

ONE WAY ONLY

*To protect our staff, clients
and community we have
taken the sad decision to.....*

There was a promise of warmth, given off by the lights, strategically placed, and the soft carpeting. It was an atmosphere without personality. Before the lockdown, hushed figures would have been hunched in front of their screens. Was it a call centre? It hardly mattered. The rest of the High Street was also closed up and dead.

An orange sun was dispersing the early morning mist.

One walk a day allowed. He preferred to avoid the street ballets, where lone bodies were trying to give each other distance in the spring sunshine, and go out in the cold of the early morning, at dawn. How quickly this virus had attacked the human world. He'd read somewhere that a 'eugenicist' had said all this was Nature having a clear out, and even referred to those younger ones who'd died *in corpore sano* as 'collateral damage', indifferent to where managed attempts at human perfectibility had ended up in the past.

Someone was kicking a tin can around the precinct, and a stray dog was crossing the road.

Before the lockdown he'd felt a misfit in an alien world of frenetic activity, and was pulled towards 'self-isolating' long before it became a Government *diktat*. Now that activity had become regulated and minimal, and street movement was tense and self-conscious, he felt more of a kindred feeling, sharing a general sense of weakness and vulnerability.

The John Barleycorn, where he'd spent many an evening over a pint, observing and listening, was shuttered up, a daily menu still visible on the chalkboard.

He tried to imagine the overcrowded city-centre flats of those who were out of work and had next to no food, and the sickness among them. But the real horror was beyond him.

He got near the corner and stopped. There were footsteps, soft and steady behind him. Instinctively, he skipped to one side. Why are they not following the rules? He looked round and saw Darrell walking his sloppy mastiffs.

"Scared ye, eh? Didn't expect to see me at this time of day." Darrell grinned and moved away from him. The mastiffs knew Craig and ignored him.

"Not really." He may look as though he's going to kick your head in but he's as soft as King Kong, he thought. "Your mother all right?"

“Yeah.” Darrell’s mastiffs pulled him off to the left.

“When this is all over, I’ll pop round.”

“Yeah.” And disappeared around the corner.

Craig liked him, and despite their differences, he would sometimes see him sitting alone in the pub and stop for a chat. Darrell's parents were originally from London and he had never sounded anything other than a Londoner. His mother used to clean for them before they split. Darrell always felt he was a bit different to those around him, thought he had something between his ears; to Craig he belonged to a class that had been dispossessed of its working class roots, and left to face a materialistic world alone. Craig wanted to believe that he had more affinity with that old working class than his own, but it was an illusion and he knew it. His own class fared little better, except materially. All were in the grip of money one way or another.

Where to now? Back ‘home’, but it wasn’t home any more. When the world had been ‘normal’, and the Great Machine was demanding more of everyone, he’d felt his caravan was to be a place of less, a retreat from the madness, from his old job at the bank. But now with the Machine nearly quiet he sometimes felt more mad than they were, away from the solace of his old domestic routines. What had he done?

At first he’d loved every little detail of the new life, living in nature without exploiting it, and he taught himself to notice everything – the hacking call of his ‘sarky Cassandra’ in the mornings, a yaffle that jabbed away for ants, the daily robin taking off twigs to its nest, the swaying reeds and the sticklebacks darting about in the flow of the river. And on the path from the farm the hedgerows and banks coloured with pink campion, meadow buttercup and cow parsley, all rampant. There was a sense of fulfilment he’d never felt before. But as soon as it was clear that the whole of human life was threatened by a virus he began to feel he was in the wrong place, and wondered how it would be if he and Charlotte were still together.

He walked slowly out town, just a few dog walkers coming in the opposite direction, the odd cyclist getting a daily fix, a steady stream of food lorries, each with the word ‘logistics’ on it, and cars of lone ‘essential workers’ hurrying to work. Normally, the totality of this outdoor activity reduced to ‘essential’ gave him a buzz in spite of himself, but not this morning. He thought about the time at the gym when he’d bumped into Darrell and told him that he was going to quit his job, and how Darrell’s jaw had tightened.

“All right for you. You can afford to.”

He was right. It was an indulgence, and stupid. After that there had been a lumpy silence between them as they got changed.

The class thing too, and education, and the resentment.

But Darrell liked to read, not that he would admit it, and venture beyond the stuff his mother read.

Craig recalled the first time he'd met him properly. Before that, he'd only seen him with his mother, and they'd exchanged looks.

It was a cold evening, early in the year, when the politicians seemed to think the virus was a foreign problem.

"Ere. You deaf or what?"

"Sorry?" And Craig looked round to see four lads and a couple of girls lounging about on the grass twenty yards away. He had been vaguely aware of them but they seemed to pose no threat so he ignored them. He had recognized one of them, a boy Charlotte had taught a few years before. The boys were waving their beer cans around and both girls were jabbering into their phones, and smoking.

"I said, Are you deaf?" And without thinking Craig waved his hand dismissively and turned away. Which was all it took.

The boy doing the shouting jumped up, walked forwards a few yards and threw his beer can at him. One of the others had been triggered into a rage and tore over to him.

"You fuckin' tramp. You don't do that to me," and launched a kick into Craig's side. Stunned, Craig fell to the ground. As though everything was part of an automatic process, the others charged over and started kicking him, including the girls. The boys laughed and the girls squealed about getting a happy-slappy movie on to their phones. Craig instinctively curled himself into ball. He had no choice but to take it. After what seemed like forever, aware of pain and blood, hanging on to life, he drifted into unconsciousness.

The next thing he felt was someone licking his cheeks – where the hell am I? – but he couldn't open his eyes, and only heard the heavy panting – my God, it's a dog – and then a gruff voice.

"You all right?" It was Darrell. Never had his laconic manner sounded sweeter or more welcome.

"No, I'm not all right. My leg."

“The bastards were having a real go. But don’t worry. I know who they are. They’ll know what’s coming to them.”

“No, no, no need. Please.”

And Craig felt Darrell wiping the blood from his face with a handkerchief and for a moment the bourgeois boy in him wondered if it was clean. Darrell’s movements were careful and considerate. He pulled him gently on to the bench.

“Shall I phone the police?”

“No, no, no.”

“Good.”

And when Craig managed to open his eyes, he said, “I’ll be all right. Thanks. Did you manage to frighten them off?”

“What do you think? I’ll get you home.”

“No, I’ll be all right. If I could just have a wash.”

“Yeah.” And Darrell helped him to his mother’s house.

All that felt so distant, now that not even the local roughs got close to one another until they’d had a few beers. If you’re going to get the bloody disease, you’ll get it pissed.

Back at his new home, he remembered the time he’d blurted out his plan to Charlotte, about the abandoned caravan by the river, about speaking to the farmer, about wanting to live there, about giving up his job, about wanting her to come too. He’d put it to her that they’d paid off the mortgage, their children had left home, and now he wanted to live without greed, living off the land. And yet, he sensed an apprehension in himself, which he daren’t fully admit to, that she might possibly agree, when really he wanted her to say no and free him. Without fully realising why, he felt uneasy, almost frightened.

“We’d get water from the river, a small wood burner and a compost toilet, all that sort of thing. A solar panel, and we could make a simple cooker from a couple of large tins. I’ve heard it’s been done. We’ll plant our own salad and vegetables. It’ll be fun. It’ll be different.”

She detected insincerity in these enthusiasms, as though a veil of youthful immaturity were being used to cover up more selfish motives. At first she was speechless, undecided which insult would hurt him most. The repressed agitation, which over recent years had become a feature of her daily self, was now intense and dangerous.

“You self-centred, egotistic bastard. You wanker”, and her anger burst its banks. Her word torrent flooded the room and their despair left them numb.

The collapse had been coming. He'd become distant and more introverted since their son had left home; and carelessly she'd struck up a friendship with a Polish teacher who when they talked in the staffroom gave her the kind of *frisson* that reminded her of her younger self. But neither Craig nor Charlotte consciously wanted the collapse, indeed they feared it, but both had the vague feeling that there was a fate carrying them forward, making decisions for them, creating situations, as though the causes were created long before, by themselves, without realising it, and what they were living through now were the effects.

