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THE SUMMER ISLES

World Fantasy Award 1999

One

On this as on almost every Sunday evening, I find a message from my acquaintance on the wall of the third cubicle of the Gents beside Christ Church Meadow. It's two thumbnails dug into the sleek green paint this week, which means the abandoned shed by the allotments past the rugby grounds in half an hour's time. A trail of other such marks run across the cubicle wall; what amounts nowadays to my entire sexual life. Here-Oh, happy, dangerous days!-is the special triple-mark that meant a back room in the hotel of a sympathetic but understandably wary proprietor. He's gone now, of course, has Larry Black, like so many others. Quietly taken one night for the shocks and needles of the treatment centers in the Isle of Man.

I pull the chain, clunk back the lock, and step out into the sweet Jeyes Fluid air. Placed above me on the wall as I wash my hands, with what, if you didn't know this country, you would surely imagine to be ironic intent, hangs a photograph of John Arthur. He gazes warmly across his desk, looking younger than his forty-nine years despite his grey hair. The photograph is brass-framed, well-polished. Of course, no one has dared to deface it.

Outside along St. Giles, twilight has descended, yet the warmth of this early summer day remains. A convoy of trucks lumbers around the cobbles, filled with bewildered-looking conscripts on their way to the sprawling camps in the southeast of England. A few of the newer or expensively refurbished pubs already boom with patriotic songs. I pause to relight my pipe as I pass St. John's, then lean spluttering against a wall and cough up out a surprising quantity of stringy phlegm, watched over by a small but disapproving gargoyle. Odd, disgusting, habit-hawking and spitting. Something that, until recently, I'd only associated with old men.

There's still some life out on the playing fields. Undergrads are wandering. There are groups. Couples. Limbs entwine. Soft laughter flowers. The occasional cigarette flares. Glancing back at the towers of this city laid in shadows of hazy gold against the last flush of the sun, it's all so impossibly beautiful. It looks, in fact, exactly like an Empire Alliance poster. Greater Britain Awake! I smile at the thought, and wonder for a moment if there isn't some trace of reality still left in the strange dream that we in this country now seem to be living. Turning, sliding my hand into my pocket to nurse the encouraging firmness of my anticipatory erection, I cross the bridge over the Cherwell as Old Tom begins his long nightly chime.

Despite all the back-to-nature and eat-your-own greens propaganda that Home Secretary Mosley has been peddling, the shed at the far end of the allotments and the plots it once served remain abandoned, cupped as they are in a secret hollow, lost by the men who went to the War and never came back again. I lever open the door and duck inside. Tools and seeds and sweet dry manure. But no sign yet of my acquaintance as the floorboards creak beneath my feet. The darkness, even as my eyes grow accustomed to the gloom, becomes near-absolute as night settles outside. A distant bell ripples a muffled shipwreck clang. The late train to London rattles by in the distance, dead on time.

My acquaintance is late. In fact, he should have been here first. As I pushed back the door, his younger arms should already have been around me. He trembles often as not when we first lock together, does my acquaintance. After all, he has so much more to lose. For, despite the darkness and the secrecy with which we pretend to cloak our meetings, I know exactly who my acquaintance is. I have studied the lights of his house shining through the

privet that he trims so neatly each fortnight, and I have watched the welcoming faces of his wife and two daughters as they greet him at his door.

Checking, occasionally, the radium glow of my watch, I let a whole hour slide by as the residues of early hope and fear sour into disappointment, and then frank anxiety. But what, after all, do I know of the demands of being a father, a husband? Of working in some grim dead-end section of the Censor's Department of the Oxford City Post Office? At ten, I lever the shed door open and step back out into the summer night, leaving my long-forgotten libido far behind me. The stars shine down implacably through the rugby H's as I make my way past lovers and drunks and dog walkers into the old alleys. I turn for a moment as I hear the whisper of footsteps. Could that be a figure, outlined against the mist of light that seeps from a doorway? But by the time I've blinked, it becomes nothing-an aging man's fancy: the paranoias of love and fear.

Then quickly along Holywell where an owl calls, and onward under the plane trees to my college and my quad, to the cool waiting sheets of my room deep in the serene heart of this ancient city.

I open my eyes next morning to the sight of my scout Christlow bearing a tray containing a steaming pot of Assam, a rack of toast, my own special jar of marmalade. Even as the disappointments of the previous evening and the cold aches that have suddenly started to assail my body wash over me, I still have to smile to find myself here.

"Lovely morning, sir." Christlow drifts through diamonds of sunlight to place the tray astride my lap. The circled cross of the EA badge on his lapel winks knowingly at me. "Oh, by the way, sir. You asked me to remind you of your appointment today."

"Appointment?"

"At ten o'clock, you were seeing your doctor. Unless, of course, you've-"

"-No. Yes." I nod in my pajamas, what's left of my hair sticking up in a grey halo, a dribble of spilt tea warming my chin-all in all, a good approximation of an absent-minded don. "Thank you, Christlow, for reminding me."

In that scarily deferential way of his, Christlow almost bows, then retreats and closes the door. With a sound like distant thunder, his trolley trundles off down the oak-floored corridor. And yes, I truly had forgotten my appointment. The dust-spangled sunlight that threads my room now seems paler and my throat begins to ache as whispers of pain and uncertainty come into my head.

Walking along High Street an hour later, I have to squeeze my way through the queue outside the Regal for the day's first showing of Olivier's Henry V. Many, like Christlow, wear EA badges. But all ages, all types, both sexes, every age and disability, are gathered. A mixture, most bizarrely of all, of town and gown-undergrads and workers-the two quite separate existences that Oxford so grudgingly contains.

Beyond the junction of Alfred Street I push through the little door beside the jewelers and climb the stairs to the surgery. The receptionist looks up without smiling, then returns to stabbing a finger at her typewriter. The posters in this poky waiting room are like the ones you see everywhere nowadays. With Your Help We Can Win. Now Is The Time. Join the Empire Alliance-Be a Part of the Modernist Revolution. There's a fetching painting of the towers and spires of this great dreaming city aglow at sunset, much as I saw them yesterday. And, of course, there's John Arthur.

"Mr. Brook. Doctor Parker will see you."

I push through the doorway, blinking. Doctor Parker is totally new to me. Fresh-faced, young, and pinkly bald, he looks, in fact, almost totally new to himself. I have no one but myself to blame for taking my chances with the National Health Service. I could have availed myself of Doctor Reichard, who comes to our college every Wednesday to see to us dons, and is available at most other times, since, on the basis of a stipend granted by George I in 1715, these attendances comprise his sole professional duty. But my

complaints-shortness of breath, this cough, the odd whispering that sometimes comes upon me, the growing ache in my bones-sound all too much like the simple ravages of age. And I nurse, also, a superstitious fear that my sexual leanings will be apparent to the trained medical eye.

"Sorry about this ah... I've only just got... ," he says as he glances down at his page-a-day calendar. Thursday 13 June 1940. The letters seem to glow, so brightly rainbowed at their edges that I wonder if this isn't some other new symptom. "You're the ah... The columnist, aren't you? What was it? 'The Fingers of History'?"

"Figures of History."

"Of course. Daily Sketch, every Saturday. Used to find it handy at school." Then another thought strikes him. "And you knew him, didn't you? I mean, you knew John Arthur..."

"That was a long time ago."

"But what's he really like?"

I open my mouth to give my usual noncommittal reply. But it doesn't seem worth it.

"Here we are." He shuffles the X-rays into order, then leans over the file. "Um-Griffin Brooke. I thought it was Geoffrey, and Brook without the e?"

"It's a sort of pen-name," I say, although in fact the Oxford Calendar, the door to my rooms-even the name tags Christlow sews into my gowns-also read Geoffrey Brook. Griffin Brooke, the names I was born with, now resides only in odd corners such as this, where, despite the potential for confusion, I find myself reluctant to give them up.

As my thoughts drift toward all the odd accidents in life that have brought me here-and how, indeed, Fingers of History would be a good description of some historical process or other-another part of me watches Doctor Parker as he then raises the cover of my file a few inches to peer sideways into it.

Something changes behind his eyes. But when he clears his throat and smoothes back down the papers and finally makes the effort to meet my gaze, I'm still certain that I'm fully prepared for the worst. What could be more terrible, after all, than growing old, or emphysema, bronchitis, tuberculosis...?

"It seems," he begins, "that a tumor has been growing in your lungs... Outwardly, you're still in good enough health, but I really doubt if there's point in an operation."

Not even any need for an operation! A stupid bubble of joy rises up from my stomach, then dissolves.

I lick my lips. "How long," I ask, "have I got?"

"You'll need to make plans. I'm so terribly sorry..."

Thrust upon the gleaming linoleum rivers of the new NHS, I am kept so busy at first that there is little time left for anything resembling worry. There are further X-rays at the Radcliffe, thin screens behind which I must robe and disrobe for the benefit of cold-fingered but sympathetic men who wear half-moon glasses. Nurses provide me with over-sweet tea and McVitie's Digestives. Porters seek my opinion about Arsenal's chances in the FA Cup.

I feel almost heroic. And for a while I am almost grateful for the new impetus that my condition gives to a long-planned project of mine. A book not of history, but about history. One which examines, much as a scientist might examine the growth of a culture, the way that events unfold, and attempts to grapple with the forces that drive them. The Fingers of History? The odd way that inspiration sometimes arrives when you're least looking for it, I may even have stumbled upon a title; serious and relevant to the subject, yet punning at the same time on my own small moment of popular fame in the Daily Sketch.

After years of grappling with the sense of being an impostor that has pervaded most of my life, I suddenly find that I am making good progress in writing the pivotal chapter about Napoleon. Was he a maker of history, or was he its servant? Of course, he was both-and yet it is often the little incidents, when history is approached from this angle, which stand large.

Questions such as, what would have happened if his parents Carlo and Letizia had never met?-which normal historians would discount as ridiculous-suddenly become a way of casting new light.

But one post-hospital afternoon a week or so later, as I huddle over my desk, and the warm air drifting through my open window brings the chant and the tread of Christlow and his fellow EA members parading on the ancient grass of our college quad, the whole process suddenly seems meaningless. Now, I can suddenly see the futility of all the pages I have written. I can see, too, the insignificant and easily filled space that my whole life will soon leave. A few clothes hanging in a wardrobe, an old suitcase beneath a bed, some marks on a toilet cubicle wall. Who, after all, am I, and what possible difference does it make?

Pulling on my jacket, empty with fear, I head out into Oxford as evening floods in.

I was born in Lichfield-which, then as now, is a town that calls itself a city-in the year 1880. It's middle England, neither flat nor hilly, north or south. Barring Doctor Johnson being born and a messy siege in the Civil War, nothing much has ever happened there. My father worked for Lichfield Corporation before he died of a heart attack one evening while tending his allotment. He'd had a title that changed once or twice amid great glory and talk of more ambitious holidays, but he'd always been Assistant-this and Deputy-that-one of the great busy-but-unspecified ("Well, it's quite hard to explain what I do unless you happen to be in the same line yourself...") who now so dominate this country.

My mother and I were never that stretched; we had his pension and his life insurance, and she took on a job working at Hindley's cake shop, and brought home bits of icing and angelica for me when they changed the window display. By this time, I'd already decided I wanted to be "a teacher." Until I passed into Secondary School from Stowe Street Elementary, I was always one of the brightest in my class. Even a County Scholarship to Rugby seemed within reach. And from there, yes, I was already dreaming of the Magdalene Deer, sleek bodies bathing in the Cherwell at Parson's Pleasure.

My later years in school, though, were a slog. Partly from struggling to keep pace among cleverer lads, I fell ill with something that may or may not have been scarlet fever. On my long stay away from school, a boy called Martin Dawes would call in each afternoon to deliver books and sit with me. Whilst up in my room, he would sometimes slip his hands beneath the waistband of my pajamas and toss me off, as if that, too, was a message that needed to be delivered from school. Of course, I was deeply grateful. After I had recovered, locked in the upstairs toilet with its ever-open window as my mother shuffled about in the kitchen, I would dutifully try to incorporate women into my pink imaginings as, in the absence of Martin's attentions, I stimulated myself. But at some vital moment, their chests would always flatten and their groins would engorge as they stepped toward me, cropped and clean and shining.

That, in the personal history of what I term my pre-Francis days, is the sole extent of my sexual development. There was just me, my guilty semi-celibacy, and helping my mother look after her house, and watching the lads I'd known at school grow up, leave home, marry, start families. I had, by my early twenties, also come to accept my position as a Second Class Teacher for the Senior Standard Threes at Burntwood Charity. In the articles with which I began my short career in the Daily Sketch nearly thirty years later, I gave the impression that John Arthur was one of my brightest and most ambitious pupils there, a little comet trail across the pit-dusty Burntwood skies. Thanks to numerous flowery additions by the Sketch's copy editor, I also stated that he was pale-skinned, quiet, good-looking, intense, and that he possessed a slight West Country accent, this being the time before it had changed to the soft Yorkshire that we all know now-all traits that would have got him a good beating up in the playground-and that, "on summer evenings after school when the pit whistle had blown and the swallows were wheeling," he and I would walk up into "the hazy Staffordshire hills" and sit down and gaze down at "the spires of Lichfield,

the pit wheels of Burntwood, and the smokestacks of Rugeley from the flowing purple heather." Now, after all these years of practice, this has become my party act. So, yes, John Arthur really is there in that classroom at Burntwood Charity with the smell of chalk dust and unwashed bodies. His hand is raised from the third row of desks to ask a more than usually pertinent question before I start to ramble on about one of my many pet subjects. That is how I recall him.

Too weary to stop, trailing cigarette smoke, memories, abstractions, I wander Oxford's new suburban streets, passing illuminated porches bearing individual name-plates; Church House. Dawric. The Willows. It's quiet now, although scarcely past nine and only just getting fully dark. The houses have a sleepy look. Their curtains are drawn. Faintly, like the movement of ghosts, I can see the flicker of television screens in many darkened lounges.

