and his handbag!’

I feel totally humiliated but I know I can't do anything. A few days later, while playing a game of cricket at break, one of my tormentors, Joel Miller, decides to seek me out again and snatch a tennis ball out of my hand just as I am about to bowl. Like the alien ripping out of John Hurt's stomach in *Alien* something monstrous in me explodes into the world: I swivel around and smash Miller in the jaw with all my might. He is much bigger than me but staggers back in a state of shock. Pain sizzles through my hand: I've bunched my thumb underneath the curl of my fist and broken it.

Miller grips me in a headlock but, despite the crowd that's gathered around us shouting 'Fight, fight, fight', neither of us are particularly in the mood. I wriggle out of the headlock and go to Art, where I spend my time blowing on my hand. When I tell my Art teacher candidly what's happened, he says, "No sympathy then. You shouldn't hit people in the mouth."

The next morning, still in excruciating pain, my stepfather takes me to Whipps Cross Hospital, where my thumb is X-rayed and put into a splint. My extremely brief career as a boxer is over, but so is the bullying. After the flying punch, the pupils give me a wide berth because I am dubbed "psycho". It is not a nickname I learn about until ten years later when it is revealed I had gained respect after hitting Miller's jaw."

A.2. Interviews

A.2a) George interview 28th May 2012

FG: I've got George here and I'm just asking him how his autobiography went...erm...how you felt the last few lessons went overall

George: Erm I felt it went pretty good... I completed it and erm about what I do outside school erm my pets and sports and families and school

FG: What was the best thing?

George: I liked it when you told us about your life coz it was funny about the handbag and I liked it when sir started to help me because he made me do more information about my life.

FG: And what piece of writing did you enjoy writing the most?

George: Most probably autobiographies...

FG: What part of it? Writing about erm Bob writing about you know what section of it did you like the best?

George: Erm about Bob

FG: About Bob and also you wrote quite well about sport and hockey and stuff

George: Yeah

FG: Which one did you prefer writing about Bob or hockey?

George: Bob

FG: But why did you like writing about Bob so much?

George: Cos Bob's my pet and he does weird stuff

FG: He does weird stuff...but when you wrote about Bob he came across as not very nice because he bit you or something I mean why did you write about that when you like him?

George: Erm because Bob gets angry sometimes and erm (.1) he just bites and stuff

FG: He just bits you?

George: Yeah he nibbles on his cage a lot

FG: He nibbles on his cage but overall do you like Bob...most of the time do you like Bob?

George: Yeah

FG: And sometimes you don't like him?

George: I like him all the time

FG: Even when he bites you?

George: Yeah

FG: Oh right...could...cos in the writing that didn't quite come through...why didn't you write about how you liked him?

George: Erm...once you left I did

FG: So you've added that in have you?

George: Yeah. Erm

FG: So I can check and see it can I?

George: Mmmm

FG: So overall so how do you think things are going for you in the school?

George: Good

FG: What things are going best

George: Sport.

FG: Hockey?

George: The hockey season is over now but I do cross country and cricket and long distance

FG: Long distance. Do you practice?

George: No really.

FG: What about outside school, how are things going for you there?

George: Good.

FG: What's going best?

George: Xbox

FG: What do you play on the Xbox?

George: Modern Warfare 2.

FG: Oh right...do you play with your friends from school?

George: Erm...sometimes

George: But you can play on Xbox Live so...so I sometimes play with like Lee or Henry or something

FG: So you mentioned before when we were doing Monster Munch that your brother wasn't very nice to you so is he a bit nicer to you now?

George: Yeah

FG: But he was fighting you what was he doing? He was just sort of bashing you?

George: Yeah we wrestle but erm everytime he calls me dopey now

FG: He calls you dopey why does he call you dopey?

George (giggling): I dunno but everytime he calls me dopey I punch him

FG: Oh right and what does he do after you do that?

George: Erm I dunno

FG: Punches you back?

George: No he just like...calls me dopey even more

FG: Dopey even more so he doesn't actually punch you back?

George: No he just calls me dopey

FG: So he's stopped beating up a bit?

George: No. We wrestle.

FG: What do you mean wrestle like wrestle on the ground?

George: Yeah, mmm

FG: Does he win or do you win?

George: Sometimes...most of the time he wins because he's fat and big but erm but yeah he squashes me but sometimes I win

FG: So sometimes you do better

George: Yeah sometimes

FG: Finally, your Dad and your Mum. How does your Dad feel you are getting on in the school at the moment?

George: Erm, good

FG: He's quite pleased with it, particularly the sport, is he?

George: Yeah

FG: Has he come in?

George: No because parents' evening is coming up

FG: And what about your mum. How does she feel you are getting on at school?

George: Good.

FG: And what does she think you are doing best?

George: Erm I dunno

FG: What about your Dad?

George: no

FG: Do you talk about school at all?

George: No. Not really.

FG: So you sort of get on and talk about other stuff

George: Yeah

FG: Oh yeah, final thing...what do you do at the weekends?

George: Well, on Sundays I go to my mum's. And the other week like Saturday, I sometimes play games or just go out to London with my brother

FG: Where do you go in London with your brother?

George: Well sometimes we go to Amersham

FG: Amersham. Why do you go to Amersham? Why do you go to Amersham? That's miles away.

George: Yeah I know. We like getting on the Metropolitan Line train.

FG: Oh right, you go to the end of the line and go back again.

George: Yeah and then we go to the station and then go to the Tesco

FG: In Amersham?

George: Yeah

FG: Yeah I know Amersham. It's quite nice. It's a nice country town. Cos your brother like trains, doesn't he?

George: Yeah

FG: He likes the different types of train. That Metropolitan Line is a very old line, isn't it? These old stations.

George: Well there's two types of train, one is old and the other CC2. I like. We sometimes go to Heathrow cos erm on the Piccadilly Line which is my favourite line but his favourite line is the Metropolitan and erm at Heathrow we go to see like the aeroplanes and we go in Marks and Spencers and buy like sandwiches or something to eat

FG: And you can actually what aeroplanes are going over?

