

February 19<sup>th</sup> 1988 Bloomsbury (almost), London.

I hate February, but then does anyone *really* like it?

Yes . . . that woman, Deirdre, Joe's wife – when we went to Crete that summer and she spent the whole time moaning about the sun and how she wished she'd bought a box of freezing fog with her.

It suits the shop though, this seeping month: all shadows and fuggy smell of damp, as Marge says, not that I can appreciate her olfactory observations — odd that, to be born with no sense of smell. What you never had, you can't miss? I suppose so, but I do wonder what other people notice as they breathe in the atmosphere; the smell of history, ancient crumbly leather — possibly the smell of me too.

I wonder what I smell like.

Ah, the bell. That jingling hope that someone might actually not just stare at the books, languidly turn a few pages, scholarly, digesting the words, projecting some superiority to me, behind this scuffed desk.

*Oh, God . . . Colette:* "You're early."

"Yes, I have to take Seb to the doctor. Zack was going to go but he's been called in about sponsorship."

*He bloody well would:* "I thought he was moving teams?"

She's doing that thing again: looking nonchalant, pretending to look out at the day when inside I know she's screaming with triumph at her fortune, her life with a six foot nine athletic, 'Hello-magazined' basketball player, lover, partner, whatever.

And to think it was once me . . . not a basketball player — lover, well, husband actually.

I've missed her answer now, not that I really give a poop: "Sorry what did you say?"

"Christ, Hamish, don't you *ever* listen?"

"Probably not, on the whole."

She's heading to the door now, the toddler resting on her hip, staring back at me; his unblinking brown eyes in a perfect oval face.

We never had one: my fault . . . well, I assume so. Zack's come up with the goods: in the basket, first attempt, of course.

She turns as she opens the door: "Did the agent come back to you?"

"Yes, they're still working out a price."

"Hamish, I want this dealt with. We can't proceed with the divorce until we sell this place!"

Before I can think of a suitable reply she's halfway out of the door, looking up at the sky. "Anyway – I must run. It's going to rain." She shuts the door and the bell jangles, gradually fading to a metal tick: silence.

Tea.

I pad into the tiny adjacent room that serves as kitchen, store room and procrastination zone. How many times have I stood in here robotically filling the kettle and waiting while it murmurs towards a rumble, signalling yet another warm, brown placatory moment.

If I did add up all those stove-lingering minutes over the years would they become hours, even stretching to a day . . . a whole day staring out over this moss-damp courtyard? So, then would those hours spent queuing in the post office that could easily amount to a week, weeks? Imagine if you had to

do it all in one go . . . a month waiting in line to eventually be told you'd forgotten a vital document and to please return in the next life.

The kettle's waspy note curtails my mental wanderings. I flip off the gas and empty the last tea residue from the brown betty.

Investigation of the crockery cupboard reveals no mugs and one remaining teabag sitting in solitary confinement, slumped in resignation at the bottom of the 'present from Dungeness' biscuit tin.

I pluck the bag from its prison and wander about the shop rounding up cups and mugs from various shelves and surfaces where I have probably stopped, mug in hand, distracted by various titles and their connection with my soon-to-be, ex-wife.

Her brief breeze into the shop must have left a trace of diamond-bright perfume within this fusty air; I sniff experimentally . . . nothing, except a desire to sneeze. The molecules of musk and flowers, or whatever perfume is actually composed of could still be here: microscopic, shimmering droplets amongst dead skin cells and book-jacket motes . . .

"Hello? Anyone here?"

I start at the voice. How did I not hear the bell?

"Sorry . . . yes. Can I help you?"

A middle-aged man dressed in an unpleasant shiny blue suit is advancing up the aisle between philosophy and animal husbandry where I stand grasping a collection of dusty mugs. His eyes flit like anxious butterflies.

"Have you got that book called the Go-behind?"

"Sorry?"

"Come-between?"

"The Go-between?"

He shrugs: "Yeah – that one."

I direct him to the relevant section and pull out a hardback copy encased in a nostalgic cream and green 50s dust-jacket.

"Here you are, sir. We do have a new paperback version but personally I think this copy is more suited to the writing itself."

He grunts a thank you and I retire to the kitchen on my tea-making mission. When I return at the bell's announcement, he has left, book carelessly astray on the pile of semi-sorted bills that grace the desk. Now alerted to these mean A4 pages, I sit and attempt a bit of organisation – who and what can be put off, for how long, etc. Collette was better at this tedious, sweat-inducing juggling – something she has left far behind in her new shiny life. *Sod it*. One more cup of tea and I'll call the bank, make a rendezvous, prostrate myself on the manager's blue, nylon carpet, beg for more time . . .