A footstep scuffs in the street behind me, and the sound is so furtive and unexpected that I turn and look back, although there was nothing to see. I walk on more briskly. Beyond a patch of grass where Ball Games Are Prohibited lies the home of my acquaintance, with its black-and-white gable, the privet, and the long strip of drive that, in these days of ever-growing prosperity, will probably soon be graced with a Morris Ladybird "people's car" instead of his Raleigh bicycle. But the windows of the house are darkened, uncurtained. And there is something odd about the look of them...

My feet crunch on something sharper than gravel as I walk up the path to my acquaintance's front door. Many of the windows in the bay are shattered, there is a pervasive, summery smell of children's urine, and a fat iron padlock has been fitted across the door's splintered frame. I see, last of all, the sign that the Oxford Constabulary have pasted across the bricks in the porch. Take Notice Hereby... but this sky is incredibly dark and deep for summer, and I can't read further than the Crown-embossed heading. I slump down on the doorstep, scattering empty milk bottles, covering my face with my hands. Suddenly, it all comes to me. This. Death. Everything.

When I look up some time later, a figure is standing watching me from the suburban night with her arms folded, head tilted, a steely glint of curlers. "I'm Mrs. Stevens," she tells me, offering a softly companionable hand to help me up, then leading me past the hedge and the dustbins into the brightness of her kitchen next door. Slumped at the table, I watch her as she boils the kettle and warms the pot.

"I know," she says. "This must be a shock to you..."

"They took them all away?"

"All of them. The pity of it really." She stirs her tea and passes me mine. "Them young girls."

"Nobody did anything to stop it?"

She gazes across at me, and licks the brown line of tea that's gathered on her small mustache. "I'll tell you what they were like, Mr. Brook. In every way, I'd have said, they were a decent couple. Only odd thing I remember now is they sometimes used to leave the light on without drawing the curtains so you could see right in.... The lassies were nice, though. Fed our cat for us when we went up to Harrogate last year. Knew them well yourself, did you?"

"He was just an acquaintance. But when they came to the house, was it the KSG or did-"

"-and you'd never have known, would you, to look at her?"

"Her? You mean...?"

"Ah..." Mrs. Stevens slaps her hand flat down on the table and leans forward, her brown eyes gleaming. "So you still don't know the truth of it? Her real name was something Polish. All Zs and Ks." She hurrumphs. "It's understandable that they want to come, isn't it? Just as long as they don't make themselves a burden, earn a decent living, talk like we do and don't bother our children and keep themselves to themselves."

"So what was the problem?"

"She was a Jew, wasn't she. All these years they've been living next door and acting all normal and hiding it from us." Mrs. Stevens raises her shoulders and shudders theatrically. "To think of it. It's the dishonesty. And her nothing but a dirty little Jew."

Two

Clouds sweep in across Oxford, thick and grey as wet cement. Rain brims over the low surrounding hills and washes away the hope of what had promised to be another spectacular summer. In the whitewashed yard of the town prison on a hissing grey dawn, two men are hanged for their part in an attempted mail robbery. In Honduras, the British prefix lost to revolution in 1919 is restored in a bloody coup. A car bomb in the Trans-Jordan kills fifteen German League of Nations soldiers. In India, as ever, there are uprisings and massacres, and I despair as I work on my book of ever making any sense of history. It seems, to quote Gibbon, little more than a register of cruelties, follies, and misfortunes.

In Britain, the Jews have always been small in number, and we've generally been "tolerant." Before the rise of Modernism, my acquaintance and his family probably had little more to fear from exposure than the occasional human turd stuffed through their letter box. After all, Jewishness isn't like homosexuality, madness, criminality, communism, militant Irishness: they can't exactly help being born with their grabby disgusting ways, can they? Rather like the gypsies, you see, we didn't mind them living, but not here, not with us.... In this as in so many other areas, all Modernism did when John Arthur came to power was take what people said to each other over the garden fence and turn it into Government policy.

I can well remember the Homeland for British Jewry newsreels: they were probably one of the defining moments of early Greater British history. There they were, the British Jews. Whole eager families of them helped by smiling Tommies as they climbed from landing craft and hauled their suitcases up onto the shingle of remote Scottish islands that had been empty but for a few sheep since the Clearances of a century before. And it was hard not to think how genuinely nice it would be to start afresh somewhere like that, to paint and make homely the grey blocks of those concrete houses, to learn the skills of shepherding, harvesting, fishing.

So many other things have happened since then that it has been easy to forget about the Jews. I remember a short piece on Pathé before Disney's Snow White in what must have been 1939. By then they looked rustic and sunburned, their hands callused by cold winters of weaving and dry-stone walling, their eyes bright from the wind off the sea. Since then, nothing. A blank, an empty space that I find hard to fill even in my imagination.

One morning as thunder crackles and water streams and the whole college seems to shift and creak like a ship straining at its moorings, I'm still marooned in my rooms, ill and lost in the blind alley of my book when Christlow arrives at eleven to do the cleaning.

"You know the Jews, Christlow," I chirp after clearing my throat.

"Jews sir? Yes sir. Although not personally."

He pauses in his dusting. The situation already has a forced air.

"I was wondering-it's part of my book, you see-what happened to the mixed families. Where a Jew married a gentile..."

"I'm sure they were treated sympathetically, sir. Although for the life of me I can't imagine there was ever very many of them."

"Of course," I nod, and force my gaze back to my desk. Christlow resumes his dusting, his lips pursed in a silent whistle amid the rain-streaming shadows as he lifts the photos along the mantelpiece of my mother, my father-and a good-looking, dark-haired young man.

"So you'll be all right, then, sir?" he asks when he's finished, picking up his box of rags and polishes. "Fine if I leave you now?"

"Thank you, Christlow. As always," I add, laying it on thick for some reason, as if there's a deeper debt that he and I owe each other, "you've done a splendid job."

When he's gone and his footsteps have faded into the college's loose stirrings, I slide in the bolt, then cross to the gloom of my bedroom and drag my old suitcase from beneath the bed. I always keep its key in my pocket, but the hinges creak as I open them, rusty from disuse. Nothing inside has changed. The tin toys. The tennis slacks. The exercise book with the name Francis Eveleigh inscribed into the cardboard cover in thick childish letters. A school badge. A Gillette safety razor-his first? A pistol wrapped inside an old rag. A decent-enough herringbone jacket. A single shoe. A steel hip flask. A soldier's pass for 14-26 September 1916, cross-stamped No Longer Valid. Various socks and old-fashioned collarless shirts and itchy-looking undies. A copy of Morris's News from Nowhere.

And a Touring Map of the Scottish Highlands, folded so often that the sheets threaten to break apart as I touch them.

I grab a handful of his clothes and bury my face into them, smelling Oxford damp, Oxford stone, Four Square Ready-Rubbed and Mansion House lavender floor polish. Little enough is left of Francis now. Still, that faint scent of his flesh like burnt lemon. A few dark strands of his hair...

What a joke I have become. My sole claim to fame is having dimly known a great man when he was still a child, and my sole claim to happiness lies almost as far back; a miracle that happened for a few days nearly thirty years ago. I suppose I've convinced myself since that homosexuals cannot really love-it's easier that way. And yet at the same time, in all the years since, Francis had always been with me.

"It really doesn't matter, Griff," I hear him say as his fingers touch my neck. He smells not of lemons now, but of the rainy oak he's been standing beneath as he watches my window from the quad. But he hasn't aged. He hasn't changed.

"No, it doesn't matter at all," he whispers as he turns me round to kiss me. "Not any of this. That's the secret of everything."

I smile to find him near me, and still shudder at the cool touch of his hands. In the moment before the thunder crackles closer over Oxford and I open my eyes, all pain is gone.

Ernie Svendsen, with his suspiciously foreign name, his long nose, his thick glasses, seems an unlikely survivor of my kind. He puts it down to something that he has on Oxford's Deputy Chief Constable, although I would have thought that would have made him a prime candidate for a hit-and-run car accident.

We meet at a park bench the next afternoon, during a break in the rain.

"Do you think they'll let them stay together?" I ask as he tosses bread from a brown paper bag to the feathered carpet of ducks that have gathered around us. "Will they send him to the Isle of Man, the girls and the mother to the Western Isles?"

Giving me a pitying look, Ernie shakes his head. "It doesn't work like that, my friend. Oh, they'll get it out of him. He'll tell them anything-lies or the truth. People always blab on so when you threaten them... I shouldn't worry," he adds, seeing the expression on my face. "If something was going to happen to you, it would have happened already. Being who you are, I'm sure you'll be safe."

"I'm not who I am. I'm not anybody."

"Then you're doubly lucky."

"I keep asking myself what the point is. I mean-why?"

"I think you've forgotten what it's like, my friend."

"What?"

"Being the way we are-bent, queer. The guilt. The stupid scenes. You remember those leaflets, the promises of help, that we could be cured. Don't tell me you didn't secretly get hold of one. " He sighs. "If we could just press some button-pull out something inside us-

don't you think we'd all do it? Wouldn't you take that chance, if you were given it? Isn't John Arthur right in that respect-and wouldn't the Jews feel the same?"

But to change would mean re-living my life-becoming something other than what I am. Losing Francis. So I shake my head. And I've heard the stories of what happens to my kind. The drugs. The electrodes. The dirty pictures. Swimming in pools of your own piss and vomit. That kind of treatment that was available even before Modernism made it compulsory. "It isn't John Arthur," I say. "It's all of us. It's Britain..."

Ernie chuckles. "I suppose you'll be alone now, won't you?"

"Alone?"

"Without companionship. Without a cock to suck."

I glance across the bench, wondering if Ernie's propositioning me. But his eyes behind his glasses are as far away as ever; fish in some distant sea. Sex for him, I suspect, has always been essentially a spectator sport. That's why he fits in so well. That's why he's survived. He doesn't want a real body against him. All he needs is the sharp hot memories of those he's betrayed.

"Look," I say, "I just thought you might have some information about what happens to... to the Jews-and to people like us. Surely somebody has to?"

"All I know is what I read in the papers, my friend. And what I see in the newsreels." His gaze travels across the silvered lawns. "I understand how it is. We're only human, after all. It's always sad when you lose someone..."

He stands up, shaking the last of his breadcrumbs over the ducks, and I watch as he walks off, splashing a short cut across the lawns and then around the sodden nets of the empty tennis courts. I can't help wondering if there will be a black official KSG Rover waiting for me somewhere soon. The polite request and the arm hooked around my elbow and the people passing by too busy going about their lives to notice. The drive to a dark clearing in a wood, the cold barrel to the forehead... I can't help feeling selfishly afraid. But as I make my way down Holywell past the old city walls, the clouds in the west begin to thin, and the wind picks and plays with rents of blue sky as the sun flickers through. Dawdling along the narrow, unpredictable streets that wind around the backs of the colleges giving glimpses of kitchen dustbins and Wren towers, the light brightens. And Oxford. Oxford! All the years that I longed to see myself like this amid these quads and buildings, the twin shining rivers, the whispering corridors of learning.

Working on my book each evening after school in the front parlor as my mother nodded over her knitting in her chair behind me, I always knew that the dream was impossibly far away. But nourishing my one great work, I never even bothered to think of setting some more realistic target and perhaps submitting an essay on local history to the Lichfield Mercury or Staffordshire Life. It was all or nothing-and perhaps in my heart of hearts I was happy enough with nothing. One evening, I remember, the work at the parlor table was going particularly well and the hours slid by until I cracked my weary fingers and turned around to my mother to comment on the faint but foul smell that I had noticed. She sat unusually still in the dimness of the room behind me.

Her head was lolling, her fingers were clenched around the knitting needles and her ball of wool had rolled from her lap in her final spasm.

Three

Now that the rain has ended and the sun has come out, all of Britain seems to drift, held aloft on wafts of dandelion and vanilla, the dazzling boom of bandstand brass. Each morning, the Express, the New Cross, and the Mail vie for punning headlines and pictures of Modernist maidens in fountains, ice cream-smearing babies, fainting guardsmen. With or without me, life seems intent on going on-but I find that I remain remarkably active in any case: with Christlow's help, for example, I can manage to be fully dressed, my lungs coughed-out, my tablets taken, my limbs unstiffened, my eyes fully focused, my heartbeat

and my breathing made almost regular by half past eight or nine at the latest. And thus aroused, thus fortified, I have taken a surprising number of trips out this August. This, after all, is my last chance to see anything, and I can easily afford to squander my savings by going First Class. But still, as I queue at the Oxford City Post Office for the appropriate cross-county passes that will get me to Lichfield, I can't help but wonder if the woman behind the spittle-frosted glass knew my acquaintance, and who emptied his desk upstairs in the Censor's Office, who scratched his name off the tea club...

Next morning, climbing aboard the Sir Galahad after it slides into Oxford Station, its streamlined snout oozing steam and the sense of far-away, I stumble past four senior officers of the KSG, the Knights of Saint George, as I make my way down the carriage in search of my reserved seat. They all look sleek, plump-seals basking on a sunny shore, washed by the warm waves of the future. A mother and daughter are opposite my place in the no smoking section further along. The morning sun pours over their blonde hair and their innocent blue eyes rest on me as I slump down. I feel I must look strange and sinister, already a harbinger of death, yet their manner is welcoming, and we begin to talk as the train pulls out in that absent, careless manner that strangers sometimes have. The husband, the little girl's father, is a Black Watch major who's risen through the Army ranks on merit in the way that only happens in real conflicts, and is currently on active service on the ever-troublesome India-Afghanistan border. The mother tells me she sleeps with his and John Arthur's photograph beneath her pillow. I smile as their faces shine back at me and then gaze out of the window, watching the telegraph lines rise and fall and the world flash by, carrying me on toward Lichfield.

Living in what I still thought of my mother's house back in the years before the War, alone and celibate, I still entertained thoughts of writing my book. But, after many botched attempts, I began to wonder if something else was missing. History, after all, is ever-changing, and must always be viewed from the perspective of the present. I was still as neutral in politics as I imagined myself to have become sexually, yet in my efforts to take myself seriously as a historian, I decided that politics probably lay at the cutting edge of current affairs, and I joined the local Fabian Society. It was probably a good job that I dipped my toe into the waters of political debate without any high ideals. Still, I can see with hindsight that it was an interesting time for British left wing politics. The younger and generally rowdier element (of which Francis Eveleigh was undoubtedly a member) were busily undermining the cozy nineteenth century libertarianism of William Morris-the Morris, that is, who existed before he was re-invented by Modernism. But it was all naively innocent. Francis, for example, worked six days a week behind the counter of the John Menzies bookstall at Lichfield station, lived in digs, lifted his little finger when he drank tea, was secretive about his background, and spoke with a suspiciously upper-class accent. Still, I was drawn to him. I liked his youth, his enthusiasm, his good looks.