George: Yeah like sometimes we go to a place called Hancross which is the one after Heathrow cos like you can see the planes that go over your head but erm but erm like Heathrow Terminal 5 they've built like a carpark and you can see like the runway and all the planes landing

FG: Oh right so it's quite a good place and you are able to take pictures and stuff. What you've got binoculars have you?

George: No, you can see them cos they are big aeroplanes

FG: What do you do with your mum on Sundays?

George: Well we have roast dinner most of the time but sometimes we go to Oxford Street or erm we go shopping sometimes and go out somewhere on the train

FG: Where does your mum live?

George: Hackney

FG: Hackney, so why do you go to Amersham then?

George: Erm because

FG: What's in Amersham

George: Nothing it's just like a really nice train journey

FG: Yeah

George: And it's like nice countryside and when it's winter is nice and it starts to snow we go to a place called Moor Park and it's a station and it's really nice and we take pictures of the train

FG: And you can see a lot of those trains

George: Yeah cos some go to Watford and some go to Amersham

FG: Oh right you didn't put that into your autobiography did you? Maybe we can add that in later?

George mumbles

Anita interview

A.2b) Anita interview June 2013, a year after they completed the autobiographical project in class

FG: What do you think went well and you know what did you enjoy?

Anita: I liked doing the autobiography like typing up the story because then you just recount what happened like in your life and erm and the acting out bit

And the acting out bit in the music theatre coz it put it in like take a funny bit of our autobiography and just perform that

FG: I remember that with the mobile phone and the chicken guys

Anita: No, it was the one with the sweets that was like the memory trigger but you said that it didn't have to be true so that one was made up

FG: Oh right, I see. What did you think about the making up of things? How did you feel about that?

Anita: Well, I feel...I'm not really used to lying much but it's OK to lie like in your writing as long as it sounds real

FG: As long as it sounds real, yeah, OK so...as long it sound real

Anita: Yeah, it's OK to lie

FG: It's OK to lie

Anita: It's OK to lie as long as it's like fixable later

FG: It's fixable...what do you mean?

Anita: It's like sometimes when people lie they just like get themselves like into a big like mess and like it's really hard to get out of it but like you can lie in some places where it's easy to get out it

FG: Yeah easy to get out of it

Anita: That's why I don't lie much because I'm not very good at getting out of it

FG: And what do you think of like you were allowed to lie in your piece of writing?

Anita: Erm, I found that OK cos like we're not usually meant to lie with teachers and and you're very like kind of open

FG: OK

Anita: As an English teacher cos you let us like do what we want

FG: Yeah, OK. And then what do you think could be improved? Worked upon, if I was doing it again with another class?

Anita: Well erm most of the time we seemed to be doing like a lot of book work and I was just thinking that not just acting out plays and stuff but more kind of practical things...

FG: Yeah, what like?

Anita: Like erm...you know like the sweets that you brought in...something a bit like that maybe...erm...

FG: The sweets thing...yeah...

Toral: And erm...

FG: OK, all right then...

Anita: And showing things which are like in a more kind of real kind of way

FG: In a real way

Anita: Not just in...

FG: More experiences?

Anita: Yeah like in a life kind of way not just books and writing...

FG: OK, and then finally what did you think the affect of the writing I showed you was? What did you think of that?

Anita: Well it just like made me feel like you are not such just like a grown up kind of teacher at all we just deal like erm you're still like at school coz you are just letting out your feelings as if you're at school

FG: I'm at school

Anita: Yeah and you're not like a brisk kind of teacher you're just like open and let it all out of the way and that just makes it a lot easier for us to do it as well

A.2c) Eloise interview June 2011

Charlotte: I was born on the 14th November, 1993, at Rush Green hospital. My parents are called Rebecca and Paul. My mum is a secretary and my dad is a builder. I went to Upminster

Junior school. I used to live in Harold Wood and then when I joined Upminster, I moved in a year before I joined Upminster Junior School and I moved to Upminster. I was about three or four when I moved.

Upminster Primary School was quite a large school. You know how some primary schools are quite small, this was, there were three classes in each year and there were about thirty two in each class. My teacher in Year 3 was called Mr Ansell and he was quite nice. He used to play the guitar. Erm, and my teacher in Year 6 Miss Sullivan. She did PE and stuff like that.

FG: Did you do stuff like you've done with me, write autobiography?

Eloise: Yeah, about your friends and pets and stuff like that. Your hobbies. Never like a big thing, but probably small things.

FG: Small things, and how did you find it then?

Eloise: Yeah, when you used to come back from the summer, you used to write about what you'd done over the summer like that. Yeah, and then you'd write up about what you'd done, and then you'd read it out sometimes.

FG: Yeah, and how did you find it reading it out?

Eloise: Yeah, I enjoyed it coz then you could share what you'd done with everyone.

FG: Yeah, yeah, cool, and then you came to Coopers', did you do any kind of autobiographical writing in Coopers' apart from when you were taught by me?

Eloise: No, I don't think so, no.

FG: It was more sort of analytical.

Eloise: Yeah, it was just when we read books and did stuff from that.

FG: Yeah, OK, um, well, yes, you know what I almost gave this title to my research. You remember when you said to me, 'But sir, I lied'...

Eloise: Yeah.

FG: Do you remember that?

Eloise: Yeah.

FG: And um, that interests me, and so now you've got some distance on it, just what is true – I am not telling you off – and what is not? I am really interested to know you know...

Eloise: I think all that bit is true (Eloise is pointing to her autobiography that's in front of her)

FG: So all this stuff about when you were born in 1993.

Eloise: And my brother, yeah.

FG: Alex, yeah, coz I know Alex...(I quote from the text) "I was the most jealous child ever."

Eloise: Yeah! That's actually true.

FG: That's true. OK. And then you went to nursery, the children didn't like to play with me and I was the one who was looked down upon (Eloise laughs at this point) it was the one that was hard, I just grinned and bared it. Is that all true?

Eloise: I don't know.

FG: So that was just a reflection of how you were feeling at the time? So, in other words, at the time of writing that, it was a genuine memory but now you've changed your memory.

Eloise: Yeah. Because none of that is true. (Eloise giggles)

FG: I love netball, I was captain of the team.

Eloise: No, that's true. I did do that in my old school.

FG: One day, I came home, my older sister was there. So you don't have –

Eloise (interrupting): I don't have an older sister.