Standing up resolutely, I go back to the kettle, squeeze the last juice from the teabag and wander back towards the desk to be then diverted by a sudden and telephone-avoiding desire to visit memory lane.

I meander, stroking the shelves, remembering the day we filled them with books gleaned from book fairs, jumble sales and my dead father's library. There were hundreds of them – peculiar as he only ever read tomes on the Second World War. Of course, Mother hadn't wanted any of them, war or otherwise . . . she was off: new life with Barry what-ever-his-name-was and she couldn't wrap up the house and its contents quick enough. Do I blame her? Not for a Nano-second. He was a toxic, boring bastard: mean, self-obsessed and ninety-five percent pickled in twenty-five year old malt.

In the plant section of the shop I spot one of Father's books. 'Growing begonias for fun'. Slipping it from the shelf, I open the stiff pages and study the 1960s hyper-colour photographs of the author: spectacled, checked shirted, beaming with his prize specimens. Did Father ever have fun with begonias, or anything, or anyone for that matter . . . he occupies my mind only as a disgruntled, gangly hornet with an ever-ready sting.

Shutting the book, I place it back between Good Greenhouse Practice and Bert White's A to Z of successful Grafting; the latter's petrol blue spine jolts a memory. Whether I like it or not, I'm back in that frigid house in Reading and Father is examining my final year thesis while I glance around the sitting room with its new velour three-piece suite, and de rigueur, geometric orange wallpaper.

Father looks up at me from the title page, disappointment ranging about in his icy eyes.

"Is this it? A collection of *poems*?" He spits the last word, almost vomits it; the adopted Bond Street voice strained and high-pitched.

I search for a crushing response, but fail: "They liked it . . . a lot. In fact, two of the pieces have been chosen" –

He's dumped the book on the sofa and is standing by the sideboard, whisky decanter in hand. Bad sign. He turns, does that tic – index finger pushing up his glasses to the bridge of his florid nose, followed by a grunt.

"So, what do you intend to do with this degree in fossilised language, eh?"

Luckily I'm saved by Mother entering the room carrying a tray of tea and cake. She places the tray on the new coffee table and glances at my father fearfully; a small house-coated rodent in the shadow of the three-piece-suited predator that he is. She gestures to one of the armchairs.

"Hamish – you sit there. Lad, and I'll pour the tea. Do you take milk?"

How can she not remember? However, it might be two years ago that I visited them . . . and milk or no milk isn't something that would crop up in the average 'must phone parents' guilt call.

"Er . . . thanks, a little."

"A slice of Dundee?"

"Please."

She nods to the sofa: "So, that's yer finished . . . book?"

"Thesis – but as I was saying to Father, they agreed to my writing a poetry collection."

A clink and gurgle over at the sideboard signals a large top up, followed by an exasperated donkey sort of noise. My father lunges over and folds himself abruptly into the other armchair.

"What about a job though, lad? It's all very well skipping about and writing about daisies and clouds but a man has to get established, ready, on the property ladder so that when the right lassie comes along . . ."

*Lassie!* The West End accent is slipping and sliding around in the booze. He's back in the damp childhood cottage with a tin bath and sheep in the garden. I risk a bit of indignant self-worth.

"I don't need any of that conformity. Art is what counts," I flap my hands at their new acquisitions, "not Sanderson curtains and teak shelving systems."

I think my mother may have squeaked. I'm not sure, but if she had done, the sound was certainly lost in the following typhoon of my father's pent up rage and disgust at his only son turning out to be a ringlet-haired, stanza-composing hippy.

The remainder of that particular memory shrinks away, orange wallpaper morphing into lines of books. My armpits feel damp, hands shaky. How desperately sad that all my recollections of him are similarly fear-inducing. There must be a tiny summery corner somewhere in the father section of my mind; I search about for images: ice-cream on a beach? A hug on Christmas morning? Nothing. And what about *her* . . . all my stocked mental impressions seem to be the same – vague, blueish and cold. *But*, further back under the domestic sedimentary layers there *are* memories of someone warm and laughing . . . when he was away.

Bury the past. She can throw a rope-bridge over this abyss that seems to have developed between us – if she wants . . . never seen the shop, or even met Collette, not that any of it means that much, a divorce and likely shop closure looming thunder cloud-like on my own personal horizon.

I wrench my thoughts away to happier times: those first days of the shop; standing outside, the Chubb key warm in my hand; discussing the layout with Colette, her face bright with excitement.

We had emptied out Father's book collection in this room, here, all those years ago. I scan the room, see us sprawled amongst the boxes.