In his numb guilt-ridden state he didn't know what to say. Perhaps he was a self-centred arsehole after all, dreaming of the freedoms of youth. It's not uncommon. A reckless wilful spirit and a search for the new. It's often the case when the children leave home.

But he knew no-one who had acted quite as dramatically as he had.

Then he remembered his own parents, who had resisted the call of the wild, and settled into getting old together, constantly bickering, accepting their empty domestic and social routines without thinking, as though it were just in the nature of things and there was nothing to be done.

So if it was true for them, why not for him? That's just how it was. He would not resist.

After he moved out of the house the feeling grew in him that this was self-deception. He hated the duplicity, the not coming clean, the pious talk of a simpler, less nature-damaging sort of life, and expecting others to believe him, as though it were the *whole* truth. Anarchic nihilism expressed as virtue. A reckless dash for freedom hidden under a contemptible display of virtue. Sickening self-righteousness. A wilful ego looking after itself, not caring about the consequences, a slow, degenerative disease eating away at empathy and sympathy.

And now the virus had taken hold and brought all our societal relationships into question, he began to feel that there must be something that could be done. But what? What had been normal before was no longer normal, and he didn't know which way to turn.

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Charlotte's reflex teacherly existence at school had started to disintegrate when Craig was still living at home, long before the virus arrived. She tried to compensate by being pleasant to everyone but it struck a false note. Always she seemed to be smiling, busying

herself, apologizing, in a hurry. At home she would look at herself in the mirror and see someone who wasn't herself. She thought the image haunted, dislocated from everything, and felt very alone. Her sleep became fitful, and full of staffroom images. In one she was sitting in the corner, crying, knees up to her face, with the expressionless faces of the other teachers staring ahead. Then Craig standing over her, with hair growing uncontrollably, laughing at her scornfully, and the Head standing on some steps opening her locker and going through her things. Oh, God, no. *There's nothing there. Really.* Then Piotrek passing in front of her, stopping, and a tear falling to the floor and transforming itself into a wild garden, with nettles and thistles. The next minute he was behind his desk in the classroom and she heard herself ask *What does the name Piotrek mean?* but he didn't seem to hear, and she could see herself shouting noiselessly, *For God's sake, tell me. Please tell me.* But he didn't register. He got up and passed down the corridor. She panicked as she realised he was a fancy that would soon fade. She hurled herself after him desperately. *I must ask him – I must, I must – Do you miss your country? I want to know.* At that moment she heard his voice – angry and threatening – coming from another place, away from the evaporating image: *This is my country. I am an alien in Poland. Do you understand? I'm going to take Protestant vows and my parents will never speak to me again. Do you understand? I'll give back my MA. They can give it to someone else. I'm going to ask the priest to give me a PGCE. Do you understand?* She heard herself gush: *I understand. I understand.* And then she was back in the staffroom, hiding under the table where they make the tea, biting her nails, and crying *I didn't ask him if he lived alone. And now he's gone.* Peeping out, she saw one of the new younger male teachers seducing the Head, caressing her breasts, and she gasped. At that moment she sat up in bed, dazed.

The school was in the poorest part of town and many of the children had behavioural issues, a resistance to learning, and difficult parents. Usually her nightmares were centred on her classroom or staff meetings. Her dreams all had an air of aggression and she would wake up exhausted.

A few days after Craig had left, she went to stay at Fran's house. They'd been work friends for years and, and when Fran saw her brushing away tears, she got the story out of her and offered a spare room for a few days. They could keep her company. At first Charlotte was reluctant. She wanted to keep the mess to herself, and didn't want it compromised by sympathy. After a week, she could no longer bear home, empty and full of reminders, and took Fran up on her offer, feeling herself drifting downstream, buffeted on all sides. If she had stopped to ask herself, truly do I want all this to happen,

she would have rationalised her feelings of desolation and disintegration and said they were inevitable elements of any major life-change. But.

Fran noticed that Charlotte had been oddly impersonal, trying to hold herself in, carrying on in a forcedly cheerful way, hardening her external self, closing down her usual sensitive awareness of others. Fran understood, and was there to listen, if needed. Charlotte kept her disclosures to a minimum, which created tension in Fran. Peter remained indifferent. He was a science teacher, and a wonderfully-talented linguist and musician, and kept himself to himself. Fran said he was always either trying to learn a new language or practising the clarinet. Although he had an analytic mind and was fascinated by scientific processes – the bedroom was stacked with copies of *New Scientist* – his chief joy was losing himself in a world of scales, declensions and syntax. What was going on with Charlotte was of minor interest, her presence in the house hardly registering with him until Fran forced him to have a view on something. When he gave his opinion, she was always amazed, and a little disappointed, not at how sensible he was – he was always that – but how banal and unimaginative he could be, as though the lives of others were solely figurative, as though they had no feelings. Fran had given up trying to unlock him, and Charlotte saw him as a warning as to what can happen when the vital connections in a marriage are lost.

At school, Charlotte's reserve caused its own strains. Her blond hair had always been dramatized by the black clothes she wore for teaching, her face softened by natural smiles and a general vivacity. But now the smiles were forced, tension lines had appeared around the eyes, and her hair seemed listless and uncared for. School stains appeared on her clothes and were only half-heartedly cleaned off. Sensing her own disintegration, she decided she must get hold of herself.

Then the Government imposed a lockdown and she could neither work nor spend time with friends.

Only go for her daily walk. Which she did, and took liberties with the rules, extending her route daily. She would look idly at places to live, knowing that before long she would have to sell, no matter what Craig wanted, not because she was compelled by money, but as an inevitability, for a new start.

Two weeks after the lockdown, she'd had another dream. During a walk she was passing by the side of a motorway, cars and lorries brushing her arm and splashing her in the rain. Then she saw a car coming right at her with Piotrek at the wheel, calm and passive, and in the same car, another Piotrek leaning out the window leering at her and another

Piotrek sitting in the back laughing at her and yet another smiling understandingly. She saw herself mouthing Why? Why? but no sound came out, and she jumped out of the way.

She'd never seen where was Craig was living but knew roughly where it was. She was curious and toyed with the idea of walking in that direction but couldn't quite make the decisive move because it would feel like a transgression, and, besides, what if Craig caught sight of her?

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"How's Dad?"

"No idea. I haven't seen him." She wanted to add, And I don't care, but resisted out of tact, and also because her voice would probably give away the lie, which she could barely acknowledge to herself, let alone admit to her son.

Charlotte was on her weekly video call. Lucas had been working as a research assistant at Aix-Marseille University in Marseille when the lockdown happened. For months before then he had feared he would have to leave because of his country's political decision about Europe. Now he was unable to get his basic shopping without filling out an 'attestation', let alone travel back home.

Her younger daughter Jo was living with her Italian boyfriend, Marco, in La Spezia, and had been doing some part-time English teaching in a private school.

Lucas asked about Marco but Jo disappeared off screen.

"Just a sec."

"Best not to press," whispered Charlotte.

"I heard that, mum," said Jo as she came back into a view. "It's OK. He's no worse. Still self-isolating. I just hope he doesn't go into a second stage."

Lucas paused and let the sound of a siren fade away.

"And you?"

"So far so good. Hopefully my immune system is doing its job. There's no point in me trying to keep away from him. We don't touch, I'm sleeping on the sofa but that's about it."

"Do be careful."

But Jo wasn't telling the truth. Two days ago, Marco's temperature had gone crazy and he'd developed a dry cough and been rushed into the kind of hospital situation her

mother would have seen on the news. She had to keep it all back. Charlotte was so vulnerable. She even kept back the anger towards her father. It would only be a matter of time before she got symptoms herself, and then what? She agonised about whether to be more truthful. Her mother would be furious if she finds out and I'd said nothing. But a combination of cowardice, Lucas' presence, and the rather stilted exchanges of a video call kept her silent. Their normal intimacies, their body messaging, the subtle tones and looks, their mother-daughter love would have made openness possible. But right now, if there were any dips in her mother's mood, she'd feel helpless.