FG: You don't have an older sister. There was a big family row, and now I see my mum, brother, and my sister's baby at the moment... My sister, aged 17, had a baby, she called it Letacia, however my sister didn't want her, so mum looked after for a few years, and liked to help. Eventually, her baby was put into care, my sister moved away to Ilford with her new boyfriend and I haven't seen her since. My mum couldn't work so she got a job in Dagenham, although she still found it extremely hard to cope with our small cramped flat. Mum met a man who she thought she loved although it never worked out. Me and brother through these experiences came closer together so we could talk to each other... What are your thoughts on any of that?

Eloise: That is what some people's lives are like...

FG: So what drew you to write about this?

Eloise: I dunno... I dunno actually... I am not really sure...

FG: When you read it now, how do you...?

Eloise: Maybe you know, at the time probably, because you like there are TV programmes where people's lives are actually like that... Cos I couldn't really think of anything to write. So I thought if just made up stuff, not made up stuff, you know just went for something completely different then you could make, say more about it.

FG: Yeah, and so, but you know, for example, your mum is still married to your dad.

Eloise: Yeah.

FG: So it's all, um

Eloise: But that is what some people's lives are like really...

FG: But what about your brother and you, have you come closer to each other?

Eloise: Yes, especially as you get older, it's in joining Coopers probably.

FG: Yeah, what do you think has drawn you together a bit more?

Eloise: I dunno because you could go to, when you go to the same secondary school. He does subjects that I'd already done because you can kind of help each other and stuff.

FG: But you had been quite jealous of him, hadn't you?

Eloise: Yeah, when I was younger, yeah.

FG: Yeah, so that's been a positive thing. Yeah, OK. So, um, and what about the psychiatrist lady and all that stuff, it's all...

Eloise: I dunno I suppose it's probably coz it was on the TV for ages, something like that probably.

FG: So you watch TV programmes, sort of like Eastenders or something.

Eloise: And you would have thought on TV they always have people like that, don't they? Also I read A Child Called It that made me think too. So bad what happens to him.

FG: Do you feel like your life is a disappointment because you haven't had all this drama like you find in A Child Called It?

Eloise laughs: No, I wouldn't have wanted any of that drama. No.

FG: How did you feel when you were writing it?

Eloise: I would have felt, I dunno, you think you'd feel sorry for someone who had so much trauma like that in their lives at such a young age.

FG: Yeah, so it sort of helped you...

Eloise: To feel grateful about your own life I suppose.

FG: Oh right. OK. That's interesting. (I carry on reading from Eloise's piece, up to she bought us a house in Upminster.)

Eloise: Yeah, that's not true coz we just moved to Upminster when I was younger. Much younger.

FG: It was a nice park, I used to sit there and think how lucky I actually am. Is that true?

Eloise smiling: No.

FG reads section about the father returning, possibly going to Australia, baby Letacia.
What are your thoughts on any of that?

Eloise: I do think. But I do think when you are younger you are not really understanding of things like that I suppose. Because if it was true and say her older sister had had a child then when you are older I suppose you realise that you could take on some responsibility.

FG: Oh right, OK, is that something you would have liked to have done?

Eloise: Um, I would, I dunno, I, no,

FG: She told me she loved me...so it's sort of like...

Eloise: Like I am a neglected child (laughter)

FG: So you know, that isn't sort of like the relationship you have with your mother at all...

Eloise: No. No.

FG: So your mother talks to you like that...or what are your thoughts?

Eloise: No, you know, my mum, I've always been close with my mum, er...

FG: So in other words you were imagining that you were deprived.

Eloise: Yeah like it was in A Child Called It.

FG: And then imagining connecting with your mum, sort of thing. So sort of quite an emotional moment in the story.

Eloise: So you know how some people aren't close to their mum, never talk to them, and when they do, it's hard for them, isn't it, I suppose

Eloise: Yeah, that's true (after I've read section on the school) kind of..

FG: Kind of...what do you mean kind of? Sometimes you have more opposite feelings about the school.

Eloise laughs: Yeah, but everyone gets that, don't they? Sometimes people like school, and then sometimes you can just hate going to school.

FG: Yeah, and you have that, do you?

Eloise: Yeah. When you're doing loads of work, and stuff like that really.

FG: And when you were writing this, what, your feelings about the school were up and down, because it was quite hard for you in GCSE year, I seem to remember.

Eloise: Yeah. I suppose that's coz you're starting to get loads and loads of work.

FG reads the last section of the piece, working for her mum, half-cousin Tamvir.

Eloise: I want this life, it sounds quite good. It's exciting. (laughs)

FG: What do you think is exciting about it?

Eloise: No, it's not really, I wouldn't want it but you know...people do have a life like that, don't they?

FG: Do you know anyone who has a life like that or not?

Eloise: No. Because I suppose, this kind of school, and living in Upminster and stuff, people don't really, do they? I suppose if you live somewhere else, it's somehow more common. I mean, you know that programme, Waterloo Road, so many people in that school have quite a lot of life's like that.

FG: Yeah. Yeah. When you writing this, did you feel like you were taking a risk in saying all this stuff in an autobiography? What were your thoughts? Honestly.

Eloise: I dunno, I suppose I thought. Coz you know when we did it and you said you didn't have to like have it like your whole life so I thought maybe doing it like that so you could do something different, if it didn't work out, you could just do it about your own life...

FG: Yeah, so you quite liked that...

Eloise: Yeah. The fact that you can be someone completely different. Yeah. And say whatever you want. Yeah. I suppose so.

FG: And that sort of made you a bit more grateful for your own life.

Eloise: yeah. Coz when you're writing it I would think now I wouldn't want that kind of life. Happy with the life you've got.

FG: How do you feel about it now, reading it two years later?

Eloise: No, that erm, I don't know actually. Probably that I'm happy that my life isn't like that. And that there are people with lives like that and they still do things. Go to school.

FG: And out of all the pieces of work you did, how was the autobiography? Did you like doing it the most, the least?

Eloise: Yeah, probably the most because all the other work we did was stuff we did throughout the whole school but this was something different. Yeah, and you can write whatever, some people might want to write about their whole life or other people could just write something completely different. The whole thing was different in a way, I mean I remember that story you told about taking the handbag to school, it was like the whole thing was different. Teachers never normally speak like that.