Collette had waved a hand at them.

“So, why if he was such a non-literary type, had he amassed such a stockpile of reading material?”

I had grimaced at the thought of the regular book-club offerings that had arrived with clockwork regularity.

“Some desperate desire to impress their friends, I think . . . not that they had any that I can remember. Anyway, you'll see, it's a true miscellany.”

“Tropical Fish for Beginners?” she had questioned holding out a glossy tome, and another, *The Joy of Sex*. ‘When did he ever use that?’ I had murmured, looking at the bearded bloke demonstrating doggy style: *fig 3 – prepare the wife thus, and enter here*.

She had knelt up, thrown the book to one side, and we had done it, all slippery and sweaty in the August heat. Beekeeping, Roundabouts of Stevenage and Classic Desserts all crushed under our desperate writhing.

So, what happened? Time, time and me not producing – kids *or* success in business, not even in a boom time. I sigh as an image of yet another cup of tea presents itself. I never used to feel like this – empty, fatigued by the days' long progression in the half-light of winter.

Boredom is a terrifying thing. This shop has sucked my ideas away. Time passes in a particular way within these four distemper-green walls, enveloping you like the skin forming on custard. Ennui envelopes me now as I wait for the plink of the bell, something to change the day. Mindlessly I start to count books.

Top shelf: One, two, three, four . . . sixty-three, sixty-four . . . *am I hungry? Must be nearly lunchtime* . . . hundred and forty, fifty . . . a hundred and fifty-eight. Stop.

This is unusual. I pull the book from its sleeping fellows, their plastic jackets squeaking. *No plastic*. Colette always insisted, but this one escaped somehow.

The cover of untarnished, red leather is plain apart from the simple title etched in gold calligraphy. *TEN*. Unremarkable, but remarkable in its unremarkableness. The pages are smooth cream. I long to close my eyes, lift the book to my face and breathe in the printer's ink, like she does . . . did, but I would just be breathing in odourless air, translucent and dull as tap water.

The third page reveals a spidery dedication: *to whoever picks this up*.

As I peer at the small print on the following page, searching for the book's edition date, the shop lights flicker. A growl of thunder vibrates the floorboards; a first few raindrops slant on these dusty windows. A moment later the deluge starts in earnest, drumming on the bins in the back courtyard. That's it. No one will be in this morning. I *could* get all the bills sorted, filed. I could . . . *To whoever picks this up.*

I seem to be moving back to the old leather swivel chair. I sit, click on the fan heater, clump my feet onto the desk and open the book at chapter one. I read until a paragraph on page twenty-two causes me to cease in minor surprise.

Odd. A coincidence. Our hero, albeit a rather drab character, appears to share my own particular sensory deprivation and is about to have it re-installed or installed . . . not sure. I continue.

*'Mr Bolton, you're out of surgery now. It was entirely successful; the growth was still small.'*  
*'But nurse . . . I can smell, smell you, your perfume, those flowers . . . it's a miracle!'*

Looking up from this blithesome and irritating exchange, I address the walls: "As if!"

My stomach grumbles from too much tea and not enough breakfast. Lunchtime beckons. I close the book with a clomp, lock the shop and stomp off in search of soul-warming comfort food at the greasy café two doors down. Halfway there, the rain changes from a mere deluge to a slow-motion splat as if God has finished washing his heavenly floor and is slowly emptying the bucket – mostly onto me.

The café owner looks up from arranging custard tarts on a plate as I slop in.

"Aye-aye. Someone's 'ad a shit morning."

I peel my jacket off.

"Not particularly . . . well, possibly, but not in comparison to a lot of peoples' of course."

Bert smiles wryly at my attempt to 'perspectivise' myself.

"So, triple whisky?"

I recall again that cut-glass decanter's clink: "God, no! What's The Special today?"

"Liver n' onions – that do yer?"

"More than you will ever know."

I walk over to my habitual window table where I sit at a yellow Formica table and stare out at the monochromatic day through a hole in the dribbling condensation. It seems at this moment as if something *must* change, move me on.

Returning to the café interior I gaze around at the familiar decoration: nicotine-besmirched pictures of sun-filled places, plastic flower arrangements and signed photos of actors who have also shared the delights of Bert's cooking over the years. Rain seeps from my hair, trickles into my vision, blurring their faces. I take a serviette from its metal box and soak up the water. It feels good, just sitting in this fuggy warmth, hands over my face. A clunk of china on plastic announces a mug of creosote tea.

"There y'go, lad. Paper too."

"Thanks, Bert."

Opening my eyes, I take in the first words of the tabloid's headline.

**'It's a miracle!'**

*Not another one.*