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Darrell, stuck in the suffocating atmosphere of his mother's house, hated the lockdown. His father had died a few years' before and he'd stayed on to help his mother. It was bearable all the time he could get out, and before the confinement did a number of minor house repairs for neighbours. He'd got himself a good reputation as someone reliable and cheap, and good at what he does. He could decide when to work, when to get in some serious gym training, and when to pop into a pub, as long as he was home around five for tea. He was also a first-class shot and spent the weekends clay-pigeon shooting, often in competition. After the virus struck all that disappeared. His younger brother also lived at home, and both were tetchy with each other, and said things to their mother that were meant to hurt her. She however never showed any hurt, and each comment rebounded on them and built up a lasting feeling of guilt which neither of them could acknowledge. Her placid smile was like a calm sea shielding them all from the troubled depths below.

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Once in the early days of his acquaintanceship with Craig, long before the current troubles, Darrell was out on a Sunday walk with his dogs in the park and had seen Craig lying on the grass reading a loose page of something or another. He had wanted to move away without being seen but the dogs had recognised Craig and started to bark.

"Oh, hi," said Craig vacantly.

Darrell growled at his dogs to sit down and not move.

"You all right?"

"Yeah. What are you reading?"

"Rabbie Burns. A Scots poet. He what wrote *Auld Lang Syne*. Found some poems of his online."

“Poet. I thought you were a banker, not a wanker,” Darrel smiled complacently.

“I also read poetry. I couldn’t live without it.”

“You pissing me about?”

“Nah. Listen.

*He was a gash an' faithfu' tyke,
As ever lap a sheugh or dyke.
His honest, sonsie, baws'nt face
Aye gat him friends in ilka place.”*

“Didn’t understand a fucking word.’

“Neither did I till I read the notes. It's about a couple of dogs who were mates. One was from a posh family, the other was a farm worker’s dog. It belonged to Burns.”

“What’s the point if you have to look at the notes?”

“I needed help with the Scottish dialect. *He was a gash an’ faithfu’ tyke* – crap accent, sorry – ‘gash’ means wise, and ‘tyke’ a mongrel. *As ever lap a sheugh or dyke* – as ever leaped over a ditch or a pile of stones, or something like that. *His honest, sonsie, baws’nt face* – his honest, pleasant... ‘baws’nt’... the little doggie's got white streaks on his face. *Aye gat him friends in ilka place* – always got him friends everywhere.”

Silence. They both looked at each other. More silence.

“Read it again,” said Darrell reluctantly.

Craig did.

Another silence.

“All right, I suppose,” Darrell said finally. “I still don’t know the fuck what it means.”

“Yes, you do. I’ve just told you.”

“So that was the farmer's dog, not the posh one. That meant to be me?”

“Neither,” said Craig defensively. “It’s just a poem about two dogs. And you’ve got two dogs. I just thought... Oh, never mind.”

“See you sometime. Come on you two. Shift yourselves.” And with that Darrell ambled off, pulled along by his mastiffs.

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Spencer was still living with his parents, and it felt as though every time a major decision had to be made their stock phrases would echo around his head: ‘get on’, ‘rise up the ladder’, ‘achieve your potential’, ‘make something of your life’. But the library didn’t pay him enough to be able to rise very far, and the disappointment they felt at his lack of ambition left them depressed, and in his father’s case, contemptuous. He couldn’t afford to live on his own so he would either have to flat-share or stay on in his parents’ two-up two-down, leading a dreary, predictable life.

He didn’t know anyone he wanted to share with, and he didn’t want to share with anyone he didn’t know, so what choice was there but to carry on, and pay his parents rent? Now with lockdown threatened and not even the library to escape to he felt locked into his own mind, with their voices droning away on the outside, pummelling his brain with their talk about the statistics, the Government’s lack of decisiveness, the difficulties of getting home deliveries – so much so that the tension in his head was unbearable, on the verge of snapping. Irritatedly, he sometimes wished, God forbid, he would catch the bloody disease and be transported away from them to hospital. Stupid thought.

“What’s the matter with our son,” George would say? “He hasn’t had a girlfriend for three years. Do you think he’s gay?”

“No,” rejoindered Sally. “He’s just very sensitive. He’ll find someone right for him when he’s ready.”

“Why did we call him Spencer?” George asked in a grump. “Were we trying to make him sound posh?” But this was an old battleground and he knew what her response would be.

“It was you, because you liked that stubborn old fisherman in the movie. Spencer Tracy, remember?” – he did, he’d been reminded a thousand times – “The huge fish which pulled him along and then got eaten by sharks.”

George and Sally were a 1960s couple, whose warmth and eroticism had faded quickly, so that it died almost completely after Spencer was born. In its place there was a steady vein of friction and irritation, which rarely exploded into full anger. After the lockdown and the almost exclusive commitment to each other’s company there were mini flare ups which neither of them wanted but couldn’t help. Spencer stayed in his room when he sensed more tension than usual between them. He hated feeling trapped, and hated his father in particular.

Before, the library had been his salvation and it was there that he’d first spoken to Craig when the Government was hoping that the epidemic would just go away. Craig was

looking idly looking through the literature section, which seemed to get smaller each time he came in.

“Are these all the poetry books you have?”

“Fraid so. Nobody around here reads much poetry. A few ask for Thomas Hardy.”

“If there were more books, people might pick them up and get interested. I need a selection of Burns’ poems.”

Spencer said he’d have to order one from another branch, or Craig could do it for himself online.

“Not to bother. I’ll think about it. Haven’t I seen you before? The film club?”

“Oh, yes,” and Spencer remembered. Craig had been the only other person on his own. The other twenty or so were all couples. They’d glanced at each other and smiled. Spencer had noticed his alertness, and thought he looked intelligent. In recent years he had become disappointed with people. They were all like each other, replicas rather than the real thing. You looked at them and it was almost as if they weren’t there.

He and Craig chatted for a bit, about nothing much.

“Anyway, thanks. If I decide to order it, I’ll do it online.”

Spencer hesitated. He thought no more about it at the time. Craig took away the memory of a boyish open smile.

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Charlotte was baking cakes for nobody in particular. The seclusion that everyone was enduring left those on their own finding ways to fight off their boredom, and those in families fighting off the irritations caused by the constant presence of the others. It was then she thought of work, the pleasures and frustrations of the classroom and the relief she had felt at first when they were told they would be closing till further notice. Her mind drifted to Piotrek, and what a mystery he was to her. At lunchtimes, he would munch away in silence, his jaw barely moving, showing no pleasure or interest in his sandwiches. Charlotte with her made-up mix of salad and fruit, was a careful discriminating eater, very aware of what each mouthful contained. A few casual words might be exchanged and when they had to work together they were friendly, nothing out of the ordinary. And yet both felt there was a warmth and sympathy between them. He was a reserved but easy presence in the school and kept himself separate from the others and their febrile backbiting.

Piotrek had always missed the family warmth he remembered from his own home in Poland.

His adopted country was in many ways weird. Hard work and thrift had ceased to be values in anything but name. Teachers worked long hours but did so with little spirit, joy or even efficiency. When he got a job in a primary school most of the teachers thought him strange.

They resented his popularity with the children and resented his ability to handle the paperwork and not make a fuss. The Head liked him because he was prepared to speak his mind in meetings, whereas the others sniped away behind her back. He also found it odd how often parents were encouraged to come into schools and help, even though they complained their children weren't being taught properly. And weird too the obsession with literacy and numeracy at such a young age, and endless testing. Why not more music, poetry, art and simple play? Education, what education? Sometimes when he helped the children to read it broke his heart. So lost were they, in a confusing, incoherent world they had no hold on.