FG: What gave you the idea to structure it with different years?

Eloise: I suppose that meant you could have it organised. I reckon if you were doing your own real-life one then it would be harder to organise but where you are doing it like that you can fit things wherever whereas if it's your own life it's harder to organise.

FG: And so how did you feel when I read it, and might have thought Oh-My-God!

Eloise: That's why I was telling you it's a lie. (Eloise laughs) I was wondering whether I would get into trouble or not. Yeah.

FG: Do you think some teachers might tell you off for making it up?

Eloise: Maybe some teachers would have thought you wouldn't be taking it seriously if you didn't do it from your own life.

FG: Any other thoughts on it?

Eloise: Erm, no, I don't know, no, no, I just think sometimes erm people I think he's I think it's different some people say they had a life that they didn't really want to speak about then yeah but you know not everyone's lives are boring and the same because no one's lives is boring and the same but sometimes writing from a different thing can be more interesting..

FG: Yeah, it's quite interesting your sister, is that something you would have wanted?

Eloise: No, there's no way I would have ever wanted an older sister

FG: Do you think you did when you wrote this?

Eloise: Probably when I was younger I always wanted a younger brother or sister to look after but much younger, like younger than my brother so when I was older they'd still be young but then I think now I wouldn't. It's kind of not true, but a tiny bit of truth brought in maybe. In like a different way. Like you know what I mean by saying about the younger sister when they were older they realise they need to look after her that brought in a completely different way with like with an older sister and stuff but I didn't have an older sister.

FG: So you never went out on the town with your mum, that's something you'd like to do, or it's just not a parental thing to do.

Eloise: No. My mum's quite easy going. I could go out with her, yeah. Probably not then. And probably not go for an all-nighter with her. (Eloise giggles)

FG: And then there's no mention of your dad in here. Why is he just not here at all?

Eloise: I dunno. I suppose if it's a broken home, it's always usually the mum that's there and not the dad. That's probably why.

FG: But in your real life, how has it been with your dad?

Eloise: Yeah, he's always been there.

FG: So in a way it's completely the opposite, isn't it?

Eloise: Yeah. That's probably why you could sometimes write it from a complete opposite.

FG: So in other words your family are reasonably well-off and they've lived in Upminster,

Eloise: and they've always been together and you haven't come from a broken home whereas that's from a broken home and they've had no money, they've had to struggle the whole time.

FG: OK, that's really good Eloise. Thank you for talking to me.

Eloise: That's OK.

A.2d) Albert interview June 2013

FG: What I was interested was this feeling alone coursework. Do you remember anything of it?

Albert: I remember the feeling alone coursework. I remember how I based it on the Barcelona trip in Year 8.

FG: Why did you base it up the Barcelona trip?

Albert: It was a contrast between a really good trip and it sort of like it came from a very high point of being with all your friends and then all of sudden I was by myself in the middle of a foreign city so...

FG: Yeah getting lost...

Albert: Yeah...I thought it went quite well with the title of feeling alone...

FG: Do you recall anything of writing this piece?

Albert: It was two years ago now, wasn't it?

FG: Did you enjoy writing it at all?

Albert: It brought back good memories I suppose of a good trip but it's so long ago I can't really remember that well, to be honest.

FG: What I'm quite interested in is...coz I...Do you remember how I would do things like nursery rhymes and things like that in the classroom to get you to remember your childhood?

Albert: Mmmm, round the circle... Yeah, I remember that...

FG: What did you think of it at the time? You can be completely honest... I remember you complaining about it..

Albert: I think I might have. It was different. Er...

FG: I remember you complained, you said why are you treating us like babies...

Albert: I think I might have done... I suppose looking back at it, it was more fun than sitting around doing the usual, it's more fun but... it was different. That's all I can say.

FG: Do you remember anything about my childhood?

Albert: I remember how you said about the child who bullied you... And I remember how you met your wife by getting some dinner money off of her. Is that relevant?

FG: Yeah, yeah, yeah... Do you remember about how I was bullied at school and how I had to take my mum's handbag into school?

Albert: I don't remember that.

FG: But you do remember me talking about my life a bit. Did that in any way help you with your writing? You know... what did you think about that... it's a bit freaky a teacher telling you stuff about their life... did you have any thoughts?

Albert: Not all teachers obviously say such personal things but um to me because I've never been bullied it never had such of a personal effect, but I suppose for someone who's been in the same position, I suppose it... to have a teacher who's had the same feelings that would be quite relevant.

FG: Coz also one thing that interested me was that you took a very long time to write this piece. Coz I remember you being very reluctant to write it. And it was handed in at the last minute, wasn't it? Any particular reasons.

Albert: Just rather disorganized... I still done quite well, I got an A but I was just disorganized. I wouldn't say it was because I didn't have a particular interest in English because I didn't. I'm more organized these days.

FG: Could I go back and get some details about your life. Where were you born and what primary school did you go to?

Albert: I was born in Goodmayes and I've always lived in Dagenham. I went to Godwin Primary school which is in Dagenham. What else do you want to know?

FG: Will you tell me a bit about your parents?

Albert: Err... My... err well... My mum and dad separated when I was four and um I live with my Dad because my mum didn't have... wasn't able sort of like... to look after me and my brother so I live with my Dad. And I still do, so... Um...

FG: And then you went to primary school? How did you find the primary school?

Albert: I found it quite easy.

FG: Yeah, you achieved well in it, you were sort of top were you? And did you do any autobiographical exercises there? Write about your holidays and that sort of thing...

Albert: Er...I remember doing things like that yeah...I can't exactly when, how old, but I remember doing things like that yeah.

FG: Do you remember liking it, or disliking it, or not really caring?

Albert: I've always had a preference in English for non-fiction so I preferred it rather than making up stories.

FG: What made you prefer non-fiction?

Albert: My main interests are geography and history and factual things. Non fiction enables you to read and learn in the things I'm interested in.

FG: Does that mean that you were reading people's autobiographies or biographies about people's lives?

Albert: I don't remember ever doing that. No. I've never read anyone else's. I suppose with an autobiography the information that you put in is personal and so it's unlikely that they've had the same story as you so I don't think it's really relevant to be honest.