He and I began meeting occasionally after he had finished work at the station bookstall, and we would take quiet walks across the flat Staffordshire countryside. When we were alone, there was a lot less of the usual posturing and political debate, but nevertheless, the prospect of a war in Europe soon began to dominate our conversation. Francis, although supposedly a pacifist, was fascinated by the whole idea of conflict. In a white shirt, his collar loose, he would walk ahead of me as we wandered at evening along misty canal towpaths and across muddy spring fields. His body was slight and bony, yet filled with energy. He grew his hair a little longer than was then fashionable, and I loved to watch, as he walked ahead of me, the soft nest of curls that tapered toward the back of his neck.

"You understand, Griff," he said to me once as we stood to catch our breath amid the cows beneath a dripping tree. "I can work these things out when we walk together."

My heart ached. I could only smile back at him.

The idea of our taking a cycling trip to Scotland seemed to evolve naturally, gradually from this process. That was probably a good thing, for if I had planned that Francis and I

could be on our own, sharing thoughts, ideas, and boarding house rooms for a whole fortnight, I am sure that love and terror would have prevented it from ever happening. But somehow, I found that we were checking maps and timetables on the basis of a vague hypothesis—playing with the whole idea, really—until suddenly we were talking proper dates and actual bookings and the thing had miraculously come about. And I was to pay. That, too, slipped easily under the yawning bridge of my uncertainties. Thank God, the idea of two men traveling together on holiday raised few suspicions in the summer of 1914. Francis, bless him, probably had a far clearer idea of where he was leading me, and what was to come. But for all of that, for absolutely everything about him, I am eternally grateful.

We ate in the dining carriage as the train pulled out of Birmingham, studying our maps. Yet we went to our shared sleeping compartment quite early, I recall, filled with that soothed, tired feeling that only the start of a long railway journey brings. In that narrow compartment, I tried to busy myself with sorting the contents of my suitcase on the lower bunk as Francis undressed beside me. Trembling, alone after he had headed up the corridor to wash, looking down at the half-erection that, absurdly, was trying to nudge its way out of my pajamas, I cursed myself for my stupidity in ever falling for the idea of this holiday. I pushed past him when he returned, and pulled down a window in the corridor and watched the fields burn with sunset as the telegraph wires rose and fell, rose and fell. By the time I finally got back to the compartment, the landscape had become a grainy patchwork and Francis was up in the top bunk, reading News from Nowhere. Muttering about how tired I felt, I climbed in below.

I stared up at the shape his body made against the bars of the bunk. It truly was soothing, this motion of the carriage, the steel clatter of the wheels. Eventually, when Francis turned off his light and wished me goodnight, I truly felt ready for sleep and when, about half an hour later, he began to shift down from his bunk, I simply imagined that he was heading off on a final trip to the toilets. Instead, he climbed in beside me.

His pajama shirt was already undone. He smelled faintly of soap and toothpowder, and beneath that of the warmth of his own flesh, like burnt lemon.

"This is what you want, Griff, isn't it...?" he said. Then he put his arms around me, and he kissed me, and nothing was ever the same.

Clatter, tee, tee... Even here, on the way to Lichfield, that same sense of passing. Then as now, the onward rush of a train. Stations beside canal bridges. Stations in farmyards. Stations piled with empty milk churns and mailbags in the middle of pretty nowhere. And posters, posters. Posters of the seaside and posters of the country. Posters of towns. The Lake District for Rest and Quiet Imaginings. Take the Sunday Special and Visit Lambourn Downs, where a smiling couple are picnicking with their two pretty daughters as colored kites dance against a cloudless sky...

Francis loved the place names as we journeyed across Scotland. Mellon Udrigle. Plockton. Grey Dog. Poolewe. Smearisary. The Summer Isles. When he wasn't reading the newspapers he got hold of every day to keep track of the repercussions of the assassination of an obscure Archduke, he'd run his finger along some impossibly contoured and winding route that the pedals of our basket-fronted Northampton Humbers were supposed to carry us down, chosen entirely to include as many of those wonderful names as possible.

Alone together in those yellow-lit boarding house rooms with their great empty wardrobes, riding the creaking seas of hollowed-out double beds, his chin cupped in his hand and bare feet in the air, laughing at something, humming to himself, twiddling his toes, Francis would study his maps and his newspapers. Then he'd lay a hand across me and pull me closer with a touch that was both warmly sexual and at the same time had nothing to do with sex at all. "This is real history, Griff," he said to me once when I expressed

amazement that anyone should care about what was happening in the Balkans. "How can you pretend to be a historian and then let all this pass you by?"

I remember that Francis and I were in a pub on the evening of August 4th 1914, when Asquith announced that Britain would be at war with Germany from midnight. I knew that he was going to enlist, and I could see that he was elated. It was no use arguing. And I, too, was excited by the prospect of this new future that lay ahead of us-that night, it was impossible not to be. Suddenly, after years of trying, we British could love each other and hate the Germans. Politics and diplomacy seemed trivial compared to the raw certainties of war. Soon, we were dancing in the crowd. Francis even kissed me. That August night, nobody cared. We were all one mass of hope and humanity.

On our journey south from the Highlands, without access to a sleeping carriage now that everyone wanted to travel, I did my best to talk seriously to Francis. I needed to fix as much of him in my mind as I could. But he was teasing about his past. Yes, I went to school but it was just a place. How do you think I learned? Do I have a brother? -well, you tell me. Go on, you know what I'm like, so guess... It was a game we'd played before, but this time it was harsher, more hurtful. As we waited on swarming platforms and changed trains and searched for seats and stood in crowded corridors, I ended up telling Francis about myself instead.

"So, Griff...," He smiled as we leaned against a window by our cases and the sleepers raced by. "You want to be a Professor? Have you ever even been to Oxford? Or would that spoil the dream?"

The train rocked us on, and Lichfield, despite my willing it not to, arrived soon enough. Francis and I parted outside the station without saying very much or even shaking hands, and I walked off toward what I still thought of as my mother's house almost looking forward to being alone. In Saint Martin's Square, a brass band was playing. Men, jolly as a works outing, talking and laughing freely in the way that we British so seldom do, queued up to enlist in the Staffordshire Regiment. They beckoned me to join them, but there was no bitterness when I smiled and shook my head, such was our country's optimism.

Walking once again along the strangely shrunken streets of my home town, heavier now with the burdens of age and illness, looking over the low front wall of the house where I lived most of my life, I note the pebbledash that the new owner has added to the rendering, the replacement window frames. Hindley's Cake Shop is still there with what look like the same cakes displayed in the window, although the butcher's shop above which Francis used to live has become a gent's outfitters, and the window of his room now bears the words Formal Dress Hire.

I take the bus in search of Burntwood Charity. But there's no sign of the school where I started my career-or even of the road that led to it with fields on the far side, or of the pit wheels. The whole place consists of nothing but houses and a vast new "comprehensive" school. Quite remarkably when you come to think about it, John Arthur remains uncommemorated. I visit the Town Library, another old haunt, but, just as in Oxford, the Lichfield census data and the voting lists and the ratings and the parish records and pretty much every kind of document covering the period between the 1900s and the start of the thirties have been destroyed. Here, in fact, the scythes have cut even deeper. Even the records of the records had gone, along with the spaces they were supposed to occupy. It's as if whole decades have vanished entirely.

The War in Britain was a strange affair, like a fever. People were more sociable, strangers would talk to each other, and even I went out more often; to the theater or to the music hall, or to one of the new cinematographs. At school, I taught my lads about the many historic acts of German aggression, and had them compose outraged letters to the Kaiser about the Zeppelin bombings of Great Yarmouth.

Francis wrote me the occasional letter at first after he volunteered. Griff, you'd hardly know me now... I could almost see him trying on his new soldierly identity. The letters were filled at first with catalogues of acquaintances and military stupidities as he was posted around various training camps and temporary barracks in southern England. They grew shorter and blander once he reached France and the rapidly solidifying Western Front. I was like the millions of puzzled relatives and loved ones who were the recipients of such letters. I put his terseness down to shortage of time, and then to the military censors. But soon, by early 1915, Francis stopped writing to me altogether.

Two years passed. I only learned about Francis by chance when, queuing for a copy of the Post from the John Menzies bookstall on the platform at Lichfield station, I suddenly thought I heard his name being spoken. I knew what had happened straight away, just from the voices, although none of them had known him well. I'd heard its echo many times before from teachers and children at school, and people you passed in the street talking about a son, a husband, a brother. Like so many others, Francis Eveleigh had died in the Somme Offensive.

Pushed numbly into action, prodding and probing at the facts of Francis's life in a way that I had resisted when he was still alive, I was able to discover that his parents lived in a large house set in arable countryside on the outskirts of Louth in Lincolnshire. Standing outside in my muddy shoes on a cold day as quizzical light fanned from their hall, I introduced myself to the maid as "a friend from Lichfield," and was ushered into the drawing room where Mr. and Mrs. Eveleigh stood still as china figures on either side of the unlit fire, as if they had been waiting there for a long time. Mr. Eveleigh managed a bank, while his wife (Francis's eyes and pale skin, his full dark hair that she always tied back in a bun) oscillated between various bridge clubs and civic societies. They were solid, dependable, and I was flattered and charmed that they were prepared to have anything to do with me. There was no hint, of course, that Francis and I had been lovers-or even that he'd had any kind of sexual life. But there was always a sense, somewhere amid all the weekends I was invited to the Eveleighs' house, of a shared deeper fondness.

The light was always grey at the Eveleighs' house, and a chill came to whatever part of your body was turned from the fire. Sitting in the dining room as the clocks ticked and the fire spat through interminable meals of boiled cabbage, boiled potatoes, and boiled bacon, it wasn't hard to see why Francis had gone away. But I found it easy enough to fit in, and there was always the pleasure of being able to sleep in Francis's childhood bed which still bore the imprint of his body, to slide open drawers that contained the starched uniforms of the various cheap public schools he had been forced to attend and bury my face in their folds.

Mr. Eveleigh talked endlessly about politics and the War. He'd ask me about the Jews; whether I didn't think they were involved in a conspiracy to set one half of Europe against the other. I think he even mentioned "dumping the buggers on some remote Scottish island and leaving them to get on with it." He asked if I agreed that the average working man was fundamentally lazy. He doubted whether every Tom, Dick, and Harry should be given the vote, and thought Lloyd George was just a Welsh windbag-what this country really needed was a true, strong leader...

The last time I saw the Eveleighs was just after the French Capitulation. I remember that my train journey up through Peterborough and Lincoln took place in an atmosphere as feverish as it had been when Francis and I journeyed back from Scotland four years before-but also very different. Strangers were talking to strangers again, but their voices were confused, their faces were hard and angry. There were rumors already of Lloyd George's resignation and of a General Election, although, as all the major parties had supported the War, no one had any clear idea of what the campaign would be about. I bought one of the few papers that were left at a newsagent's and stared at the headline. War Over. Allies Defeated. It was 6 August 1918; a date, it seemed to me, that would never look right in the cold pages of history.

The Eveleighs' front door was open-which seemed like final confirmation that everything had changed. People were milling. Clients from the Bank. Friends from the bridge circle. Farmers and neighbors. Time passed. Voices grew louder, then began to fade. I was tired and had a headache by the time I found myself alone with Mr. and Mrs. Eveleigh. Still, Mr. Eveleigh insisted on spreading out a map of Belgium and France, then asking me to explain exactly who was to blame for this mess. No doubt making less sense than I imagined, I told him that the economies of all the nations had been seriously weakened, that the Bolsheviks' treaty with Germany had been a capitulation, and the promised American reinforcements had been too few, and had come too late. Once the Germans made a break in the Allied lines, the certainties of trench warfare had crumbled; tactics were suddenly about communications, swiftness, surprise. With Paris succumbing and the British and Colonial Forces clustered chaotically around Cherbourg and Dieppe, there was nothing left to do but surrender to the Germans.

"We can't leave it like this," Mr. Eveleigh said, swaying as he poured himself yet another whisky. "There'll have to be another war..."

Later, Mrs. Eveleigh showed me up to my room. "You might as well have these," she said, handing me a child's exercise book with Francis's name on the cover, a couple of battered tin toys. "Oh, and there's something else." I sat on the bed and waited as she carried in a cardboard box with a War Office stamp on it. She lifted it open, filling the room with some faint other smell. Mud? Death? It was certainly unpleasant. The box proved to be half empty. There was that cheap edition of News from Nowhere. A spare pair of thick standard issue grey-green military socks. More odd was the pistol. It seemed well-kept and, more surprising still, a screw of yellowed paper containing a dozen of what looked like live bullets. Mrs. Eveleigh just gazed down at me as I sat on the bed and handled the thing.

"Keep that too," she said, something new and harsh in her voice. "I don't want it."

She was standing closer now. Like me, and in her own quiet way, I think she had passed into that grey hinterland that lies beyond an excess of drink. I glanced around at the familiar wallpaper, the twee pictures, expecting her to turn and leave. But she just stood there in front of me, her hands knotting and unknotting across the long line of buttons that ran down her black dress.

"I only feel as though I've lost him now," she said. "Before I knew we'd thrown away the War, it was always as if some part of him might still come back to me."

I nodded, staring up at this twisted image of Francis as a middle-aged woman. Her eyes were lost in shadow; a shade deeper than black.

"And I wonder, even now, if he ever knew a woman." She took a step closer so that our knees touched. I was looking right up at her now, the folds of her chin, the rapid rise and fall of her breasts. "I never knew what he was like," she said.

"He was..." I tensed my hands, feeling enclosed, threatened. But something snapped. "I loved him, Mrs. Eveleigh. I just loved him..."

She took a step back and nodded severely. I had truly thought for a moment that we could somehow share our Francislessness. But, instead, I heard the sigh of her dress as she left the room, the soft clunk of the door closing.