Products of the village. The techno-media-political world unable to recognize its part in making them thick, imposing yet more meritocratic systems on them to fail and then blame the schools. He had had one sweet little boy who just sat there and looked at him, so frail, tears in his eyes, and Piotrek couldn't get him to do anything. He heard afterwards the social services had been in and given the parents some kind of warning. The boy loved school because it was the one place he could find warmth and someone prepared to give him time. But that wasn't good enough for the system. The school had poor results and was put under special measures.

The boy was taken out and Piotrek never knew what happened to him.

He didn't think much of the young teachers. They were frivolous, self-centred and loud, where he was serious and caring; they were hedonistic and materialistic, where he was more spiritual, a Slavic soul with a Catholic upbringing. The children sensed his warmth and trusted him, even though he was not particularly outgoing. He wasn't really tuned into their media world. He taught them well and they made good progress. But at the end of the year he received far fewer presents than less able but jollier colleagues.

Among the teachers only Charlotte interested him. Charlotte, too, had sensed his spiritual nature and it drew her to him. He was all reserve and gentleness, and kept the secrets of his inner life to himself. He simply got on with the job. And he too sensed that she knew all this.

The day before the lockdown she was walking out of school and Piotrek was getting into his car, and stopped without thinking, and looked at her.

“Can I offer you a lift?”

“Eh, no thanks. No. That’s kind of you. I need to walk. I need the fresh air.”

She was overcome with panic. Partly because the idea of social distancing had become current but also because she felt there would be a whole string of consequences that she hadn’t the courage to deal with.

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“I didn’t know you were a fisherman.”

But Darrell just looked at him, with a half-smile, mocking.

Craig had wandered down to the chalk stream, to try and clear his mind.

“What are you after?”

“Trout. Why? Have you got a poem about that, too.”

Craig smiled, and sat down a bit apart.

“From tomorrow it looks as though we won’t be allowed.”

“They won’t stop me fishing.”

He looked at Craig, curiously, and mocked him in silence.

“My caravan’s not far from here.”

“I know.”

“You know?”

“Yeah, I’ve seen you.”

Craig was taken aback but said nothing. Darrell turned and stared at his float.

“If you want to borrow books, I’ve got plenty.”

There was a long silence before Darrell replied.

“Like what?”

And immediately regretted his show of interest and closed down.

“Not just poetry. Novels. Books on wildlife. Only if you’re interested.”

A pause.

“Maybe.”

A swirl of half formed thoughts and contradictory feelings were battering away at his surface calm. Willing himself not to say a word, he tightened into an even deeper silence. Yes, yes, he would go, rummage through the books, take some away, and check out this fucker’s lifestyle.

But tangled up in such a want was repulsion, shame and indifference, and he would reject any such offer.

Craig could feel the tension and decided to leave.

“See you.”

“Yeah, see you later.”

But when he left, Darrell felt a sense of loss and Craig felt it had been a missed opportunity.

Both were depressed.

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Spencer was lying on his bed letting images drift through his semi-awake self. The effect of a brief exchange with Craig had puzzled him. Why? It had been fairly inconsequential. Sure, he was nice enough, a bit intense perhaps, but he was a different generation, not much younger than his father. Nevertheless, part of him felt he'd quite like to see him again. Asking for a book of poetry made him interesting. He himself read a lot, particularly poetry, and since university he'd never met anyone he could really talk to about things like that.

From his early teens he had felt an outsider. Often during the day, he would amble along the streets, peering in at windows, particularly offices. They had a deadly fascination for him. The scenes inside were like masques, behind which there was uncreated life, a weird anonymity, as though a complex of mechanical functions were being performed without movement. Phones jammed between ear and shoulder, faces transfixed by screens. Money was being made for the great Pyramid but it was ant life, static, and had a banal inevitability about it. Those at the top have the power, the rest settle for crumbs, getting paid just enough to live on and have an occasional ‘good time’. He resisted all undercurrents pulling him into this world, for money's sake, for a career. He was outside, and would stay outside.

But he needed someone to talk to, someone who could help shore up his isolation.



Charlotte was looking out at the empty street. How long before she'd be able to get back to work? She was enjoying the simpler life but there were long stretches of boredom. What would it have been like living with a husband planning to desert her? Thank God she was alone, but how she missed the little drops of humour and vivacity in mundane social exchanges. She forced herself to be chatty in the distancing queues, but customers were wary, more were wearing masks, and the two metre gaps made it a strain. No, she said to herself, she didn't need anyone, but her dreams told her she longed for sensual pleasures. Yes, she wanted this restricted life to end but dreaded a return to the old. And Piotrek? Well, they couldn't even meet, let alone take it further.

She had loved Craig so very much. She recalled those moments when they were both thoughtless of others, and the world was reduced to themselves, before the children were born.

She had first seen him when she was putting in a cheque at the bank, long before he became the manager. They exchanged pleasantries and his light humour and slightly mocking tone were attractive to her. He seemed to want to show that he was only a banker in appearance.

She was in her first year at school and carried along by the successes and failures of teaching and the relentless routines of school life. There were threats of a new inspecting body and schools were fearful of losing their freedoms to teach as they saw fit. In the evenings the younger, newer teachers would meet in the pub, and it was there one evening, a bit tipsy, she saw Craig sipping a beer in the corner and asked if he'd like to join them. He had recognised her and declined. After another chance encounter there was mutual attraction and this time they agreed to meet. Within a matter of weeks, it became a physical affair and went from there to marriage and children, in a predictable sequence which at the time gave her deep satisfaction and a sense of security. Where would life have taken her if she hadn't seen him that day? Over the years the predictable sequence became a burden, and security turned into insecurity. Both worked long hours, and she tried to keep their domestic, family life together.

They would make sure that on Saturday or Sunday they were alone together for at least part of the day, but their hold on those precious moments grew tenuous. Charlotte found the pressures at school demanded more of her time, and the domestic chores which they liked to do together were given to a cleaner and gardener. Their meals became more perfunctory, time-saving and ready-made.

Craig was distracted, and dissatisfied with life at the bank. He missed the warmth and marital love there had been in their early days, and they became more irritable with each other. His amiable manner appeared to be under constant strain. When they had important things to say they did it through the children. Communication between them became minimal, and had less and less meaning. Each knew the other wasn't happy and blamed work but they couldn't talk about their unhappiness. When Craig told her what he intended to do she was shocked but not shocked. Shocked because no matter how much you expect and fear it, when it happens it feels as though the world is falling away. It was as though Craig had been gripped by madness.

If it had been the usual 'other woman', she would have exploded but understood it. But for this? Why?

Charlotte compensated with a more driven commitment to work, obsessed with becoming as good a teacher as possible, spending evenings out with the younger teachers. Piotrek was someone she had transitory fantasies about, but before Craig left he had not filled any significant part of her inner life.

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"We're getting a new kitchen," Darrell announced, poking away at his food.

His mother just looked at him and blinked.

"I only finished painting this one last week. We don't need a new kitchen."

"There's a mate who's got one going. He'll fit. Won't be just yet..."

The lockdown had been announced earlier in the evening.

"Why didn't you talk to me before?"

"I wanted to surprise you. What's wrong with a new kitchen? This one's shit. Too old."

"It's nothing that can't be fixed."

The truth is that after his fishing trip yesterday, he felt restless and angry. He wanted to lash out, but at what? He couldn't bring his feelings into thoughts that made any sense to him. He'd try an extravagant gesture of some kind, at home, to try and calm the beast, and phoned one of his mates from the gym who was desperate to do business.

In the silence that followed he had to repress the thought that all this was the same kind of shit as that stupid fucker's giving up his life to live in a fucking caravan.

•••

Spencer had been busying himself among the periodicals. The council had asked them to cut the periodicals budget by a half and the chief librarian had asked Spencer for his view. He found the task difficult. Would he cut those he thought were rubbish or those that few visitors read and were expensive? He was flicking through *Dogs Today*, when he was aware of a presence behind him.

“Hello. Can I help you?”

“Yeah, poems. About dogs.”