FG: So actually autobiographies have no particular interest to you?

Albert: Unless you have an interest in that specific person. Relating it to yourself I don't think...

FG: What do you mean?

Albert: So if I was...say if you told me to read an autobiography to try and help me to do my own autobiography I don't think it would really be relevant because people have different histories and if you get what I mean so...

FG: So it wouldn't fit with you...

Albert: It wouldn't be relevant. I don't think.

FG: So you would have been interested in reading an autobiography of someone going on a school trip and getting lost say because that's a kind of common thing...

Albert: Mmmm...Yep.

FG: But no other type of thing would have helped you?

Albert: Unless I was interested in the person. Unless I liked them or something but not really.

FG: Are there any people whose lives you want to read their autobiographies?

Albert: Err...I can't really think who to be honest.

FG: But personalities interest you...

Albert: Yeah...

FG: What does interest you then about history and facts?

Albert: Er...It's just a topic I've always, history and geography are my favourite topics, I like travelling, just history I've always been interested and my Dad always took me places of historical importance, it's just something I've always liked to be honest.

FG: What places have you gone with your Dad?

Albert: I've always travelled to castles, places in London, umm, such places like that so...

FG: Any places you can remember?

Albert: Oh, yeah...Many, many like erm whenever we go on holiday we say when we go to the Isle of Wight we visit er Carisbrooke Castle there, we went to Battle Abbey near Hastings, I went to Carnarvon Castle, there's many historical places.

FG: Oh wow...

Albert: And I'm also interested in like railways so I go to a lot of preserved railway lines and stuff so...

FG: What type of railway lines?

Albert: I suppose it links in with my love of travelling and Geography...I've been all over the country with my Dad and by myself, yeah, in the summer I went to Inverness,

FG: Inverness? Blimey! That's miles away.

Albert laughs proudly: Five hundred miles. It was just a day trip. I go, I went there...I got there in the evening, it was about thirty pounds return...

FG: So you get up very early...

Albert: Go there and come back...and I've met a lot of other people who have the same interest...I travel around with them as well...

FG: What type of people?

Albert: Railway enthusiasts,

FG: Why the Inverness line?

Albert: It's because it's just Scotland, I've never been there...And also I got the overnight train back, the sleeper train, which was good.

FG: It's a very historic line that one.

Albert: Well it goes over the, I don't know if you know, the Forth Railway Bridge and the Tay Railway Bridge, near Dundee.

FG: That's the Brunel one.

Albert: The Brunel one is in Cornwall. I went there on holiday.

FG: Is there one in Berwick?

Albert: That's the Robert Stephenson bridge. The Royal Border Bridge I think it's called.

FG: Blimey, you know it all. That's where my family live, Berwick...

Albert laughs proudly...

FG: So as you're going along, you have knowledge of these places. You know what bridge you're going over.

Albert: What station, what bridge...

FG: You know it all...

Albert: Yeah.

FG: Blimey, that's brilliant!

Albert laughs proudly.

FG: So you know Alnmouth (pronounced Owl-mouth) station, do you?

Albert: Alnmouth (pronounces it phonetically "All-mouth"), yes. I've been through it, it's just north of Newcastle, isn't it?

FG: That's it, amazing.

Albert laughs out a loud.

FG: And Berwick as well...

Albert: Berwick upon Tweed

FG: So you've got a map in your head of most of the railway lines in the country.

Albert: Definitely. I record where I've been, I record how much I've travelled as well. Like my mileage. This year, since January, at the moment, it's twenty five thousand miles.

FG: Twenty five thousand miles? Blimey!

Albert: it's the equivalent of, it's more than, the length of the equator so...(Albert laughs proudly)

FG: That's all in England.

Albert: Ah yeah, although...the next month I'm going to Paris with my brother. Just me and him for the day.

FG: What you've booked it already?

Albert: Yeah, we get the Euro-star at five and then we come back at ten in the evening.

FG: Blimey, that's quite exciting, isn't it?

Albert: I love travelling around.

FG: Do you look outside when you're doing it?

Albert: I'm interested in, I always look out of the window,

FG: Do you take your own packed lunch and stuff? It's expensive to buy stuff.

Albert: Yes, it definitely is...I suppose you could call me a train spotter (laughs nervously)

FG: Have you got a book with a list of the different types of trains...

Albert: I circle the ones I've been on. I've got records of where I've been...I got my book two years ago...I do spreadsheets on the computer...I just write it up at home.

FG: You didn't write about your train interest here.

Albert: That wasn't really relevant with feeling alone.

FG: Because when you're on the train, you don't feel alone.

Albert: Well, I know where I'm going, that's the main thing.

FG: But surely if you go to Inverness by yourself, don't you feel alone?

Albert: I'm always interested, I always have something to do...

FG: You've got a group of friends you go with...

Albert: Oh yeah...friends from all over the country really...I met them in person out and about, communicated with them over the internet. I met them once and then you get talking to them, and then you talk to them, so I have a friend from Cambridge, Ipswich, and then loads from London, Oxford, all over the country really.

FG: Your brother goes with you too...Is he interested in trains?

Albert: Not really...I suppose he goes when he's bored but I didn't feel the need to include it in here because I thought really it's not really relevant to be honest...Didn't I do another piece on autobiography as well?

FG: I didn't find that...

Albert: I think I handed it all in the last day, I had to go with Miss Hendley on the last day...

FG: I hope you've improved your organizational skills since then...

Albert: I sure have...Also feeling a lot more confident, the fact that my dad lets me go out and let's me travel has helped me go out and be more confident, and I'm happy now to go out and travel myself and explore new places and stuff so yeah it's good...I definitely enjoy it. It's not everyone's cup of tea...I don't understand, you get the stereotype, if I asked everyone in the school what's a railway enthusiast, they say it's someone with a big book and a nerdy sort of person but I don't really come across many of them sort of people, they're just normal people, I mean it's fine to have an interest in cars, you don't see Top Gear getting it, I don't get how it's different from supporting a football team, men who've paid hundreds of pounds, travelled hundreds of miles just to see some men kick a ball around...

FG: Do some people make fun of you?