The Eveleighs never wrote to me after that.

I never saw them again.

With half an hour to kill and the return train to Oxford delayed, I buy a Lichfield Mercury from the same John Menzies bookstall at the station and then share the waiting room with three members of the Young Empire Alliance. They're little more than lads, really, and yet they affect maturity and ease as they smoke their Pall Malls and stretch out in long-trousered "boy-scout" uniforms. Two of them begin to hum a tune under their breath, alternately kicking each side of my bench in rhythm. A woman in a floral hat appears at the window, and I shoot her a despairing glance before she decides not to come in. I do my best to study the paper, the Sits Vac, where a Decent Widow is looking for a

Clean Anglo Saxon Couple to take care of her and her Nice House. The Classified columns, where various Modernist and EA self-education courses and camps are on offer, along with supposedly War Office-endorsed photographs of the Mons Archers. The photo on the back page, beside a column giving advice to Young Mr. and Mrs. Modern on setting up home, is of an elderly woman hunched in the stocks on a village green. She has been put there, the caption jokily informs us, as a "show of local outrage." Similar submissions from other readers are invited.

"I was wondering..." The best-looking of the YEA youths smiles. "Where's an old bastard like you going?"

"Oxford," I croak.

"Not one of them fucking eggheads, are you?"

"Well, as a matter of fact..."

"Tell you what..." He stands up. His face is tanned. His brown hair is cut so short that it would feel like velvet if you stroked it. He comes close to me and leans down. "The problem is..." A soft rain of his spittle touches my cheek. "I'm all out of cuntin' matches. Light my fag for me?"

He keeps his eyes on mine as I fumble in my coat pocket. His friends watch on, grinning. His irises are an intense, cloudless, blue. He squints slightly as the match flares, and he holds my hand to guide it toward the tip of his cigarette. Moments later, my train arrives, and I leave the waiting room a sweaty wreck, still bearing an uncomfortable erection.

My journey, though, is far from over. Summer heat has buckled the main line rails, and I end up stranded on the sun-bleached platform of a remote rural station with the faint promise of an eventual Oxford connection. There, I talk to the station master, a round-faced man whose body bulges gently from the gaps between the buttons of his uniform like rising dough.

"You know," I say, clearing my throat, taking the kind of risk that the nearness of death encourages, "I've always wondered what happened to the people who were sent north. The newspapers about five years back always used to speak of the Jews. I mean-" I hesitate, searching without success for a better word, "their relocation."

His eyes narrow as he looks at me, but the station is empty, and the rails stretch down through Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire amid nodding scoops of cow parsley and wild fennel. The air seems joined to the sky. We are safe here, alone. At other times, in other, happier, places, I suspect that this station master and I might be engaged in some other kind of transaction. That is why we choose to trust each other.

"It's quieter here now," he says. "But three, four years ago, a lot of freight trains went past. Long things, they were, with slatted wooden sides, like the farmers use for market-only always at night. One of them pulled up, and this soldier got me out of bed to send a message down the line. A bad smell came off the trucks and I could hear movement inside. I thought it was just animals. But there were voices. And you could see their eyes... Children's fingers poking out of the slats..."

The station master stands up and shuffles through the tin heat toward his little station house. He returns with something in his hands.

"I found this," he says, unfolding it, holding it out to me. "On the platform afterward."

It's a travel poster, almost like the ones for Skegness and Barmouth that are smiling down at us. A family are striding down a winding road that leads to a glittering sea. The father is grinning, beckoning us to join him while his wife holds the hands of their two daughters, who are chattering and skipping excitedly, their pig-tails dancing in mid-air. Set within the ocean, more hinted at than revealed, yet clearly the focus of the picture, lie a scatter of small islands. Looked at closely, they blur to just a few clever brush strokes, but they suggest hills and meadows, wooded glades, white beaches, and pretty shingle-roofed and whitewashed houses; a warm and happy place to live. The caption reads:

Relocate to the Summer Isles.

The promised train does eventually arrive, and the stationmaster and I make our farewells, briefly touching hands, a soft pressure of the flesh that I will soon be losing. I gaze out of the carriage as the train rattles on, close to tears. Oxfordshire comes. Then Oxford. Along Park End and George Street, the city is warm, summer-quiet, at peace with itself now it has lost the unwanted distraction of students, and smells sweetly of dusty bookshops, old stone, dog shit, grass clippings.

"Something for you, sir." Christlow says, nearly falling over himself to intercept me as I limp across the quad. I take the letter he's waving and climb the old oak stairs to my rooms, then stare at the crested envelope as I lean against the door, wondering if I should play a game with myself for a while and let it rest, wondering just how dangerous a letter can be... but already my hands are tearing at the wax seal, dragging out the one thick sheet of paper that lies inside.

Beneath a lion and unicorn, it reads:

WHITEHALL
FROM THE OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER
8 August, 1940, GB-

I know it's been a long time, but I honestly haven't forgotten. You may have heard that there's going to be a "National Celebration" in London before and around 21st October, Trafalgar Day. It probably still seems a long way off, but I'd really like to see you there. I promise it'll be nothing formal. I really do hope you can make it. My staff will send you the details.

All the very best as ever,
J A.

Later that evening, I build a small fire in the grate of my rooms and feed it with the pages of my book. Everything, after all, ends this way. Napoleon, Peter the Great, Bismarck... all the Figures of History. The pages curl. Glowing fragments of paper dance up the chimney. Soon, there's barely anything left to burn. It's all over so quickly, and what is left of my life, as I open up my old suitcase and cradle Francis's old pistol in my hands, feels simpler already.

Four

My college principal Cumbernald comes to my rooms one evening, stretching out in one of the chairs facing the fireplace and companionably beckoning me to join him. He's a tall man, is Cumbernald. He radiates smooth affluence and, like most inferior academics, has pushed his way into administration. Yet he has risen ridiculously far, ridiculously fast. It's almost nice, as the sunlight gleams on his bald head, to think that I'm probably going to bugger up his plans for the next academic year by dying.

"About Michaelmas Term," he begins, crossing his legs to reveal a surprisingly brown length of shin. "I was thinking of giving you the old decline and fall for a change. Bit of a problem with Roberts, you see. Evidently wrote a book back in the twenties about the economics of the Roman Empire. Argued that the colonies were a drain on Rome. Then he keeps drawing comparisons with Britain. Even crops up in his students essays-although of course we can't expect the dear things to know any better unless we teach them, can we?"

"I'd be surprised if Roberts' book was still available."

"But that's not the point, is it? Remember Hobson...? And Brooking? Gone, of course. History changes..."

"By the way," I say, interrupting him as he pushes on, "you'll have to do without me for the first week or so of Michaelmas."

"Oh?"

"I have a personal invitation to the Trafalgar Day celebrations from John Arthur."

I reach for the gold embossed wad of papers that arrived soon after that letter. Cumbernald studies them. He swallows audibly. "I'm sure that we can manage without you for a week or so..." He smiles at me. "But you're looking a bit peaky, Brook, if you don't mind me saying so. And Eileen and the children and I, well, we have a chalet at this place outside Ross on Wye. It's very clean, very friendly, very smart. All very modern. We're always saying there's room enough to fit in at least one interesting guest. So I was wondering..."

Eggs and Bacon, Eggs and Bacon, Apple and Custard, Apple and Custard, Cheese and Biscuits, Cheese and Biscuits, Fish and Chips, Fish and Chips...

Cumbernald's two daughters are making piston-movements with their elbows, going faster and faster, pretending the Daimler's a train as we bowl along the A40 toward Wales and Gloucester. Christine's the eldest at eleven; a plump pre-adolescent who's designated "clever" and "reads a lot." Barbara's seven, thinner, more self-assured, and "sporty." Cumbernald clicks on the radio, and he and his wife Eileen argue about whether they want to listen to the Light or the Third Program. Snatches of Vera Lynn, static, and Tchaikovsky roar out from the loudspeakers-it's like the avant-garde "European" music they'd be so quick to condemn-while Christine and Barbara grow alarmingly green and listless.

It seems later than it really is when we finally arrive at Penrhos Park. The lodge, clad with logs like some fairy tale woodsman's cottage, is set in a pine-shaded clearing. Cumbernald prepares the dinner out-of-doors using a crude iron device filled with charcoal while Eileen unpacks and the children disappear into the pines. Looking over the forest crown, I see the smoke of other cooking fires rising like Indian signals. As it gets darker, Eileen sets a lantern on the outdoor table, and we watch the moths flutter into oblivion on the hot glass.

"You look a better man already," Cumbernald says, wineglass in his lap, looking pleasingly ridiculous in sandals, baggy shorts. "This is some place, though, isn't it, eh? A real breath of England."

It's suddenly night-quiet. With the faint stirring of the pines, the distant hoot of an owl, it wouldn't take much imagination to catch the growl of a bear, the rooting chuff of a wild boar, the howl of wolves-the return of all the beasts of old to the vast Wood of Albion. Then I hear a thin shriek. The sound is so strange here, yet so familiar, that it takes me a moment to realize that it's simply the passing of a train.

"It's just a goods line," Cumbernald explains. "Never quite worked out where it's from or to. But I shouldn't worry, old chap. That's the latest I've ever heard one go by. They won't disturb your sleep. I was thinking we could go down to the Sun Area this morning, by the way. That okay with you?"

"Oh? Yes. Fine..."

There's eggs and bacon in the morning, which the girls have already been down to buy from the site shop so that Eileen, back in her traditional role now the cooking's indoors, can prepare them. The sound of their sizzling mingles in my head with the clack and roar of the trains that fractured my night.

The Sun Area is lavishly signposted, yet still requires a long trek past high hedges and long walls, then a queue at a turnstile. The swing doors beyond lead to a hot wooden tunnel lined with benches: some kind of changing area. Eileen Cumbernald removes her halter top and hangs it on a numbered peg. She isn't wearing a bra. Cumbernald, contrarily, first removes his shorts and his baggy y-fronts before taking off his sandals. The children, by some instantaneous process, are already naked, and scamper off to be swallowed by the bright square of light at the far end.

Cumbernald really is brown. Eileen, too; although I can see that she's not as blonde as she pretends to be. I undo a few token buttons of my shirt, wondering how easy it would be to wake up if I pinched myself. The most amazing dream. I was with the college principal

and his wife. They took all their clothes off, then asked me to do the same... Having somehow divested myself of my clothes, and hobbled into the amazing sunlight, I promise to keep an eye on the children, and sit beside the lake with a copy of something called Future Past while Cumbernald and Eileen go off to rustle up a team for the volleyball. Out in the distance, white sails are turning. A woman breastfeeds her child on the towel next to mine, engaging me in alarming snatches of conversation. A young Adonis strides at the water's edge. There's barely any hair on his body. Amid all this display, his genitals are disappointing-a small afterthought-but then it really is true what they say; people in the nude are impossibly decent. We should all go around like this. I can see it now-Naturism-The Answer to the World's Troubles. The only trouble is, I have a feeling that it was a title I drew the line at when I was stocking up for my researches on John Arthur in Blackwell's.

I squint at the book I'm supposed to be reading. Chapter Five. The Greatness of the British Heritage-Truth or Myth? But I can feel the air passing over me-it's strangely exhilarating-and I lie back on the towel and let the dreary pages splay in the sand. I'm part of the water, the air, the shouts and the cries... Noon comes and goes. The afternoon glides by. I swim. I eat ice cream and a Melton Mowbray pork pie. I drink gallons of Vimto. By evening, as we grab our few belongings and head back up the slope, my skin is itchy and my prick, I can't help noticing, looks a bit like one of Cumbernald's barbecued sausages; cooked on just the one side.

That night, I shiver and roast, glazed in minty unguents. And the trains are busy again, banging back and forth, clanking chains and couplings, hissing brakes as they trundle back and forth. Then a creak of springs comes through the lodge's thin walls as the Cumbernalds' indulge in their own bit of coupling. And there are children's cries, too; the clatter of the showers from which they emerge like drowned figures with their hair lank, thinly naked as they walk on to be swallowed by the light...

At three o'clock, feeling stiff and nauseous, I pad through the dim parlor and open the patio doors. Silvery night lies over the trees in the clearing and I can hear the breath, like a great animal sighing, of a train that must be waiting almost directly behind the lodge. Barefoot, wrapped in my crumpled sheet, I wander toward it.

The huge engine sighs in impatience, then the wheels slip as they begin to take up the tension and move again, hauling the vast burden of wagons that lie behind. They are open-backed, covered in mottled camouflage, although it's easy enough to make out the huge bodies of the Lancaster bombers as they clack past. Eggs and Bacon, Eggs and Bacon, Apple and Custard, Apple and Custard, Cheese and Biscuits, Cheese and Biscuits, Fish and Chips, Fish and Chips.

I shuffle back to the lodge trailing my shroud, and lie down to stare up at the grey swirling ceiling of my bedroom, wondering if I could truly perform the act that my thoughts, like the grinding of some unstoppable engine, keep returning: the one deed that would make my life mean something, and repay the debt that I owe to my acquaintance, and to Larry Black, and to all the others, the pleading fingers pushed through the slats of a railway carriage, those lost smiling families heading down the road to be swallowed in the brightness of the Summer Isles. I even owe that same debt to Francis, although the reasons are much harder to explain.

Bang bang. Scurrying KSG officers. The salty drift of cordite and smoke. I'm Charlotte Corday as she plunges her knife into Marat, I'm Gavrilo Princip and the Archduke Ferdinand, I'm John Wilkes Booth and Lincoln... I'm The Fingers of History.

Bang bang. Long after the stillness of the forest has reasserted itself, I can still hear the sound of that train.

The commonly accepted truths about John Arthur's upbringing are that he was born John Arthur of William and Mary Arthur on 21 October 1890 in a suitably pretty cottage (now open to the public) in Cornwall. Mary Arthur died in childbirth, while William Arthur and his son ended up traveling up through Britain. In the popular imagination, John Arthur

never lived in a house before the age of about twelve. He slept in barns, beneath hay ricks, under the stars. He sat on milestones gazing into the future. In the more far-fetched books I've encountered on my researches, you find pictures of John Arthur hand-prints in stones, John Arthur hawthorns that lean against the prevailing wind.