Spencer couldn't keep his surprise from his face.

“What's wrong with that?”

“Nothing, nothing at all. Let me see. That's a tricky one. We don't have a very large poetry section. People don't read poetry so much these days.”

Darrell said nothing.

“I'm not much of a dog person, but I'd like one, one day. You?”

Darrell still said nothing. Spencer was distracted and Darrell wasn't going to waste his words.

“Let me see... I think I saw... Let me try... Yes, there a Chilean poet. Here. I saw it when I was putting it away.”

He flipped through and found what he was looking for. He passed the poem to Darrell.

“Just the one.”

Darrell read silently.

*His friendship for me, like that of a porcupine
withholding its authority,
was the friendship of a star, aloof,*

The rest was just a blur to him, and he slammed the book shut.

“I'll take it.”

Spencer was struck by the tension in the man, and Darrell felt like a porcupine himself.

•••

Piotrek's wife and child had gone back to Poland two years before. Speaking little English, and shy in the presence of strangers, she had never really settled in England. With the constant fear that she was living in a country largely hostile to foreigners, she missed the familiar routines of home. Her whole existence was taking their son to school, cleaning

the flat, cooking and sleeping. Occasionally, another lonely Pole would call, and for a while she cheered up and relaxed. Conversation with Piotrek was tense and unnatural, and there was little of the family warmth that both of them craved. When he got home he was frequently on the end of irritable sniping, which she hated herself for but couldn't help. When she decided to go back to Poland, Piotrek applied for permanent UK residence, because of Brexit and because he knew that if he went back with her he would be subjected to the overpowering will of his mother-in-law.

After the lockdown he felt lost. There was talk of some teaching online but it never materialised. All he could do was what everyone else was doing – walking, cycling, and staying at home, reading and streaming movies.

•••

Lockdown had been announced in late March and there were further restrictions in April. Some were eased in late May and more in early June but schools were still closed. Fishing was 'allowed' and one evening Piotrek found himself a quiet spot he'd never been to before.

"Have you paid?"

He had closed his eyes and was waiting for a bite.

"Scuse me?" He sat up and looked round into the setting sun and there was this huge bulk hovering over him, closer than he should be, with two huge dogs with drooping ears.

"No, I didn't think you had to on this bit of the river. I thought the farmer didn't mind."

"Sometimes he does, sometimes he doesn't."

"You know him?"

"Yeah."

And Darrell started to walk away. "I usually fish where you are."

Piotrek felt relieved. "Oh, I'm sorry. I can move."

"Don't bother. Next time try further down."

Piotrek said OK, and heard Darrell mutter, partly to him, partly to himself, "Foreigner?"

"Yes, a Pole."

Darrell said nothing, and they both carried on. After an hour, Piotrek saw him coming towards him. "Do you want tea?"

“That’s kind, but no thanks. I’ve got some.”

This time the man did stop a couple of metres away before he spoke. “Where have I seen you before?” His voice was a mix of feigned assertiveness and unease.

“Maybe at the primary school. I’m a teacher. Have you got kids there?”

“No. Mother...” and his voice trailed away. He was a little defensive about her cleaning job. So what, he thought. Teachers think themselves so much better than anyone else but they’re not.

“Caught anything?” he asked.

“No, not even a bite.”

They froze into silence, both feeling awkward.

“There’s a bloke who lives in a caravan near here,” said Darrell. “His wife’s a teacher there.”

Piotrek felt himself tense up a little.

“I’ve seen him. I know who you mean. Why?”

“Dunno. Just wondered.” And in some confusion Darrell wandered back to his rod.

Piotrek delved into his backpack and got out a couple of beers.

“Want one?” he shouted to Darrell.

“Nah... Yes. Thanks.”

Piotrek left it half way, moved off and sat down. The dogs eyed him suspiciously.

“How you been coping?” he asked.

“OK.” Darrell resented the question. He didn’t want to be looked after by anyone. Whatever he did was whatever he did. It was no business of anyone but himself.

Silence. But Darrell couldn’t help himself.

“It’s those posh politician bastards who’re telling us what to do, then don’t do it themselves.”

He swallowed what he really wanted to say, that they were fucking lying cunts, he hated the lot of them. And the fucker in the caravan was no different from the rest of them.

Piotrek thought this might be a veiled attack on himself, but no one could accuse him of being posh. He waited for something nasty about foreigners and immigration but it never came. Perhaps out of delicacy or because foreigners were like him, outsiders.

“Absolutely. Very depressing.”

“But it’s not really your country, is it?”

Here it comes.

“Well, it is and isn’t. I’ve been living here a long time now.”

Piortrek felt this wasn’t really going anywhere, and got up to leave.

Darrell smiled, thanked him for the beer and offered to stand him a pint when the pubs reopened. It was beginning to get dark.

The old bruiser set up his line and dozed off. Within seconds he was dreaming that his dogs had broken from their leads and were running away from him. The harder and the faster he chased, the greater the gap. When he slowed down the gap narrowed. He was tired. As soon as he had recovered, he was after them again but they forged ahead. Something inside him was desperately trying to understand what was going on. Perhaps he shouldn’t give chase, but the compulsion was too great and the chase continued, until suddenly – shit – there was a shot, and he could see himself screaming, but could hear nothing except the tail end of that shot, someone was shooting his dogs, he sped up but they disappeared further into the distance, they were getting smaller, and it was all exasperation, vexation, frustration. And there it was, another shot, which this time woke him up. He looked around in panic. “My dogs,” he said, over and over again.

In the semi-darkness he made out the dim silhouettes of a couple of blokes with shotguns pointing at the water. The bastards, he thought, they’re shooting my fish. And he leapt up, let out a scream and charged at them. The dogs were barking, excited and frightened. The men, terrified, turned their guns in their direction. But Darrell was too quick for them, and they were paralysed with fear. “You’re shooting my fish!” They spoke little English but it hardly mattered. Their guns were brushed aside and they found themselves being pushed towards the water. In they went, screaming, and Darrell shouting after them, stabbing his finger in their direction – “Nobody shoots my fish. Nobody!” – sentimental tears rolling down his cheeks.

At that Darrell picked up his gear, turned on his heels in self-righteous fury, not conscious of where he was going.

•••

Charlotte had been texting Jo to agree a time for their video call but got no response. She hadn’t heard from her daughter for two days now, and before that Jo's texts had become shorter and more uninformative.

“I’m worried, Lucas. Have you heard anything?”

“No, nothing since last week. Maybe Marco’s in hospital.”

“Yes, but I doubt if she can visit. What if she's ill too?”

“I’ll try phoning the hospitals. Give my rusty Italian an outing.”

They made small talk before Lucas couldn’t resist any longer.

“Will you divorce?”

Charlotte had a fit of shock, panic and confusion and stared woodenly at the screen. Jo's health is what is important right now, and carelessly she thought Craig’s madness would pass like the bloody virus, and things would return to where they were.

Her mind began to drift, and Lucas just looked at her for a while. But no, her old life was over.

All she wanted was to be secure in the warmth of someone new. The desire was so great.

Besides, it's difficult to keep up with these long-distanced children, and nothing could ever return as it was. This slide into family fragmentation was inevitable.

And then she remembered that her daughter might be fighting for her life, and she was all helpless frustration.

“Mum?”

“Oh, sorry, no. I don’t know. It’s too early to say. I’d be a lot happier if I knew Jo was OK.”

•••

As the weeks of semi-confinement wore on Spencer felt the numbness of continuing boredom.

Friction and frustration downstairs, boredom and frustration upstairs. Only the daily walks gave him any release. When the days were crisp and sunny, a sense of well-being would return and he felt himself opening up. At this point he would come to understand that it wasn’t just this difficult phase that was frustrating him but the whole of life. Jobs and money didn’t interest him, and in the company of others he was nervous and insecure. He found it difficult to make friends. There was never any chance for a long-term relationship, let alone marriage and children. His time at school and university had been awkward. He felt he wasn’t like the others. The one reward was when he was able to fight off the pressure of having to study for exams and found the time to read real books. His best tutors had understood the influential power of the books they were

encouraging him to read, as well as the destructive results-driven forces of the education system they were part of.