Albert: Ffff...Never here, I think it's mainly sort of not a problem here because people who are my close friends know about my interest and they're sort of little banter jokes, you know what I mean,

FG: Not serious

Albert: Not like the bullying you experienced.

A.3. Student aesthetic autobiographies

A.3a) Anita's aesthetic autobiography

This was written in response to a request to bring in food which would trigger a memory of the past.

Sweet memory trigger

This is my memory of a sweet that I used to like and I still do now.

It started in the summer holiday. It had only been a few weeks since we had broken up and it would be 4 weeks until I would be a yr.6. We had only just come back from a visit to Hilding High St. We had gone to a newsagent's shop which was owned by one of my Gran's friends. We came home with sweets in our pockets (Me, my sister and my 2 cousins (both younger than me and my sister, a boy and a girl) and we began eating them the second we got out of the shop. When we got home we still had a fair few left and decided to eat them outside in the sunshine.

My little sister loved liquorice strings and had eaten all of hers. She started nagging me for some of mine. I laughed and called her a greedy-guts. She didn't take it as a joke and started tugging at my liquorice (sic). I held on to it; I wasn't giving up. I got so annoyed with her I snapped "You want them so bad, you can have them!" and I let go. They weren't very springy but they pinged back and hit my sister on the face. She (sic) howled and stormed away. I got told off later but I didn't really care because it was worth the look on my sisters (sic) face when the sweets hit her.

A.3b) George's autobiographies

My autobiography.

My name is George ---- and I was born in good Mayes hospital. I was born in the winter when there was frost on the ground. I was born on 5th February 1998.

My parents are called brain badomda and agustos qumbie . George works as a truck driver. Mary is a priest in the Church of England.

My first memories are of going to the toilet. I remember pooing myself and having to run to the toilet and get my Dad to change my nappy. He was smiling and laughing about it all, saying "Who is a poopy boy!"

My first accident was when there was a big child called Michael who lived two doors away from me. On the first day of nursery, Michael beat me up. He got his dummy and stuck it up my nose.

My first day at school was a problem because I farted in the lesson. I like to fart.

There's a kid who lives in my house and we adopted him he's names albeeert.the worst teacher ever is

By some kid

George wrote this "aesthetic autobiography" in response to an exercise where students ate specific foods that triggered memories. The formatting and colour are all his.

monster

munch

When I eat monster munch it reminds me of when I went to the sobell centre. We got on a 254 or a 253 bus I preferred the 253 because the lovely old seats. The bus drivers always raced down the road. We always saw the Jews at Clapton coming out of the Synagogue. They always wore there funny fury hat, even when it was in the summer, they looked silly. When we were at the sobell centre we went in the adventure play ground going thought the spongy objects and sliding down the slide.

Some times Albert my brother, and me went on the trampolines. We were doing flips and bounces on the trampoline. It felt like I was flying in the air.

While we were having fun, my mum was sitting there watching us play. When she was bored she did a cross word while drinking a hot tea from the machine.

If I was thirsty I had a ribena or a hot chocolate I liked it how the machine put the cup down then poured the chocolate into the cup then the boiling water.

This was back in the time when my brother was nice to me. He was nice to me then because he would play with me. Now he's older he spends his time attacking me. We wrestle

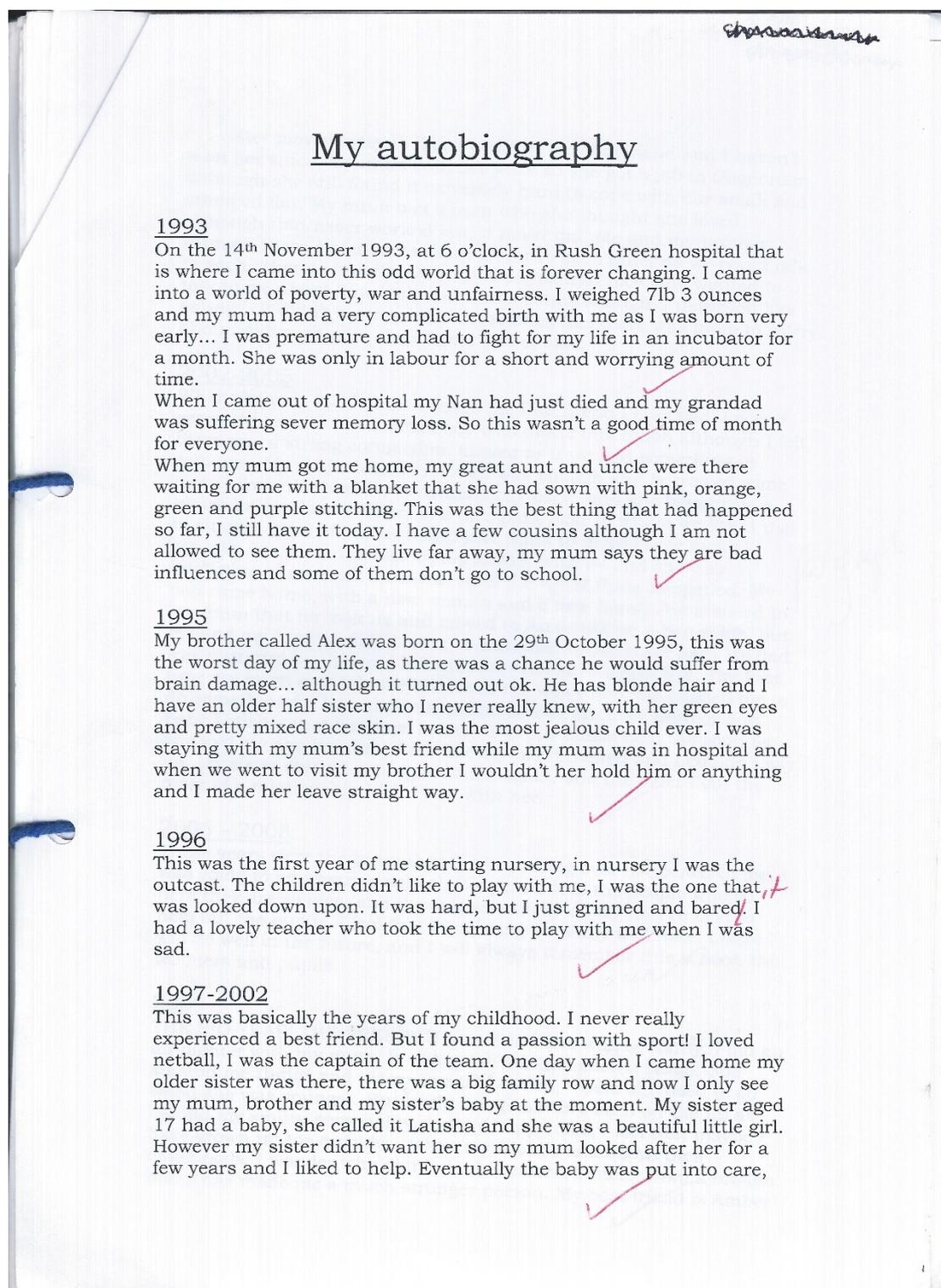
He comes into my room and starts hitting me. When he does that, I hurt him and he gets really angry and starts pummelling my neck.