A small link with Burntwood is generally made along the lines of: "William Arthur set about learning his new trade as a miner in a pit (now-disused) in Southern Staffordshire, where John also briefly attended school before heading north to the South Yorkshire village of Raughton." The famous pit at Raughton has also closed-the miners' sons and daughters now work behind the counters of gift shops, museums, pubs, and guest houses. But here, for all I know, is where a boy called John Arthur really did spend his adolescence, and where his father died in a pit accident.

At the age of fifteen, John Arthur supposedly went down the pit himself. At eighteen, he was working the roads. At twenty, he went to night school in Nottingham. At twenty-three, the War intervened. He was wounded first in Flanders in 1915, and then again at the Somme. Back at the Front by mid 1917, promoted corporal, he famously won the George Cross at Ypres, yet somehow survived that and the confusion of defeat.

By the agreed figures, John Arthur would have been twenty-seven by then. As an ex-corporal, a leader of small groups of men used to the harsh decisions and horrors of war, he would have been well equipped to make his mark in the strange and violent world of 1920's fringe politics. In Italy, Il Duce was already in power, building Romanesque temples and thumping his chest from balconies, while John Arthur was still trying to make his voice heard in the corners of East End bars and complaining about the injustice of the Treaty of Versailles. But for Britain, as South Africa plunged into civil war and the Russians expanded across Afghanistan toward the Indian border, there were only other losses to face, and then one final crushing humiliation. In 1923, the Irish Republicans defeated the British forces street by street in Dublin, then savaged them as they withdrew north.

Nothing seemed to have much value then. I, too, queued outside the grocers for ten pounds, then fifty pounds, and then a hundred pounds worth of rotten cabbage as General Election followed General Election and MacDonald succeeded Baldwin and then Baldwin took over again. India was in famine. There were street-battles and demonstrations. When Churchill took power during the Third General Strike of 1924-5 and succeeded in defeating the miners and the train drivers, then issued a "Guaranteed Pound" that people somehow actually believed in, it seemed as though the worst of Britain's post-War nightmare might soon be over. But money was still short. The Communists and the Fascists didn't go away. Neither did the reparations payments, the feeling of defeat, the whole sense of national crisis that Churchill was often so good at exploiting. In this new world order, Britain was a third-rate nation; a little island off a big continent, just like Tierra del Fuego, Ceylon, Madagascar.

I saw John Arthur once at that time, although I know that's a privilege so many people claim nowadays. I was working by then as a teacher at Lichfield Grammar, although we had to subsist on credits and half pay. I was aware of the various bus stops and bushes that the lonely men of Lichfield would sometimes frequent, but I also knew about police entrapment, the shaming articles in the Lichfield Mercury that were so often followed by the suicide of those named, the long prison terms, and the beating and truncheon-buggings that generally accompanied a night in the cells. Of course, I could have tried to honor Francis's memory by seeking someone I cared about, but instead, as the twenties progressed from the time of the five-hundred-pound haddock into Churchill's empty pontificating, I became a regular weekend visitor to London. From Francis, I had taken the turn that many inverters take once love has failed them, which is to remove the holy power from sex by making it a means of humiliation, parody, comedy, degradation.

Once, wandering near midnight in a area of East End dockland houses that the police had long given up policing, I crossed toward the gaslit clamor of an end-of-terrace pub. Just half an hour before, I had been on all fours on a fire-blackened wasteground, half-choking

as a fist twisted the back of my collar while an unlubricated cock was forced into me. The pub was called the Cottage Spring. Dry-throated, I made my way toward the bar, then had to give up as I was pushed and shouldered. There was a sense, I suddenly realized, that something was about to happen here.

Those were restless, anxious nights in the East End. Yet, so obsessed was I with my own sexual pursuits that I hadn't realized the many other kinds of risk I was taking. No one had noticed me when I came in, but I was sure that they would notice me now if I tried to leave. I glanced at the man nearest me and saw that his lips were moving. A whispered name, barely audible at first, but becoming clearer, was filling the air. He clambered up on the bar, then, did this man they were all calling for. His face looked pale and his hands were stained with mud or blood, yet he managed to keep an easy dignity as he balanced there with the dusty rows of glasses behind him. He raised his arms and smiled as he looked down at his people. Although he had changed much in the fifteen years since I had last seen him, it was that smile that finally made me certain. I was sure that this man-this John Arthur they were calling for-was in fact Francis Eveleigh.

I didn't wave my arms and cry out. I didn't even try to meet his eyes. Instead, I backed slowly toward a large pillar at the far end of the bar as others pushed forward to get nearer him. I hid myself from his gaze.

He's refined his technique in all the years since, has John Arthur. Nevertheless, his performance on that night was essentially the same as those since outside 10 Downing Street, and on the nation's television screens. That initial pause. The sharing, self-mocking smile that tells us that he still doesn't understand why it has to be him. By then, you're expecting nothing more than a calming chat, but suddenly, one of his anecdotes will twist around to some moment of national humiliation. Perhaps the forced scuttling of the fleet at Scarpa Flow in 1919, the refusal of MacDonald's petition to join the League of Nations, or Ireland. There was always Ireland. John Arthur, more clearly in control now, will gaze sadly at his audience. Truly, his eyes say, if only we could only laugh and play like innocent children...

When his voice rises, it is imperceptible because it always lies in the wake of the passion of his audience. He seems so calm, in fact, so reluctant, that you find yourself filled with a kind of longing. Exactly what was said on that night matters as little as his recent speeches at the Olympics, or to Fordingham's gloriously ill-fated Everest Expedition. All I know is that, despite my shock and fear, I was moved in the way that good popular music sometimes moves me. And that, when John Arthur had finished speaking and had stepped down from the bar, the men were happy to drift into the darkness toward whatever passed for their homes. For many years, I have clung to that image of John Arthur as the queller rather than the creator of violence. It's part of what has kept me sane.

I found myself momentarily rooted behind my pillar when the crowd began to thin in the Cottage Spring. Francis's hand was resting on the shoulder of a plumper, slightly older man who is now our Deputy Prime Minister, George Arkwright, and he was also talking to his then second-in-command Peter Harrison, who was executed for treason in 1938. I was surprised, as he stood there, to realize how much I still longed to hold him. Then, with that unnamed sense of being watched, he cast his eyes across the fallen tables and chairs in my direction. I just stood there with my hands in the pockets of my grubby coat, looking like the aging mess I knew I was. For a moment, John Arthur's eyes bore the trace of a smile as they met mine, a shade of what could only be recognition. Then he looked away.

Eggs and Bacon, Eggs and Bacon...

Back from Penrhos Park to Oxford, and the days flash by. Golden Week nears. The stones and the fields glow with anticipation. The older University hands, us fellows and dons, doctors and vicars, MA's in abstruse subjects, best-selling authors, sexual molesters, surreptitious alcoholics, athletes, and aesthetes, caw and flap at each other in our black gowns as the punts still move and slow, move and slow beneath Magdalene Bridge.

Resuming my occasional traipses over to the Radcliffe, new X-rays reveal that the vast cancerous network that runs through my body has stopped growing. It's still there, still almost certainly lethal, but, to all intents and purposes, the thing's biding its time. Waiting, just as I am, while the days slip by into the maw of history.

"Couldn't help noticing, sir," Christlow says, preparatory to spitting on his cloth and wiping the small mirror above my bookshelves one morning, "that you've had an Invitation." He actually says, Han Hinvasion, on the traditional working class assumption that anything posh has an extra "h" in it.

"That's right," I turn from the A-Z Map of Central London I've been studying.

"Matter of fact," Christlow continues, still rubbing the mirror, "I'll be off down in London myself for the period of the celebrations. In my own minor small capacity. So we may bump into each other..."

"I'll certainly keep an eye out," I say. But London's a big place.

He puts down his rag, and we find ourselves gazing at each other. I'd never realized before how much Christlow looks like Mussolini: Modernism was probably always his destiny. He clears his throat. He's probably about to ask me why I'm always hanging around now when he's cleaning my rooms, and why I've put another lock on that old suitcase. But he simply gathers up his things as if in some sudden hurry and closes the door, leaving me to my thoughts, my dreams, my desk, my studies.

I open the window to take in a great, shivering breath of Oxford air. It has a cooler feel to it this morning. The limes are dripping, sycamore seeds are spinning, soft autumn bathes the towers and rooftops and domes with light. And the bells are ringing, filling my head, my eyes, my lungs, my heart. Oh, Oxford! Oxford! I cannot bear to leave you.

But history beckons.

My moment has come.

Five

The narrator in William Morris's *News from Nowhere* awakes in London to find that summer has at last arrived. The air smells sweeter. The Thames runs cleaner, and the buildings along its banks have been transformed into glorious works of art. The people wear bright costumes, and smile at each other as they go about their everyday tasks. There is no poverty. Children camp in the Kensington Woods. The Houses of Parliament have been turned into a vegetable market.

A full century and a half before Morris predicted, his dream of *Nowhere* has come true. Truly, I think as I sip gin and gaze down from an airship droning high above the stately parks and teeming streets and the sun-flecked river, this city has never looked lovelier. The Adelphi Theater. Cleopatra's Needle. The sightseeing boats that thread their wakes across the Thame... the engines of the *Queen of Air and Darkness* rise in pitch as she sinks down through the skies and across the flashing lakes and lidos of Hyde Park. Eventually, after much tilting and squealing of airbags, she is safely moored to a huge gantry, and I and a dozen or so other minor dignitaries are escorted along a wobbling tunnel to the lift that bears us dizzily to the ground.

It would be rude not to smile and wave for the lenses of the Pathé News camera that follow the progression of our open top bus. Who knows, a darker thought nudges me, this image of the killer's face may be the one that makes it into history. We turn along Oxford Street into the wide new architecture of Charing Cross Road. Then Trafalgar Square, from where the Victory Spire at the end of Park Lane looks like some Jules Verne rocket, or a new secret weapon. Compared with all of this, the great government offices along Whitehall are solid and somber. To our right lies Downing Street, and, even as I watch, the gates slide open on electronic hinges, and out rolls a black Rover 3 Liter with Austin police patrol cars ahead and behind. There are no bells, no flashing lights. As the cars turn up

Whitehall, I glimpse John Arthur's face, absorbed in thought as he stares from the Rover's plain unsmoked glass, and my heart freezes.

A loud-hailer calls out incoherent instructions as we disembark outside the New Dorchester's entrance on the South Bank. Reeve-Ellis, the Under Secretary who's in charge of us, lays a hand on my shoulder and steers me through the doors and across the vast main atrium where bare-breasted caryatids raise their arms to support the arches of the glass-domed roof.

"Two days before the big day now, Brook," he murmurs in that dry voice of his. "About time we had a little chat..."

He leads me to a door marked No Admittance, where plump Police Constable T3308 jumps up from his chair, his holstered pistol swinging between his legs like a cock. My skin prickles, but all that lies beyond is a long corridor bustling with the click of typewriters and the slam of filing cabinets. " 'Fraid everything's a mess here," Reeve-Ellis says as he removes his jacket in his temporary office and shrugs on a baggy grey cardigan. His little mustache bristles as he attempts a smile. I know already that Reeve-Ellis is a Balliol man, 1909 intake, and was working in the Cabinet Office when Lloyd George resigned. So he's seen it all, has toiled under every shade of administration.

"I've been meaning to ask," I begin. "Exactly how-"

"-You'll be up in the VIP seats for the afternoon parade up the Mall. Have to miss the end of that, though, I'm afraid, if we're going to get you across to Downing Street in time."

"So there'll be-what?-about twenty or so people in the gardens at Number Ten. And I suppose some... staff?"

"That's about right. It's an informal occasion."

"What if it rains?"

"We're a lucky country, Brook. It won't rain." He smiles again. "As I say, keep a space in your diary for six o'clock, Monday. Don't worry about protocol or what suit to wear-JA's the least bothered person about that kind of thing you could possibly imagine."

"I do have a new suit, actually," I say. "It was delivered to me this morning from Hawkes on Saville Row." Hand-tailored, the thing cost me a fortune, and feels quite different to any clothing I've ever worn. Just as I requested, the jacket has been tailored with an especially strong and deep inner left-side pocket to accommodate the pistol that currently lies hidden in the aged lining of the old suitcase I have brought with me.

I thought I'd already been through all the possible stages of grieving for my Francis when I discovered that he was alive again. I'd been angry. Almost suicidally miserable. Eventually, I'd come to imagine that my life was no longer under his shadow. But just knowing how I looked to him as I stood in that pub made me realize that everything about my life was still Francis, Francis, Francis. What, otherwise, was I doing in London in the first place, if not trying to wipe out my love for him?

Even in 1925, this John Arthur that he'd become was no longer a totally obscure figure, and I was soon saved the trouble of having to delve through National Rights! and The Spitalfields Chronicle to follow his activities. His was one of several names to emerge into the wider acres of political debate on the back of Churchill's use of right wing groups to help break the long succession of strikes. But John Arthur was always ahead of the rest. With his accent, his manners, he seemed both educated and working class. In an age of lost certainties, he made good copy. And he had a knack of simply stating the obvious-that Britain was poor, that we were shamed by the loss of Ireland and Empire-that most politicians seem to lack. Unlike William Arkwright, Peter Harrison, and the soon-to-be rising star of Jim Toller, John Arthur was never openly racist or intolerant. His carefully cultured background, the wanderings, the War record, the thuggery and unemployment of the East End, presented, like the rest of the man, so many facets that you could select the one you preferred and ignore the rest.

In the winter of 1927, John Arthur stood at a by-election in Nottinghamshire as the first-ever Empire Alliance candidate. I can well remember the moment when I picked up my newspapers from the doormat on the morning after his maiden speech in Parliament. Appropriately enough, I think it was the Sketch that ran a smaller by-line asking Who Is Geoffrey Brook? which quoted an aside in his speech about how he'd been much influenced by a teacher named Geoffrey Brook in Burntwood, Lichfield. After all, I was a distant memory to him; there was no reason why he should exactly remember my name.

Over the next few days, when the press discovered my address, I had my own small moment of fame. They called me Geoffrey, and it seemed churlish to correct them when they were so nearly right. Would it have made any difference if I had announced that, while I knew little enough about this man who called himself John Arthur, he reminded me markedly of someone else with whom I had once had a homosexual affaire? Other than betraying a trust and guaranteeing my death in some freak accident, I doubt it.