After university he drifted into low paid work in the library, which had the unfortunate effect of committing him to parent dependency.

His dalliances with women had been brief and unsatisfying, a mile away from the sexual fantasies that had haunted his college years. He had had a short-term affair with a temporary librarian, and felt fleetingly the joys of mutual sexual fulfilment, but regretted the lack of deep mutual love.

During lockdown he would often walk through the dense birch woods on the edge of town. He would follow the narrow tracks just visible in the undergrowth until he came to a familiar clearing of beech stumps, which in spring had been carpeted with bluebells. There, absent from the human world, he would try to put himself back together again, to find what he termed 'a more authentic self', and the only way there was inwards, towards a deeper self.

One cold, crisp dawn with the broken rays of the sun in his face, he approached the clearing when he realised he was not alone. Tightening, he trod cautiously and made out a figure he recognised. This figure was looking alarmed and on alert. They gave each other an awkward greeting, and awkward half-truths of why they were there. Both self-consciously stood at a distance from one another, as advised, before finding separate stumps to sit on. Spencer outlined his current living circumstances, in response to Craig's questions, and Craig gave the gist of his.

Spencer wondered how a man like this, used to material comfort, could survive. They eyed each other warily, Spencer not certain that Craig, a much older man, wasn't a pervert. Craig was not certain how much he wanted to give away to this callow youth but there was a certain naivety and ease in him which he found attractive. Against what he had always promised to himself, he invited the youth back to his lair for tea. Spencer recoiled at first, fearing it wasn't right, but then trusting to the fundamental honesty of the man and reasoning that if he had any nasty intentions here would have been as good a place as any, he accepted. There was a reality about Craig, even if he was a bit obsessive. He seemed to have more about him than most people.

"At the beginning I did a bit of odd-jobbing for the farmer. Grow my own vegetables, pick berries. That sort of thing."

"It sounds ideal."

“It can be hard, particularly when I can't find much to eat. It's true I still have some money in the bank but I'm determined not to touch it. Besides, my wife...”

But this was all too much, and the response was inevitable.

“At least you know you've got it. You won't starve,” said Spencer sharply.

Craig wished he'd kept quiet and felt diminished.

“Excuse the mess,” he said opening the door.

And Spencer felt a rush of warm air coming from inside. The burner was still going and Craig fussed a little, and lit a few candles. Really it seemed quite cosy.

“I'll make some tea,” he said pouring off some warm water from a little tank.

Spencer looked around. Books scattered everywhere – the bed raised from the floor, clothes stuffed in the space underneath, a shelf of pickled vegetables, onions and garlic.

“And your loo?”

“Oh, that's outside, a homemade compost toilet. No need for water.”

Craig told him about Darrell and the yobs. He explained that the kids were just hopeless and helpless victims of a system that only values economic solutions and has no idea what education is. “Inevitably, we now have an uneducable underclass. Most don't have a chance from the day they're born. Yet they assert their rights because they know it's the only way to get what they want, whereas you and I can get it through clever talk. You can't really blame them.”

Spencer sat down and exhaled in such a way that Craig thought there might be irony there. Is he just an old Jeremiah sounding off?

“How have you been coping during lockdown?” Craig asked, changing tack.

“OK. It's a drag having to live at home. I'm glad we're coming out of it. I need to get out.”

In fact, this was not quite true. In some respects, Spencer had quite liked the lockdown, since he didn't have to engage with people he had nothing in common with. As long as he could detach himself from his parents' moods and chatter, which wasn't easy.

Nothing much more of consequence was said. Both felt a certain warmth for each other. A tacit understanding, despite their age difference. Craig told him that if he wanted to come again, to feel free.

On his way back Spencer wondered whether Craig wasn't a little mad. Being a drop-out at his time of life, when he had had all the comforts, wasn't that just a middle-class

indulgence, a marriage-wrecking act of self-love? But how could he, Spencer, criticise anyone, when he was still taking refuge in his parents' house? At his age for heaven's sake. Craig meanwhile was wondering why he had invited him and worried that he'd come across as lonely and needy. Perhaps he was. Which might account for the unease he felt whenever he reflected on his situation.

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"Why didn't you say no?" asked Charlotte.

And a look of confusion came over Darrell's mother. She was a little frightened of her son as well as a little excited at the prospect of a new kitchen. A 'no' would have stuck in her throat.

Besides, he would have taken no notice. It had been like this since his father had died. He had his own way in everything.

"Well, you won't have to repaint for a bit," laughed Charlotte. "When it's allowed, you'll be able to come and clean for us."

"Oh, I thought you were on your own."

"Oh, yes I forgot. For *me*, I meant," and she laughed again.

Old habits die hard, thought Charlotte evasively.

"I don't know when. The boy's feeling a bit poorly right now. I hope he hasn't got it."

"Oh, so do I. You'd have to self-isolate."

Charlotte thought that might have sounded as if her need for a cleaner took priority over the boy's health. "Sorry, I didn't mean..." But the old woman had interpreted nothing and walked on into the shop. Everything was a matter of course. But Charlotte walked away, disconsolate, without really knowing why.

•••

Craig was poking at his ragged mattress, trying to sleep off his depression but images and half thoughts were keeping him awake. Darrell with his class resentment, his contradictions, and his tentative steps towards a different kind of thinking. Spencer, a solitary youth, good natured with a touch of innocence, a lost presence in an uncongenial world. There were connections of spirit between them which he might not have seen so clearly in 'normal' times. He and Spencer had detached themselves from the semi-educated middle-class they grew up in, and Darrell was pulling away from the

dispossessed state of his class. Long before Covid the world had appeared to him to be in the grip of the virus of materialism, its moral culture lost, the deeper social bonds weakening. How he hated it and despaired. Now, though, the world had the shared purpose of keeping itself alive and he dared to hope the grip might weaken, and the four winds blow away this miasma.

The cause and effect of the Covid pandemic could be more easily traced. Someone selling a diseased bat in a market and unleashing a rapid reaction among humans. Careless, deliberate or simply an accident, who knows? If an accident, apportioning blame is harder. Can accidents ever be blameless? And yet he remembered scaring a rabbit out of its grazing once and it ran straight into a car. Despite his feeling of guilt, he hadn't meant to do it so how could he be guilty? He hadn't even been careless, which he would have blamed himself for. It was chance.

The cause was an accident but the effect was deadly.

The cultural virus was rarely acknowledged, so embedded was it. It had everything in its grip, politics, the means by we expressed ourselves in the media and literature, and in education. Our inability to see and say things as they really are, without pretence or distortion, lies or evasion, to take responsibility for what we say and do, honourably. To Craig it felt like a Godless post-rationalist world he lived in and it left unsatisfied his deeper needs. Was it not the same for Darrell and Spencer? Why did Charlotte not see it? In the young, particularly from better-off families, he saw lightness and fresh-faced kindness. He recalled the lines *When I consider everything that grows, Holds in perfection but a little moment* and his dread of sclerosis and decay would return. That must be it, he thought, we were in the clutches of a decaying culture, the moments of perfection over. He thought back to his many years of owning a house, and buying things he didn't really need.

How much better to be away from all that. After all, without repair, material things fray, rust and deteriorate, unable to resist the pressure of time, and he didn't want the responsibility of ownership.

Such thoughts were exhausting and without intending to he fell asleep.

•••

Piotrek couldn't settle into any one thing for very long. He had tired of fishing, and for short, snatched periods read bits of books, and waded through a string of TV catch-ups.

He was restless and bored, and lonely. The scraps of activity that filled his days lacked coherence.

Above all he was lonely, and the only thing that steadied his mind was remembering the last few months at school, and the sense that there had been a growing mutual attraction between him and Charlotte. Why had she turned down his offer of a lift that day? He knew that her first impulse was to accept but she had forced herself to resist. Why? He knew it wasn't out of dislike or fear of him as a person. Probably it was just too soon after the break-up of her marriage.