It hurts a great deal.

But the great George does not give up he got an axe and cut the guts out of he's body and so the legend lives. ☺

A.3c) Eloise's aesthetic autobiography

Eloise wrote the following "aesthetic autobiography" as part of her GCSE coursework which was to write a piece of fiction which seemed like a real autobiography, with the purposes of trying to entertain, imagine and explore.



The image shows a handwritten autobiography on lined paper. The title is "My autobiography" underlined. The text is organized into sections by year, each with a red checkmark to its right. The sections are: 1993, 1995, 1996, and 1997-2002. The handwriting is in black ink on white lined paper. There are some corrections and additions in red ink, such as "it" in the 1996 section and "put" in the 1997-2002 section. The paper is held in a blue binder on the left side.

~~Chloe's autobiography~~

My autobiography

1993
On the 14th November 1993, at 6 o'clock, in Rush Green hospital that is where I came into this odd world that is forever changing. I came into a world of poverty, war and unfairness. I weighed 7lb 3 ounces and my mum had a very complicated birth with me as I was born very early... I was premature and had to fight for my life in an incubator for a month. She was only in labour for a short and worrying amount of time.
When I came out of hospital my Nan had just died and my grandad was suffering sever memory loss. So this wasn't a good time of month for everyone.
When my mum got me home, my great aunt and uncle were there waiting for me with a blanket that she had sown with pink, orange, green and purple stitching. This was the best thing that had happened so far, I still have it today. I have a few cousins although I am not allowed to see them. They live far away, my mum says they are bad influences and some of them don't go to school.

1995
My brother called Alex was born on the 29th October 1995, this was the worst day of my life, as there was a chance he would suffer from brain damage... although it turned out ok. He has blonde hair and I have an older half sister who I never really knew, with her green eyes and pretty mixed race skin. I was the most jealous child ever. I was staying with my mum's best friend while my mum was in hospital and when we went to visit my brother I wouldn't her hold him or anything and I made her leave straight way.

1996
This was the first year of me starting nursery, in nursery I was the outcast. The children didn't like to play with me, I was the one that was looked down upon. It was hard, but I just grinned and bared. I had a lovely teacher who took the time to play with me when I was sad.

1997-2002
This was basically the years of my childhood. I never really experienced a best friend. But I found a passion with sport! I loved netball, I was the captain of the team. One day when I came home my older sister was there, there was a big family row and now I only see my mum, brother and my sister's baby at the moment. My sister aged 17 had a baby, she called it Latisha and she was a beautiful little girl. However my sister didn't want her so my mum looked after her for a few years and I liked to help. Eventually the baby was put into care,

~~the end of the world~~

my sister moved away to Ilford with her new boyfriend and I haven't seen her since. My mum couldn't work so she got a job in Dagenham, although she still found it extremely hard to cope with our small and cramped flat. My mum met a man who she thought she loved, although that never worked out, it never did. Me and my brother through these experiences came closer to each other as we could talk to each other as friends. One day a physiatrist nice lady wanted to talk to me about how I felt and if was eating enough. I never felt like eating... it didn't seem worth it, it seemed like there was more to worry about, although now I love to eat lots of food.

2002-2005

When the year 2002 came I made the first friend I ever had, I was 9 years old and he was a small boy who didn't talk much although I felt there was a strong connection, almost as if we had something in common. My mum decided enough was enough and borrowed some money from the bank to eventually pay back, and she bought us a house in Upminster. There is a nice park near to where we live, I use to sit over there on my own and just think to myself how lucky I actually am. My mum was trying harder with us and she was beginning to get back on track, until the worst thing happened. My dad came home, with a new woman and a new family. He insisted to my mum that he took us and moved to Australia for a better life, but me and my brother didn't want to leave behind what we had. My dad was outraged by this and left without even saying goodbye. The first time my mum ever told me she loved me was when she needed me to do something for her, she wanted me to look after my brother and baby Latisha, that had now returned to our house hold. As soon as she told my she loved me I felt like my heart melted and I couldn't say no. My sister started getting in touch again, and the older I got the more of a relationship I felt I had with her.

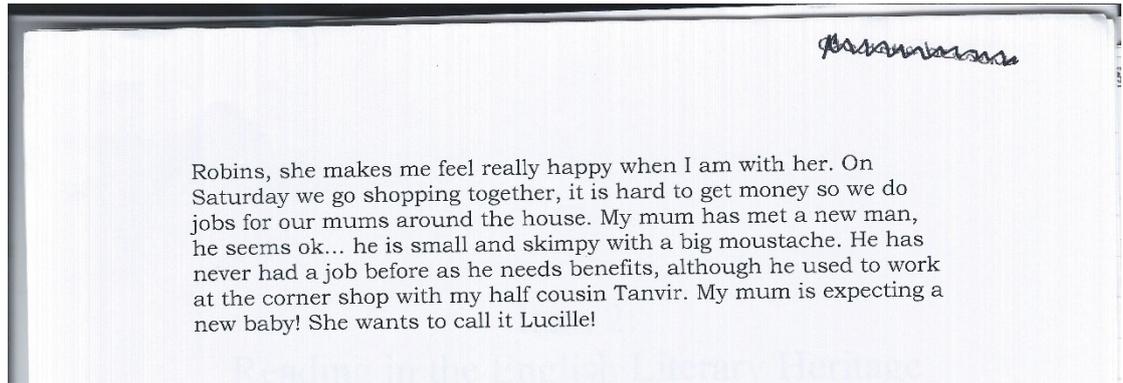
Paragraph

2006 - 2008

These years were the years that the best thing ever happened to me, I was going to an amazing school, Coopers! I love the people who go here they are so nice, and the teachers really do try they're best to help out the pupils. I feel that I'm getting on really well here. I hope I will do well in the future, and I will always remember this school, the teachers and pupils.