The next year, 1928, while John Arthur was joined by another 10 EA MP's at the spring General Election, and Churchill continued about the dogged business of keeping himself in power, the editor of the Daily Sketch approached me about writing a weekly column. At last, I felt like someone who mattered. Churchill, meanwhile, lasted until October 1929 and the Wall Street Crash. Ramsey MacDonald then became Prime Minister of a Government of National Unity while Oswald Mosley struggled to reunite Labour before giving up and joining the EA six months later, thus forcing yet another General Election. This time, John Arthur traveled from constituency to constituency by Vickers aeroplane, and such was the dangerous glamour of the EA by then that even his fat deputy George Arkwright with his trademark Homburg hat became a vote winner. Uniformed EA members marched in the streets of all the big towns, noting names as people emerged from polling stations. The EA won seventy seats. Amid an atmosphere of increasing crisis-unemployment, means tests, riots and starvation, open revolt in India, popular support for Unionist terrorist attacks in Ireland-John Arthur refused new Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's offer of a post in his Cabinet.

Chamberlain's "get tough" policy in India over the next few months only served to increase the bloodshed, and the rest of the Empire was also starting to fray. A new Egyptian Government nationalized the Suez Canal. Welsh and Scottish Nationalists began to talk of independence. The country was in a state of collapse. Chamberlain was probably right in imagining that Britain would be torn apart by another pointless General Election. He was running out of options, but there remained one figure that the great mass of the public seemed to believe in. Not really a politician at all, and head of an organization that had never properly disowned violence. But controllable, surely; a useful figurehead to keep the prols happy and the bully boys at bay while the real brains got on with sorting out the mess that the country was in. It was thus without fuss or bloodshed, in a deal in which he seemingly played no part, that John Arthur was finally summoned to Number 10 and offered the only Cabinet post that he had said he would ever consider accepting.

Just after six o'clock on the chilly evening of November 10, 1932, John Arthur emerged from that famous black door to the clink of flashbulbs. In those days, traffic was still allowed along Downing Street, and he had to check left and right before he crossed over and raised his arms, smiling slightly as he looked about him. He said that he would be heading off to Buckingham Palace in a few minutes, where he planned to seek King George's advice about forming Greater Britain's first Modernist Government.

The flags and the bunting are going up as I'm chauffeur-driven across London to meet the King and Queen next morning. Tomorrow is the eve of Trafalgar Day, and there's a Thanksgiving Service at Westminster Abbey. Already the advertisements on the sides of buses for Idris Table Waters have been replaced with cheery messages to our Leader. Greater Britain Thanks You. Here's to the Future.

My black Daimler sweeps with a stream of others around Hyde Park Corner and through the towering gates to pull up beside the steel flagpoles in front of New Buckingham Place. I wade through a dizzy sense of unreality past the guardsmen in their busbies. I'm giving Monday's suit a trial-airing, and have even placed News from Nowhere in the inner pocket to give a similar weight and feel to the pistol.

Dresses rustle as the queue shuffles forward. His Highness the Duke of York stammers slightly as he greets me. I bow. Then his wife the Duchess, and their two plain daughters. A moment later I'm standing before King Edward and Queen Wallis. I glance discreetly to both sides as I bow. It would be easy for me to reach inside my jacket at this point. Click back the hammer as I pull the pistol out. Two shots, minimum, thudding into the chest at close range. Within moments, this whole Place would implode in shatters of glass and steel, drawn up through the skies in a hissing gale, back toward fairyland where it belongs.

The guests wander out through pillared archways into the afternoon's gracious warmth. There's a stir when the silver trays of sweet Merrydown Wine emerge for the loyal toast. The gardens as I explore them still feel a little like Green Park of old. The stepped orchards and monumental statues don't quite fit. The roses that amazingly still bud and flower on the trellises in this bright October sunlight look too red, too raw. You can almost smell the paint, and hear the bellowing voice of the Queen of Hearts. No! No! Sentence first-verdict afterward. Looking around for something more filling than smoked salmon sandwiches, light-headed as my belly growls and premonitions of pain begin to dance around me, I recognize a famous face.

"Personally, I can't stand fiddling around with plates and standing up at the same time," he says affably. "Strikes me as a foreign habit."

Deputy Prime Minister Arkwright looks small and ordinary in the flesh, almost exactly like his pictures, even without the pipe and the Homburg. In fact, he really hasn't changed that much from the man I glimpsed standing with John Arthur all those years ago at the Cottage Spring. He was probably born cherubically plump, going-on-fifty.

"Hmm. Oxford," he says when I tell him who I am. "You know, I still wish I'd had a university education. And you know John from way back?"

"I taught him briefly when he was a child," I reply, conscious of the rainbowed sun gleaming on Arkwright's blood-threaded cheeks, the strange intensity, even as he chomps cocktail sausages, of his gaze. William Arkwright's the EA's comic turn. He's frequently seen on the arms of busty actresses. But he's Deputy Prime Minister and Home Secretary. He's the second most famous face in the country, even if he trails the first by a long way. He can hardly have come this far by accident.

"John's always so quiet about his past-not that you'd believe it if you read the press." Arkwright chews another handful of sausages. "Of course, no one gives a bugger about my upbringing. It's called charisma, I suppose. Some of us have to make do with hard work."

"Did you ever think you'd get this far?"

Arkwright tilts his head as the water clatters over the green brass dolphins behind us. "I'm permanently amazed, Mr. Brook. Although I know I don't look it..."

I nod. I'd never realized how difficult it is to talk to someone famous, that sense of knowing them even though you don't, and the way Arkwright's looking at me as if there really is something shared between us.... Then I realize what's happening-and immediately wish I hadn't. It's there in his eyes. It's in that smile of his and the way he studies me. After all these years, I've finally met someone else who knows the truth about John Arthur.

"What do you think of John Arthur, Mr. Brook? I know it's been a long time, but do you like him personally?"

"He has my... admiration."

"Admiration." Deputy Prime Minister William Arkwright smiles at me. "I suppose that's about as much as any of us can hope for..." Then he pretends to see someone else he recognizes over my shoulder, and waddles away.

Much of what happened after John Arthur became Prime Minister seemed so traditional that at first even the skeptics were reassured: the marches, the brass bands, the jamborees, and the improvement of the roads and the railways. The arrests certainly came. The few remaining communist and socialist MP's were immediately deprived of their seats-after the years of riots, strikes, and disturbances, that only seemed like a sensible precaution. Left wing newspapers like the Manchester Guardian suffered firebomb attacks. The Jews and the Irish were the subject of intimidation. Homosexuals were still routinely beaten up. In many ways, in fact, little had changed.

At this time, Britain was still supposedly a democracy. But John Arthur plainly had little time for the fripperies of a discredited political system. In his first weeks in power, he passed a short Enabling Act that effectively meant he could rule by decree. In a country without any written constitution, that was all that was needed.

It was a time of whispers. In schools, there were Modernist masters who would report any colleagues to the EA-dominated Local Education Authorities. Anxious to keep our jobs, the rest of us never quite seemed to realize that we had crossed the line from the truth and had began to peddle lies. Despite the thrill of the fresh new vision that was gripping Greater Britain, as we now called our country, there was an atmosphere of almost perpetual crisis. When I was summoned to the Headmaster's study midway through the 2B's Tuesday morning lesson one day in 1932, all the usual suspicions went through my mind. Poor results, perhaps, in the new Basic Grade exams? My sucking off that foundry worker outside the Bull at Shenstone last Saturday evening? Some new twist of the national curriculum that I had failed to absorb? The Daily Sketch and I had already parted company. Once again, I was a nobody, nearing retirement and easily discarded. And behind that, behind it all, was the fearsome burden of what I knew about John Arthur.

"Take a pew, take a pew..." The headmaster smiled at me with alarming warmth as I slumped down. "I've received a letter this morning." He rubbed the thick vellum between his fingers as if he still didn't believe it. "From the Vice Chancellor at Oxford, in fact. It seems that they're seeking to widen their, ah, remit. Trying to get in some fresh educational blood. Your name, Brook, has been mentioned..."

Back at the New Dorchester, surrounded by bakelite angels, deep fur rugs, soft leather chairs, a huge television set, and an ornate stained-glass frieze depicting Saint George Resting in a Forest, quite unable to rest, I put on my coat and head out into the sprawling London night. The traffic roars by as I cross Westminster Bridge, and the strung lights twinkle along the Embankment. People are running, amazingly enough, dressed up like athletes in shorts and vests, and there are accordionists and street vendors, floating restaurants, arm-in-arm lovers, wandering tourists. The newshoardings for the final edition Evening Standard proclaim France and Britain Clash over Egypt. You can almost feel the news hotting up as the summer cools.

Fairgrounds have been set up in all the parks, and the sickly smell of candy floss spills across all of London. Children, their faces shining with sugar, grease, and excitement, nag their parents for a last ride on one of the vast machines. I find a shooting gallery and aim and shoot, aim and shoot while the couple beside me smear their mouths across each other's faces. Bang Bang. Gratifyingly, several of the tin ducks sink down, and my hand hardly seems to be trembling. Further out beyond the tents and the rides lies a great bonfire. Two Spitfires swoop out of the night, agitating the sparks and trailing ribbons of smoke while lads stripped to the gleaming waist climb over each other to make trembling pyramids, marshaled by absurd middle-aged men in khaki shorts and broad-brimmed hats, and I'm enjoying the comedy and pondering the question of what else goes on in those lines of tents, when I sense that I'm being stared at from across the ring. It's Christlow, his face slippery with firelight as he marshals the next shining cluster of Modernist youth. But his eyes flick away from mine when I attempt to smile at him. He looks around as if in panic, then stumbles from sight into the trembling heat.

Everything seems tired now. Lads are yelling fuck-this and fuck-that at each other and the toilet tents have turned nasty. As I limp back along the safe, tramp- and pervert-free streets in search of a taxi, all London is suddenly, dangerously quiet, and seems to be waiting. The night staff at the New Dorchester are out with mops and vacuum cleaners in some of the communal spaces, doing their night duties, and everything in my room is immaculate, unchanged. Saint George is still at prayer in his forest of glass. The sheets of my huge bed are drum-taut. I sleepwalk over to the tall ash-and-ebony cabinet and pour out a drink from the first bottle that comes to hand to help down the tablets. Now, I notice, my hand really is shaking. I reach to the line of buttons and make the lights dim. Saint George fades, the forest darkens.

I lift my old case out from the wardrobe, sliding my hand into the flabby lining and feeling for the gnarled stock of the pistol, conscious of the weight of the metal, the pull of history, gravity, fate. Then-as now seems as good a time as any-I begin to load it. Five bullets are left out of the ten I started with, and they look newer and cleaner than I imagined. I tested the others against a dead tree stump late one evening in Readon Woods when the very stars seemed to shrink back in surprise that the damn things still worked. Now, each remaining one makes a tiny but purposeful click in the cylinder.

It was a cool day when I first arrived at Oxford, with the year's first frost covering the allotments. The sky was pale English blue and beneath it lay everything that I had ever dreamed of or expected. The bells, the bicycles. Christlow. Worn stone steps. Faded luxury. Casement widows. The college principal Cumbernald taking me for lunch at the White Horse jammed between Blackwell's and Trinity as if he really had every reason to welcome me. But by the time we'd opted-yes, why not?-for a third pint of Pedigree, I didn't even feel like an impostor. I felt as if I was gliding at last into the warm currents of a stream along which my life had always been destined to carry me.

I remember that the news vendors were selling a Special Extra Early edition of the Oxford Evening News as we walked back along High. Cumbernald bought a copy and we stood and read it together. Other people were doing the same, forming excited clusters, nearly blocking the street. A British Expeditionary Force had landed north of Dublin, and a task-force fleet led by HMS Hood had accepted the surrender of Belfast. All in all, it was a fine day to be British.

More fine days were to follow. There was easy victory in Ireland. The commemorative Victory Tower went up and up in London. I, meanwhile, shivered pleasurably at Christmas to the soaring music of the choir at King's. And for these new and nervous students who entered my rooms clutching essays and reading lists, I became what I had always been, which was a teacher. There were gatherings, paneled rooms, mulled wine in winter, mint teas and Japanese wallpapers in the spring, cool soft air off the river on long walks alone. Greater British forces aided Franco's victory over the communists in Spain. The Cyprus Adventure came and went. We re-took Rhodesia. I bought myself an expensive new gramophone.

The rest of the world found it easier to regard John Arthur as a kind of Fascist straight-man to Mussolini. France, Germany, and the Lowlands were too busy forming themselves into a Free Trade Community while the USA under Roosevelt, when it wasn't worrying about the threat in the Far East from a resurgent Japan, remained doggedly isolationist. In the Middle East, Britain's canny re-alignment of Egypt's King Farouk in the Modernist mold, and his conquest of Palestine with the help of British military advisors, were seen as no more than par for the course in that troubled region. After all, Britain was behaving no more aggressively than she had throughout most of history. Even now that the whole of Kent has been turned into a military camp as a precaution against some imagined Franco-German threat, the world still remains determined to think the best of us.

Meanwhile, I grew to love Oxford almost as much in reality as in the dream. Eights Week. The Encaenia Procession. Midnight chimes. The rainy climate. The bulldogs in their

bowler hats checking college gardens for inebriate sleepers. The Roofs and Towers Climbing Society.

History went on. The Jews were re-located. Gypsies and tramps were forcibly "housed." Homosexuals were invited to come forward for treatment. Of course, I was panicked for a while by that-but by then I had my acquaintance, our discreet messages on the cubicle wall at the Gents beside Christ Church Meadow, our casual buggerings when he'd do it to me first and then I'd sometimes do it to him-my soft and easy life. I had my desk, my work, my bed. I had my books, the tea rooms, the gables, the cupolas, the stares of the Magdalene deer, the chestnuts in flower, music from the windows of buildings turned ghostly in the sunlight, young voices in the crystalline dusk, and the scent of ancient earth from the quads.

I was dazed. I was dazzled. Without even trying, I had learned how to forget.