The one thing he did a lot of was walk. He had found out about her situation at school, not because she gossiped but because he'd heard some comments Fran had made in the staffroom. He had never met her husband, and didn't know what he looked like, but he fancied he had seen him in a number of faces when out walking. He recalled Darrell's slighting comments. He couldn't deny he was curious and thought that one afternoon he might try and stumble upon his caravan 'by accident'.

•••

"You look a bit peaky? You OK?"

"Yeah, just bit of a cold," he grumped.

Darrell started to cough, and Craig who had kept his distance retreated further.

"What about a temperature?"

"Nah," he said, and he trundled off, letting the mastiffs pull him.

"Look after yourself," said Craig. But he was worried. If Darrell's got the virus, his mother will get it too, and if she gets it, she'll give it to Charlotte. I must get a message through to her. Tell her to put the cleaning on hold. I'll go home and put a note through the door.

A pause.

Home? What home? And a wave of despondency came over him when he remembered the lack of contact with his children.

Darrel rushed back to his house but coughed violently and felt sweat coming from his forehead.

•••

Charlotte had just begun her video call when she heard the letter box snap shut.

"Don't worry, mum. She's in good hands."

‘She’s got the virus, hasn’t she?’

“Yes, but I spoke to the hospital and they’re hoping she’ll start to mend at the end of the week.”

“Give me the number. I must speak to them.”

“Mum, it took me forever to get through and they weren’t best pleased. And hardly anyone there speaks English” – although he didn’t know whether or not that was true.

Charlotte looked blankly at the screen, irritated and distracted, and she felt her spirits sink.

“Mum?”

She forced herself back again into responsiveness.

Lucas asked her if she had heard from dad. He hadn’t a clue how to contact him. No matter what had happened he was still dad. Charlotte said she had no idea. She only had a rough idea where he was living.

“Do ring the hospital at the end of the week and let me know.”

Lucas told her a bit about the return to something resembling normality in Marseilles, and they both felt there was nothing more to say.

Charlotte went down the stairs and saw the note on the mat.

•••

When Piotrek arrived Peter was practising his clarinet and Fran was marinating chicken pieces.

They had invited a few friends to a ‘socially distanced’ barbeque. Piotrek had misunderstood the arrival time but Fran told him not to worry and asked him to get the garden furniture out.

“Peter, Piotrek’s here. Could you come down and help him with the furniture?”

Peter was trying to perfect a couple of very tricky bars and was irritated.

“What’s the problem?” he asked as he descended. “Hi, Piotrek. How ye doing?”

Piotrek was uncomfortable and didn’t quite have the easy banter of the insider English. All the same he bustled around with Peter, who always seemed a little separated himself. Two other couples arrived and everything felt a little easier though he was conscious of being on his own.

“I wonder where Charlotte’s got to?” Fran asked Peter, and Piotrek was confused and felt a desire to leave. What was going on? Had the situation been engineered by Fran to get them together. If so, he resented it.

Drinks, and the smell of chicken cooking, and still no Charlotte. Fran gave her a call but it went straight to answerphone.

“I hope she’s OK. I know she was worried about her daughter.”

“She’ll be fine,” said Peter. Piotrek felt tense.

Social chat, and some cooked prawns in mayonnaise, and then the doorbell.

“Ah”, said Fran and Peter in unison.

“I’m so sorry,” Charlotte whispered.

‘What’s up? You look awful.’

“I went for a walk and got lost. So sorry.”

In fact, Craig’s note had left her disturbed, not because of the message but because Craig had put it through the door. Before, her fate had seemed clear and inevitable but this was an unwelcome disruption. But why? Craig had attempted no contact – he was simply doing the ordinary decent thing in these strange times, protecting another human being from the virus.

Why did it register as more that? If not for him, then for her. They had lived together for so long and he was the father of their children. So? It might have been different if he'd sent her a text, but he had no phone. So? Somehow putting a handwritten note through the door, was more than a simple act of concern, or so it seemed to her. It brought him back into her consciousness and it shook her certainties. Why? She didn't know. No doubt her confusion would settle down in time but life during the virus had dislodged itself from the norm. She didn’t confess it to Fran but she had wanted to see where Craig lived, not to make contact, but just to see. She had wandered around trying to find the spot, unaware of the time. But she couldn’t find it and headed back home depressed and humiliated that she should ever have done what she did, when she remembered what time it was, and oh, damn, the barbeque. Would she try again? She didn't know.

Charlotte did her best to make animated small talk but once she had got over her irritation at seeing Piotrek she had a detached air, as though everyone was really an irrelevance to her. She suspected that Fran had engineered the situation to bring them together but knew it would be rude to try and ignore Piotrek. To protect herself, she

fitted him into the same disconnected pattern of chatter, which both pained and offended him.

“Is everything OK?” He had caught her at a moment when she was on her own. She smiled and said nothing and he thought he saw her social mask slip for a few seconds, and warmth and desire filled his body. But she quickly gathered herself.

“Yes, fine,” and she looked away. “And you?”

Before he could answer Fran had rounded her up to help out in the kitchen. Something’s happened. Perhaps her husband. She’s so different.

Relaxing her guard after a couple of glasses of wine, she confessed to Fran where she had gone, and said she had been troubled by her daughter’s condition and wanted to tell Craig to try and make contact.

Imperceptibly, the hosts and the guests grew closer to each other and their conversation became more animated.

Charlotte was overcome with tiredness and withdrew to the sitting room and into herself. She saw Piotrek glance in her direction, and self-consciously turned away, only half aware of what she was doing. She hoped he wouldn't take it as an act of cruelty, even though he was bound to see it as a reversal of her earlier behaviour. Part of her hoped he would make excuses for her and keep the potential alive in himself. But that was wrong. Besides he was married too. If she went off with him, they'd only be exchanging one mess for another. He didn't know what had happened to her. How could he? That the simple act of Craig posting a note about Darrell through the letter box had reconnected something for her, whether or not it was significant to Craig. She wanted to share with him her sense of helplessness about their daughter. But what if she were disillusioned by his reaction? And here she was closing down the chance of a future with someone who's marriage was also on the rocks.

Struggling to keep awake, she recalled the span of her own marriage. From the passionate and loving to passion's decline as the children grew up. Instead of a drift into affectionate and considerate old age, which she'd always wanted, there was discontent and frustration. What caused what, and was it a question of fault or blame. Weren't these changes just inevitable and in the nature of things? But if that was the case, why didn't it happen to every couple? It was surely because Craig had his fantasies of being somehow different, and she had she lacked understanding. If he was to blame, so was she.

Whereupon she fell into a deep sleep, and Fran came over and gently shut the door.

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Was he asleep or awake? Images were floating through Craig's agitated mind. No, he was asleep, he was in a huge room, downstairs, it felt like downstairs, in his old house which didn't look anything like his old house, and there were lush tropical plants everywhere and exotic furnishings from the East, and it wasn't his house any more, no no no it was Charlotte's, there was a huge bed in the middle and Charlotte was lying propped up on her elbows, her head held back, her lips full and soft, and he asked her what she was doing here and said he felt stupid for asking. I live here, silly, don't worry, there are no children around, come here, and he moved towards the moist sensual lips and he was very stiff and she pulled him into her and she was more aroused than he'd ever known her and he was aching aching aching with desire. He awoke, startled, still aching for ecstasy, and with some shame gave it to himself. He got out from under the smelly blanket, shaken and disorientated, exhausted, still possessed by erotic images.

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"He's not a boy any more. He doesn't have to tell us where he's gone," answered Sally.
"Common courtesy. And we're not fully out of lockdown."

George understood his son's needs to break from their domesticity, what young man wouldn't want the same, in fact he shouldn't be living here at all, but out there on his own or 'settled down'. All the same he was irritated and didn't fully understand why, whether there was envy that Spencer could at least be free if he wanted to, or whether he wanted his son to recognise the tragedy of his own weakness, being 'settled', he didn't know. What he said was he didn't like not being informed as to what he was up to, the sheer impoliteness of it.