2009

THE BIG YEAR! THE PRESENT! New Years Eve was so funny, I did an all-nighter with my mum. It was great! We had such a laugh. She showed me things and places in east London, where she used to go when she was younger. But lately things haven't been on the up as behind my smiley personality and my happy face, I feel that maybe I have grown up too quickly... when my friends talk about their childhoods, I wonder why didn't do this either. Coming from a broken home has made me a much stronger person. My best friend is Amber



A.3d) Albert's aesthetic autobiography

Albert wrote the following aesthetic autobiography in response to the task to write about a time when he felt alone, using fictional techniques to illuminate how he felt and thought at the time. He could "make stuff up".

Mr Gilbert

English coursework

Feeling Alone

~~Mr Gilbert~~

Introduction. In July 2007 I along with two other Year 8 classes, who had chosen Spanish as a first language, went to Spain on the foreign language trip which occurs every year and is attended by Year 8 students. The location depends on the language either French, Spanish or German, that you had chosen on being accepted into the school whilst still in Primary School. I had chosen Spanish due to the fact that I had done some French in Primary school and thought that I would just go over the same content again in the resulting first year of secondary school and ^{the} thought of learning the German language didn't seem to excite me much. Spanish was the chance to learn something new that I had never come across before, although I later regretted choosing it due to the fact that after a second foreign language was introduced into my school timetable, French, I seemed to understand and learn this much better than Spanish and come choosing my GCSE options. I choose to do French. The best thing which came out of choosing the Spanish language was the trip which I'm going to base my 'Feeling Alone' coursework on.

It was the end of the summer term and I arrived at school with luggage and we waited for the coach to arrive. The coach arrived and left two hours late, at 2.00 pm instead of 12.00 pm. It was a hot July afternoon and everybody on board, including myself were excited and anticipating a good trip. Although straight away the mood was lowered as many road closures and heavy traffic meant that we never boarded our ferry to Calais from Dover at around 10.00 pm instead of around 5.00 pm. The ferry journey was a good opportunity for everyone on board to ~~stretch~~ stretch their legs. When we arrived at Calais, we quickly got onto the dark and empty French motorway and through the dark hours of the night we drove through Northern and Central France, passing around the outskirts of Paris, when dawn broke we were ~~still~~ still driving although the scenery had much changed and we were now passing through the beautiful Pyrenees mountains. After a few more hours of driving we arrived at Salou, our final destination. Salou is a

inspection I found our two coach drivers, at this time I felt more relaxed as I knew that at least somebody was there to help me. They obviously saw that I was in some distress and rang Ms Garcia, who was the leader of the trip. Whilst the driver was on the phone I heard that they were, everyone on my trip, were all sitting somewhere nearby, waiting and wondering where I was. I found this ironic that we were both aware of each other's disappearance, although didn't know what to do or where to go. Eventually the group returned to the coach I was on and I was very relieved to see them all.

To conclude the experience made me feel very lonely and for the rest of the trip I made sure that I was close or in sight of people I knew and seeing them made me feel much more secure. The experience made me feel much different, "an outcast", too as I couldn't communicate with anybody, whilst at the same time feeling lucky and ~~thank~~ thankful that I wasn't left alone in Barcelona.

A.4. Relevant Field Notes

I wrote many field notes, amounting to well over 5000 words. These are the relevant ones to the points made in the thesis. The words in bold are of particular relevance.

Field Notes 1

10th May 2010 – Year 7 Period 3 Lecture Theatre

During break, pupils are rioting outside. Ask them to line properly.

Surge through the door. George causing trouble. I ask him to wait outside.

Pupils are noisy, giggly. Difficult.

The technology doesn't work. Don't have the pin-number for the screen. Can't show them what I want.

I tell The Pilky and Handbag story. I show the written version, they read it and then I tell the story orally. Me being personal. Me telling them about my parents' divorce helps. Disturbs them.

The kids are gripped. They laugh sympathetically when they learn about me taking the handbag to school, even though they've read it already it has a surprise value. So does the punch. I explain that it's difficult to talk about it still because it's upsetting. That I don't want them to tell the truth. That they don't have to be personal. That it's fine not to.

We talk for a bit about whether I was right to punch my persecutor. Most students say I shouldn't have while George says I was right to.

My open sesame is: "Just make it up! Don't worry about telling the truth. The idea is to be realist!"

Then they get working.

George is working hard. Engrossed in his story about trampolining at the Michael Sobel story. Get him talking about how his brother used to be nice to him, now fights him. The mother is with them, working on a crossword.

D has ideas. A. needs help. D needs help, but the open sesame works: gets him thinking of ideas.

Go around checking they are saving documents.

Anita works hard.

L works on a poem about a teacher.

My voice is hoarse because I shouted out too much, getting annoyed with giggling. Lack of respect.

C. gets on with it and then wants to show his YouTube video.

Doesn't really get it together.

Surprised that he doesn't need help. Talk to others, telling them to make things up.

Next lesson: add in a wish-fulfilment to narrative. Make it realistic.

Field Notes 2

June 8th 2010 Year 10 GCSE English

I tell my Year 10 class the Pilky and the Handbag story, then show them my written version. The story is even more successful than when I told it to the Year 7 class; we have a long discussion about whether it was the right thing to do or not; should I have punched my persecutor? Some say yes, some say no. The conversation is more nuanced than the Year 7

class who were mostly definitely against the idea; the Year 10s are much more reluctant to rush to judgement.

We talk about the structure of the story, and the ending with meeting F R on the Tube train in my twenties, how it's a nice punch line to learn that I was a psycho. So we're discussing story structure and morality together. And exploring the effect of the story.