Six

I am dragged back toward morning by sleek sheets, a clean sense of spaciousness that cannot possibly be Oxford, and an anguished howling. My head buzzes, the light ripples. London, of course. London. The New Dorchester... I fumble for my tablets on the bedside table as the sirens moan, and I'm blinking and rubbing my eyes when the door to my room swings open.

"Sorry about this, Brook." Reeve-Ellis leans in. He's already dressed, and has PC T3308 in tow. "Frightful cock-up to have an air raid practice on this of all days. You know what these bongo-bongo players are like-probably think it's the Great White God coming down to impregnate their daughters. There's a good man. Just pop on that dressing gown..."

It's pandemonium along the corridors. People are flapping by in odd assortments of clothing with pillow-creases on their cheeks and electrified hair. Reeve-Ellis steers me down the main stairs, then on through crowds in the main atrium. "A lot easier if we go this way," he says, and he, PC T3308, and I struggle against the flow until we reach an eddy beside the hotel souvenir shop where another PC-he's K2910 according to his shoulder badge-is standing guard at the same door marked No Admittance that I was led into two days before. PC K2910 follows us as we go in. The howl of the siren, the sound of people moving, suddenly grows faint. This early in the offices beyond, there are no phones ringing, no typewriters clicking.

"Along here," Reeve-Ellis says, shoving his hands into his cardigan pockets. PC K2910 keeps just behind me. PC T3308 strides ahead and opens another door marked Emergency Exit Only that leads to a damp and dimly lit concrete tunnel. It slams shut behind us. Here, at last, the New Dorchester's carpets and luxury give out. The passage slopes down. Water drips from tiny stalactites on the roof. The air smells gassy and damp.

We reach a gated lift which clanks us down past coils of pipework to some kind of railway platform. An earthy breeze touches our faces as we wait and the rails begin to sing before an automatic train slides in, wheezing and clicking with all the vacant purpose of a toy, hauling a line of empty mail hoppers with pull-down wooden seats. PC K2910 clambers in first, then helps Reeve-Ellis. I try taking a step back, wondering about escape.

"Might as well just get in, sir," PC T3308 says, offering a large, nail-bitten hand. Hunched in our train as we slide into the tunnel, I'm conscious of my slippered feet, my pajamas beneath the dressing gown. Grey wires along the walls rise and fall, rise and fall. I study the two policemen squatting opposite me in what light there is. PC T3308 is bigger and older, with the jowled meaty face and body of an old-fashioned copper. PC K2910 is freckled, red-headed, thin; he seems too young, in fact, to be a policeman at all.

We disembark at another mail station, and travel upward in another gated lift. Then, suddenly, the walls are almost new-painted the same municipal green that covered the walls of the Gents by Christ Church Meadow. PC T3308 grips my arm. There are doors leading into offices, but the place seems empty, abandoned, and we're still deep underground.

"It's in here." Reeve-Ellis opens a door to an office where there are three chairs and a desk, one battered-looking tin filing cabinet, and fat pipes run across the ceiling.

"You may as well sit down, Brook." Reeve-Ellis points to the chair on the far side of the desk as PC K2910 locks the door behind us, and I notice as my body settles into it that it gives off a sour, unfortunate smell. The air is warm in here, almost swimmingly hot.

"Whatever all of this is," I say, "You should know that I've no close friends or relatives. And I have terminal cancer-you can look it up in my NHS records..."

"I'm afraid," Reeve-Ellis says, "that it doesn't work like that."

PC T3308 leans across and lifts my right hand from the arm rest, splaying it palm-up at the edge of the desk. He sits down on it, his fat-trousered bottom pushed virtually in my face. I hear the rasp of a belt buckle, and something jingles. I imagine that they'll start asking me questions at any moment, long before they do anything that might actually cause me pain.

"If this is-" I begin just as, with a small grunt of effort, PC K2910 brings the truncheon down across the fingers of my right hand.

Alone now, I can hear Reeve-Ellis's voice as he talks to someone on the telephone in a nearby room. Yes. No. Not yet. Just as you say... I can tell from the sound of his voice that he's speaking to a superior.

I'm cradling my right hand. It's the most precious thing in the entire world. My index finger is bent back at approximately 45 degrees just above the first joint, and it's swelling and discoloring as I watch. The first and middle fingers are swelling rapidly too, although they could simply be torn and bruised rather than broken.

This is terrible-as bad as I could have imagined. Yet I've had plenty of opportunity lately to get used to pain. The thing about torture isn't the pain, I decide between bouts of shivering. It's the simple sense of wrongness.

The keys jingle. Reeve-Ellis and the two PC's re-enter the room.

"I won't piss you about, Brook," Reeve-Ellis says. "I'm no expert, anyway, at this kind of thing..."

PC K2910 extracts his note pad and pencil. With that freckled narrow face of his, he still looks far too young. PC T3308 leans back against the wall and nibbles at his nails. A sick tremor runs through me.

"Perhaps you could begin," Reeve-Ellis continues, "by telling us exactly why you're here. What all of this is about..."

"You brought me here. I'm supposed to be an honored guest, and then you..."

But almost before I've started, Reeve-Ellis is sighing in weary irritation. He's nodding to PC K2910 to find the keys to let him out of the room again. Once he's gone, the two PC's glance at each other, and come around to me from opposite sides of the desk. Their hook their hands beneath my armpits.

"I didn't think this was the sort of thing the London Constabulary specialized in," I say. "I always imagined this was all left to the KSG nowadays."

"Oh, we don't need those fancy boys, sir. Piss-poor at anything from what I've heard. Now, if you'll just stand up..."

I try to grab the chair's armrest with the fingers of my good hand, but soon I'm standing upright and the PC's are moving me toward the old grey filing cabinet in the corner of the room. I feel the agonizing pull of my tendons as they hold my damaged right hand over the open drawer. Then PC T3308 raises his boot and kicks it shut.

"These things have a pattern," Reeve-Ellis says, sitting in front of me again. "You have to accept that, Brook. What you must realize is that there's only one outcome. Which is you telling me everything."

A soft click, and there on the table, although stretched and blotched to my eyes as if in some decadent non-realist painting, lies the pistol that I inherited in some other life, some other world, from Francis.

"If you could just tell me how and why you got this thing, and what it was doing in your suitcase."

"It's a relic," I say. "It belonged to a friend of mine who died in the War."

"Can you tell me his name?"

I hesitate. A billow of black agony enfolds me. "Francis Eveleigh. As I say, he's dead."

"Where did he live?"

I tell him the name of the street in Lichfield, and then-what could it matter now?-that of Francis's parents' house in Louth. "It came back with his effects when he died at the Somme."

"And the bullets?"

"They came with the effects as well."

"So it all came to you-" Reeve-Ellis strokes his chin. "This gun, these bullets, as a memento of this Eveleigh fellow? And you've kept them with you ever since?"

"Yes."

"Ever used the gun?"

"No... Well, once. I wanted to make sure that it still worked."

"Did it?"

"I'm no expert. It seemed to fire."

"I see. And what did you intend to do with it?"

"What do you think?"

Reeve-Ellis frowns. "I thought we'd got past that stage, old man."

"I intended to kill John Arthur."

Reeve-Ellis nods. He seems unimpressed. Behind him, PC K2910 frowns, licks his pencil, makes a note. Somewhere, a phone is ringing.

"It was Christlow," I say, "wasn't it?"

"Who?"

"Christlow, my scout. He told you about the gun."

"We seem to be forgetting here exactly who is asking the questions." Reeve-Ellis smiles. I sense that the two PC's behind him are loosening their stance. Perhaps all this will soon be ending. Then he stands up and nods to them as he leaves the room, even though I'm screaming that I've already told him everything.

But there are more questions, the nightmare of my hand in the filing cabinet again. Pain's a strange thing. There are moments when it seems there has never been anything else in the whole universe, and others when it lies almost outside you. I think of Christ on his cross, of Torquemada and Matthew Hopkins. All those lives. And even now. Even now. In Japan. In Spain. In Russia. In Britain. I'm not lost at all. Not alone. A million twisted ghosts are with me.

I flinch as the lock slides and the door opens. Alone this time, Reeve-Ellis sits down.

"I was once John Arthur's lover," I swallow back a lump of vomit. "I bet you didn't know that?"

Reeve-Ellis frowns at me. A loose scab breaks open as the flesh on my hand parts and widens. The sensation is quite disgusting.

"I was asked to show you these," he says, laying down a brown manila envelope and sliding out four grainy enlargements of faces and upper bodies, all apparently naked. Three are white-lit against a white cloth background; the fourth-a man, I realize when I've sorted out the approximate details of these gaunt, near-bald, blotched, and virtually sexless figures-is standing against a wall. They are each holding in spider-thin hands a longer version of the kind of slot-in numbers that churches use for hymns. My vision blurs. A large part of me doesn't want to recognize these people.

"How do I know," I say, "that they're still alive?"

"You don't."

I gaze back at the photographs. Eyes that fix the camera without seeing, as if they can fill up with so many sights that light is no longer absorbed. My acquaintance, he looks younger, older, beyond time, with the thin bridge of his nose, the ridges of his cheeks, the taut drum-like skin, the sores. His wife, his children, are elfin, fairy people, blasted through into nothingness by the light that pours around them...

"These people-"

"-I was just asked to show you, Brook. I don't know who they are, what they mean to you."

The lock on the door slides back. Both PC's stand close to the wall without a word, watching me and Reeve-Ellis.

"Are you proud of this?" I say to them all. "Is this how you wanted the Summer Isles?"

"Just concentrate on telling us everything, old man." Reeve-Ellis looks weary, defensive, frustrated. In spite of everything, I still have this feverish sense that there's some part of this equation that I haven't yet glimpsed. "Do you really think you could get even this close to John Arthur with a pistol unless someone wanted you to? Still, it must have been fun while it lasted, playing your stupid little game."

He picks up the photos, taps them together, and slides them back into the envelope. PC's T3308 and K2910 move toward me, grip me beneath my arms and bear me up toward the filing cabinet once again.

When I've told them more than I imagined I ever knew. When I've told them about Francis Eveleigh and about my acquaintance and about poor Larry Black at the Crown and Cushion and Ernie Svendsen who deserves it anyway and all the children I used to teach who I know are grown up by now and culpable as all we British are yet at the same time totally blameless. When I've told them about that time in the twenties when I saw Eveleigh again at the Cottage Spring except he was now really John Arthur. When I've told them everything, I'm suddenly aware of the sticky creak of the chair I'm in, and of the waiting emptiness that seems to flood around me.

"Well...", Reeve-Ellis says. "I suppose we had to get there eventually." He takes PC K2910's notebook. The way he stuffs it into his pocket, I know he's going to destroy it. The two PC's are careful this time. They lift me up almost gently and, amazingly, my limbs still work as we stagger out along the corridor. We come to a door marked Maintenance Only, where PC K2910 fiddles with the bolts and swings it open into a shock of night air. I can hear the murmur of traffic as PC T3308 leads me into the darkness, but the sound is distant, shielded on all sides by brick and glass and concrete. The patch of sky is the same shape and color as a cooling television screen-there's even one small dot-like star in the middle. I'd always imagined that my life would end in a prettier place. A remote clearing in some wood in the Home Counties, the cry of a fox and the smell of leaves and moss...

I glance back. Reeve-Ellis stands in the lighted doorway, hands stuffed into his cardigan as he leans against the frame. It really is quiet here. The whole of this pre-Trafalgar Day, and the celebratory service I was expecting to attend at Westminster Abbey, has gone by. PC T3308 lets go of me and I sag to my knees, still struggling to protect the precious burden of my hand. I hear the creak of leather as he reaches to release the flap of his holster as somewhere, faintly, dimly, deep within the offices, a phone starts ringing. His breathing quickens.

"Wait!" Reeve-Ellis calls across the courtyard, and his footsteps recede. The night falls apart, pulses, regathers as I breathe the rotten air that my own body is making, trying to wish away this moment, this pain. Eventually, the phone stops. Somewhere across London, a train whistle screams. I think of a rocking sleeper carriage. A man's arms around me, his lips against mine. The gorgeous, shameless openness...

Reeve-Ellis's footsteps return, the lines of his body re-shape against the bright doorway.

"There's been," he calls, "a change of plan..."

Reeve-Ellis drives a Triumph Imperial, a big old car from the pre-Modernist early thirties with rusty wings and a vegetable smell inside given off by the cracked leather seats. It creaks and rattles as he drives, indicating fitfully, jerking from side to side along the London streets.

"Who was that phone call from?"

"After what you've been through, old man...," he says, stabbing at the brake as a taxi pushes ahead of us. "You really don't want to know. Believe me. Just count yourself as bloody lucky..."

The brightening sky shines greyish-pink on the Thames as we cross Westminster Bridge. At the New Dorchester, the remnants of a fancy dress party are lingering. A Black Knight is clanking around in the remains of his armor while Robin Hood is arguing mildly about some aspect of room service with Reception. We fit in here, Reeve-Ellis and I. He's come as what he is, and I'm something from the War-or perhaps the last guest at The Masque of the Red Death.

Reeve-Ellis punches the button for the lift.

"The message," he says as the lighted numbers rise, "is that you carry on as before."

"What?"

"Today, old man. You still get to see John Arthur..."

We arrive at my floor. My bed has been made, but otherwise nothing has changed since I left here a day ago. The nymphs still cavort across the ceiling. Saint George is still at prayer in his forest.

"Get some rest," Reeve-Ellis advises after summoning the hotel's resident nurse and doctor on the phone. "Watch the parades on television. I'll make sure someone fixes you up and sees that you're ready in time..."

"Those people-the photographs you showed me."

"I don't know."

"And what about you? Aren't you afraid?"

"Of what, old man?"

"This..." I gesture wildly about me, nearly falling. "Hell."