Spencer had told his mother that he'd bumped into a library contact, an odd fellow, but she thought it best not to mention it.

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Craig couldn't quite let go of his dream, or forget the guilt he was feeling about what he had done to his family. And he worried about Darrell. The old thug-who-wasn't was a kindly man, and although he'd heard that he annoyed his mother by taking over his dad's role, he was by all accounts generous. The woman accepted pretty well everything he did once she'd said her piece. Actually, she was rather proud of him and his prizes for shooting. He might be bullish but she never thought him nasty, and if he got into fights he never started them. No doubt the way he spoke to her would sound rude to people

like Craig and his family ('unacceptable') but nobody was getting smacked around, and anyway Darrell's neighbours probably thought nothing of it. Why should they?

He'd looked awful the other day and Craig was quite sure he'd got the dreaded disease, and given that he was overweight from his weightlifting days he might well be seriously ill. But what could he do? Drop round and ask if he was OK? Then what? No-one would answer the door because they would all be self-isolating. He could offer to do the shopping, but he couldn't phone and they couldn't contact him so it was all rather futile, even to think about it. All the same he did think about it. It would be so cruel if he had succumbed, just as the rest of the country seemed to be getting out of it, and he remembered the awful fate of soldiers killed on the last day of a war.

Anyway, he argued to himself, he trusted Darrell's neighbours would offer support.

Perhaps he could leave him some books to read. No, no, no. Darrell would hate that.

On one of his walks he passed by the house but saw no signs of life.

Craig felt frustrated at the helplessness of his own situation, no money he could offer, and without a phone, no practical help.

After a couple of days in bed Darrell had felt better, and as if to prove something, despite the protests of his mother about it being illegal, went for a walk, careful to avoid contact.

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Finding the caravan shut up, Spencer walked round to the back and on to the vegetable patch, but there was no-one there. He felt stupid, and irritated that he'd given in to the impulse to come. Yes, he was bored, the lockdown routines had become tiresome, but all the same.

This man had something, which seemed to parallel his own feelings of separateness. He hadn't exactly been lured to this isolated spot – he had made the choice himself – but he had been drawn to it. He trusted Craig was no madman who chopped up his victims and buried them. He was just an odd bloke. How could he be interested in *me*? A nothing really. He felt his own vulnerability and was afraid.

He walked down to the river and sat for a while. His search for a more authentic self was all very well but it still left him a prisoner of time. He knew he had a religious sensibility and understood the limitations of self. Most people of his age were either contemptuous or indifferent to any such thoughts. He saw little religion in his parents and he'd never belonged to a Church himself. He would always avoid discussions about whether or not

he 'believed in God' or whether 'there was a God'. They seemed senseless and irrelevant. He didn't understand atheists and agnostics. Why do they want to close themselves down to the possibilities of religion? Didn't its poetic images have deeper meaning than the facts of history or science? Do we really live in a void of physical existence – mere matter and space, subject to time? Thus he reflected as he watched the ineluctable glide of the clear, fresh water disappear into places beyond his view.

Spencer realised that Craig had his limitations, wrapped up as he was in himself and his societal and environmental notions. At the deeper levels he could never really connect with him. He was so much older for a start. Spencer would have to make his own way, submit to the promptings within, no matter where they took him.

For one glorious moment all fear in him had gone.

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Lucas tailored the tone of his voice so as not to panic his mother.

"No, she relapsed. Something happened."

"I'm going over, even if I have to drive."

"No, no, no, they'll never let you in. You'd get in the way. Please don't."

"I don't care, I have to be near her."

"But you could end up in hospital yourself, it's crazy. You'd only be a burden and you'd have to pay for any treatment. Forget it, mum, please."

Charlotte looked away from the screen and Lucas waited to get her attention.

"Mum. Don't."

"I must speak to your father."

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Smoke could be seen miles from the town. The first thought of those at home when they heard the sirens was that the virus had claimed another victim but when they heard the fire engine their insides tightened with excitement. More like a car accident at this time of the year, but those still out walking could see smoke in the distance. Maybe a hayrick had caught fire but why the ambulance?

The scene was one of confusion. Foam had been squirted everywhere and a bored ambulance crew wearing masks lounged about waiting to see if they were needed. Blue

lights flashed in the late evening gloom and two police officers – a stocky policeman and a tall police woman, laced with phones and a battery of other devices – were taking a statement from a farmer when they were interrupted by a shout.

“Move your car away, please, sir. There are sparks around. We don’t want another fire, do we?”

John Reedham, the farmer, was a short man, in his seventies, dressed in his lifelong uniform – tweed, cords, frayed checked shirt and brogues. He had progressed from Marlborough to Cambridge to farming, was a ‘name’ at Lloyds, and very visibly gave patrician support to the local community. He was notoriously bad tempered to strangers, which helped those who knew him feel favoured when he spoke or acted kindly. He was telling the police officers that he’d been thinking of turning the field into a paddock with stables and he would need the owner of the caravan to move somewhere else. He had another field a couple of miles away, he could go there. The owner didn’t much like the idea but Reedham had told him that nothing was definite as yet and he’d give him plenty of notice.

“Do you know where the owner is, sir?”

“No, I haven’t a clue. I haven’t been up here for a couple of days. He can’t be in town, everything’s closed. Perhaps he’s walking somewhere. He’s not inside, is he?”

“Not as far as we know. The door was open, which was odd, but they won’t know for sure until they can examine the debris. Also they’re not sure whether or not it was started deliberately.”

“It’s awful, but I can’t say I’m sorry the thing’s gone. It was a heck of an eyesore.”

And he went to move his Range Rover.

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Peter was showing Fran the headline on the screen – CARAVAN BLAZE SUSPICIOUS.

“They thought it started accidentally. Now they’re not sure because they can’t get hold of the owner.”

“Let me try Charlotte again. She can’t still be out.”

“All very strange. He couldn’t have been in the caravan, could he?” muttered Peter

Fran didn’t hear him as she held herself in tension listening to the continuous ringing tone.

“Bizarre. Who would want to do it?” mused Peter.

“Who knows what he’s been up to in recent weeks. Where *is* she?”

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That evening Spencer was lying on his bed staring at the ceiling, reviewing his life, Piotrek was trying to get through to his wife, and Reedham was sipping whisky and deciding which side of the field he would build the stables.

Four lads and two girls had dropped their bikes by the roadside and were guzzling beer and laughing.

In the night, Darrell was rushed into hospital.

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The next day the rules about social distancing were relaxed and hotels and pubs were allowed to reopen. In the evening the John Barleycorn had a few seated customers that were being waited upon. The large hotel in the centre had no bookings until the following week, and the manager was about to close up for the day when in the soft afternoon sunshine a late middle-aged couple walked through the front door without any luggage. They looked vaguely familiar but he couldn’t place them. Neither spoke to the other. The manager took off his mask, forced a smile, and straightened his tie.

At the dinner table the couple attracted his attention because of their silence. There were no other guests. They ordered mechanically and ate mechanically. He had thought it strange that they had booked separate rooms when they had no luggage. They seemed to be a couple rather than working colleagues and yet didn't speak to each other. They must have had a row. Towards the end of the meal he noticed the man take a piece of paper and put it on the table for the woman to see. He was improperly curious but couldn’t work out what was going on. The woman glanced at its contents. She looked up at the man and gave a half smile. The manager didn’t know why but he felt very emotional. Was it a romantic gesture? No, but it was obviously significant. They seemed to know each other very well. But why won’t they talk? He was overcome with curiosity and went to offer them some wine, apologise for the limited menu, make a fuss, anything so that he could see what was on that paper. The man ignored him, apart from a halting gesture to stop him clearing away the plates, but he was at the table long enough to catch sight of a printout of a receipt for Eurotunnel. One way only.