"If there is a hell," Reeve-Ellis says, reaching to grasp the handle of the door, "you and me, old man-we'd probably hardly notice any difference. We'd just get on with doing the only things we know how..." Then he closes the door, leaving me alone in my plush room at the New Dorchester. My wristwatch on the bedside table has stopped ticking, but the electric clock on the wall tells me it's just after six in the morning. I make the effort to slide back the wardrobe doors with my left hand and check my suitcase. The scents of Oxford still waft from inside, and everything has been left so neatly that it's almost a surprise to find that the pistol really is missing. Clambering to my feet, I swallow a handful of my tablets and study the label on the bottle, although the handwriting is indecipherable. But how would my body react if I took the whole lot? Would that be enough to do it? And the anti-inflammatories, I could take all of those, too. I gaze at the stained glass frieze of Saint George. There's dragon's blood, I notice now, on his praying gauntleted hands. I've been left alone-so perhaps they're expecting this of me; a bid at suicide. But then wouldn't I have been killed already? I throw the bottle across the room with my clumsy left hand. Somehow, it actually hits the frieze, but it bounces off with a dull clunk, raining tablets. Weeping, I scuttle across the floor, picking them up, and collapse on my huge bed.

Beyond my windows, a barge sounds its horn. Lozenges of light ripple and dance with the nymphs on the ceiling. I'd press the button on the headboard that makes the doors slide back, were I able to reach it. I'd like to smell the Thames on what feels like this last of all days, I'd love to hear it innocently lapping. Here in London, it has fostered trade, cholera, prosperity, and been the muse of a thousand poets. There were bonfires upon it in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, so hard did it freeze...

I see myself in front of a class of students once again, speaking these words. Francis Eveleigh is there-he's a young boy, no more than ten, and for some reason his arm is in a

sling. And Cumbernald, and Christlow, and Reeve-Ellis, and my acquaintance, and the many other faces that have filled my life.

I smile down at them as they sit with their scabbed elbows and knees, their grubbily cherubic faces, the looming playtime forgotten for a while as they listen. These, I know, are my only moments of greatness. So listen, just listen. All I want to do is to tell you one last tale.

Seven

Monday 21 October 1940. Trafalgar Day. John Arthur's fiftieth birthday, his silver jubilee. At nine, and under clearing skies even though the forecasts had remained doubtful, the church bells begin to ring out all across the country. There had been talk of rain coming in from the North Sea, driven down over Lincolnshire and across the Fens toward London. But that was just a tease. After a glorious summer of seemingly endless celebrations, no one ever doubted the perfect autumn day this would turn out to be.

By eight o'clock, as the hotel doctor sets and splints my hand and the nurse gags my mouth with a stick to stop me biting my tongue in my agony, trestle tables are being laid in village halls and on dew-damp greens from Mable-thorpe to Montgomery, from Treviscoe to Nairn. Balloons are being inflated and jellies turned out onto plates. Guardsmen are polishing their buckles and blanching their straps while grooms feed and brush their shining mounds. We British are still unsurpassed at doing matters of this sort.

The doctor's manner is brisk-so unsurprised that there doesn't seem to be any point in asking whether he's used to dealing with matters of this sort. And I'm too busy weeping, anyway, until he gives me one last blissfully large injection. Floating, white as angels, the nurse and a hotel steward remain on hand to help me with the tricky process of bathing and dressing. Then I'm placed before my television set, which is already glowing, giving off a smell of warm bakelite and electricity, and my head is supported and my arm is rested. I drift in and out of the rest of the morning on the monochrome visions that come out at me. Already, the ghosts of Empire are moving from Horse Guards Parade, past Admiralty Arch, and along the Mall. Fizzing out at me in shades of grey, they turn at Palace Gardens and march back along the far side of the Mall. The Fourth Infantry. The Gurkhas. The Northamptonshire (Youth) Branch of the Empire Alliance. Bowler-hatted veterans from the War. The Metropolitan Police. The Knights of Saint George.

As noon passes, the King arrives in a white uniform. Pointedly, a gap still remains between him and Deputy Prime Minister Arkwright. It's typical of John Arthur to delay his entrance on this of all days. I can well imagine, in fact, what a delicious luxury it must be to sit in the book-lined calm of his Downing Street study, working quietly through papers while the yearning sea-roar of a whole nation and Empire drifts through the sash windows. It's hard to imagine a greater moment of power. Where to after this, Francis? Oh, Francis-despite everything, I almost feel as if I can almost understand...

Then he arrives. John Arthur, wearing a plain grey suit, settles into his seat beside the King, and every eye, every camera, and with it, the attention of the whole world, shifts to watch him. The latter part of the parade is more military. It's hard not to be impressed by grey-black tanks of such shining bulk that they leave burning trails behind them on the television, and artillery, and bombers swooping low; the sound of their engines reaching me first overhead, trembling the warm air through my balcony windows. But through everything, even in the long minutes when he's not on the screen, my thoughts remain fixed on that one distant figure. I keep asking how it's possible for one man to change anything. And would I have killed him? I don't know. I don't know. Already, that dream seems as lost and remote as the Summer Isles that Francis and I never got around to visiting.

The procession finally ends at half past four with a final massive boom, and gouts of cordite and tank exhaust. The air in my room is cooler now, and the sky outside my balcony doors is already darkening.

"Here's the suit, sir, is it...?"

The process of dressing me is more like armoring a knight of old; it would be easier if we had pulleys and winches. But still we get there, these hotel people and I, moving along shifting avenues of pain as the light from the television plays over us. Then triumphal music cuts short and John Arthur sits at his desk in his Downing Street study. His eyes are black pools in the moment before the dancing electrons settle in the camera; his silver hair dazzles like wet sand.

"As most of you probably know by now," he begins, arms on the desk, a small sheaf of papers in front of him, "today is a special day for me personally. As well as celebrating Admiral Nelson's famous victory at Trafalgar with all the majesty our Nation can muster, I must also celebrate my own fiftieth birthday..."

A nostalgic and a personal note, then, to begin with. It must be said, though, that John Arthur doesn't look fifty. He doesn't look any age at all. The chauffeur touches my good arm, my good shoulder, but I'm still looking back at the screen as he steers me out into the corridor, trying like the rest of the world to trap a little of John Arthur's light. Outside in the grey London dusk, I sink down into the soft hide of yet another Daimler as the New Dorchester slides away. Despite everything, I feel a gathering sense of excitement as, warmly beside me, John Arthur's voice murmurs on the car radio.

"There are signs-indeed, alarming signs-that in Britain itself, this very island, we must prepare for troubles to come. I heard only this morning that Presidents De Gaulle and Von Papen have signed a treaty that draws even closer links between their economies and also those of the Low Countries, uniting their military forces into what is effectively one vast European army..."

The French-and-German-threat has been a favorite theme in the popular press, but now John Arthur is giving it his own approval. I stare at my chauffeur's close-cropped neck as we drone across the empty tarmac of Westminster Bridge, wondering; does he hear those guns, the same grinding engine of history that fills my bones? Much though we British relish the threat of war, there is always a strange sense of shifting values when a fresh enemy is declared. And our main ally in this can only be Stalin's Russia, with Spain, perhaps Italy. Such a conflict would drag in America and the Colonies, China, expansionist Japan.... We drive along Whitehall as the speech ends in a typically wistful finale. All this talk of war seems like a dream as we pass into Downing Street. The old Whip's Office is now the National Headquarters of the Empire Alliance, and the traffic and the tourists are kept back by those iron gates, but little else has changed here with the advent of Modernism. A London constable still stands guard at the polished black door of Number 10, just as he has done since Peel introduced them. He doesn't even wear a gun. Inside, the air smells disappointingly municipal-a bit like Oxford-of beeswax and floor polish and fried bread and half-smoked cigars; slightly of damp, even. There are voices. Other people are wandering. I look around, and glimpse one or two of the other nobodies I've come to recognize during my stay at the New Dorchester. I really am back on the tracks of the itinerary that had always been intended for me-six o'clock, PM meets and greets... It's as if the pistol, this hand, never happened. I wander through to an elegant room of wood panels and mirrors, then out into the Downing Street gardens.

Seen from the back, with its tall windows, pillars, its wrought iron and its domes, Number 10 looks a small stately home tucked into a quiet side street in the heart of London. The transformation from that terraced front is so much like all the other shams of Modernist Britain that I have to remind myself that the building has been this way since the 1730s. The willows in the garden slump limp and grey, the rose bushes are crumpled fists of paper. Paraffin lamps are carried out, shining on the guests as they move amid the mossy urns and statutes, glinting over the mirror-black waters of the ornamental pool. As they mill and chatter in the hushed tones of visitors to a consecrated building, I follow the gravel path leading to the deeper darkness beside the garden's outer wall.

A small stir arises, followed by lightning blasts of flashbulb, and a grey-haired man of slightly less than average height moves easily amid his people, one to the next, shaking hands. Their voices reach me as wordless calls; cries, murmurs, exclamations. John Arthur's shirt looks incredibly white. The lanterns seem to brighten as he passes them. I imagine my last moment of history as I step toward him from these deeper shadows and he smiles with that warmth of recognition that politicians have. Then the feel and the sound of the gun. Bang bang. Blood flowering blackly within the white of his shirt. His eyes fixed on mine, knowing and unknowing as he falls back.

John Arthur seems to glance in my direction as I stand hidden against the dark mass of the ilex tree. Already, discreet KSG minders are shepherding some of the guests back into the house. The garden slowly empties and the voices grow fewer and quieter as damp darkness thickens. I've seen almost all I want to see as John Arthur, arms behind his back now, white cuffs showing, looking a little tired, prepares to follow them. Then he turns and glances back. He takes a step toward the darker reaches of the garden. And I, feeling some impelling force behind me in the night, take a step forward. It's almost as if I'm still being pushed into this moment by the fingers of history.

We meet at the very edge of what remains of the light.

"It is you, isn't it?" John Arthur shakes his head. His voice, his whole posture, belong to a far younger man. His hands flutter white, then his eyes flicker down to my sling.

"That was done yesterday," I say, my voice more unsteady than I'd intended. "Your people did it to me when they took away the gun."

"No," he shakes his head, his gaze fixing mine so firmly that a tremor runs through me. "It wasn't my people, Griff. You were arrested without my authority..."

Griff. A blackbird sings briefly from a bush, but otherwise there is earthy darkness, an implacable sense of silence.

"I heard that you were ill and I wanted to see you. That was all. No one told me about..." He runs his hand back through his sleek grey hair. It's a fair impression of distress. "No one told me about the gun. As soon as I heard you'd been arrested, I ordered your immediate release."

I study him. What am I supposed to say?

"Haven't got long to talk now, Griff," John Arthur points toward the house with his thumb. "They'll soon want me back in there."

"I thought you made your own decisions."

He laughs at that. Then he shrugs and shoves his hands into the pockets of his suit. It's a typical gesture of his; we've all seen it a million times. "But, look, I've been thinking about you these last few months..." We are standing barely a pace apart now, yet he looks grainy and grey with the great house now glowing behind him. Still less than real. "I'd like for us to talk this evening, have a drink. We could go somewhere, Griff. Just you and I. I could shake this for a while..." With that, he turns and walks back toward the house. There are many stars kindled overhead now; the night will be crisp and clear. Shadows that I hadn't noticed before separate from the trees and the ancient walls and move toward me. I almost want to run.

John Arthur is silent as he drives swiftly along Horse Guards Parade and then on through clear barricaded side streets. No one turns to stare. The speeding, blank-windowed official car is, after all, commonplace in Modernist Britain. "You enjoyed the show?"

"The show?" I look over at him.

"Of course," he pushes the car faster. "You were here to kill me..."

Drunk and jolly Tommies squat aside the lions as we pass Trafalgar Square. Everywhere, flags are being waved, people are leaning dangerously from windows. There will be deaths tonight. There will be conceptions. On through Covent Garden and across the Strand, then past the Inns of Court. A taxi draws up beside us as we queue to get into Cheapside. Two women in evening clothes are talking animatedly in the back.

"Tell me this, though, Griff," he says, his fingers clenching and unclenching the wheel's stitched leather. "Whatever made you think the world would change if there was no John Arthur?"

"Who would replace you? Jim Toller's too young-and nobody trusts him. People like Smith and Mosley are second-rate politicians. I suppose there was Harrison, but then he was conveniently executed. And we've all been laughing at William Arkwright for years..."

"You shouldn't underestimate Bill. I've kept him close to me because he's the one person I can least trust. You're wrong about it all, in fact, Griff. The military, the bloody establishment. They all want rid of me. Why do you think I made that speech this evening? Why do you think this country has to fight? They're afraid, Griff. All of them are afraid..."

Soon, we are in Whitechapel. He makes a turn and the tires squeal across the wet cobbles, then rumble to the curb of a dead end beside a scrap of wasteground. Clinging to my dignity, not waiting for him to come and help me, I climb slowly out. It's cold and dark here. The ground is sticky with litter and the air has a faintly seasidey smell of coal smoke and river silt. John Arthur opens the rear door and takes a hat from the back seat-an ordinary-looking trilby-then a dark overcoat, which he pulls on, raising the collar.

"There," he says, turning with his arms outstretched, "who would recognize me?" The transformation is, of course, complete.

My walk is slow and labored as we head past the terraced houses, and John Arthur helps me by snaking his arm around my back to support some of my weight, giving me a little lift as we step over a pothole and up onto the loose beginnings of a pavement. In odd, flashing moments, he feels almost like Francis. His breathing and way he walks is almost the same, and his skin, beneath everything, still smells faintly of burnt lemon.

Soon, we're drawing close to the sidings, tracks, and cliff-face brick warehouses of the docks, where local people have gathered for a view of the fireworks above the Thames. Mothers in slippers with scarves wrapped over their curlers. Men with fags behind their ears and the stubble of a day off work peppering their chins. They Ohh and Ahh as the sky crackles and the colors shine in gutters and ignite the myriad warehouse windows. No one notices John Arthur and I as we slip between them. He's just a slight middle-aged man helping his invalid father.

A little away from the crowd, tea chests lie heaped beside a wall. I slump down even though the air is sour here, and John Arthur sits beside me. In shadow, he risks taking off his hat, gestures toward the crowd. "They all seem so happy," he says. "A few drinks, a bed, food, some flesh to hold, some bloody fireworks..."

"They worship you."

"Do they? You tell me, Griff. You're the historian." He looks at me challengingly then, does this ex-lover of mine-does this John Arthur, and something chill and terrible runs down my spine. Now, powerless as I am, I'm sure that I was right to try to kill him. "It's not enough, is it? After what we went through. I thought it might be enough when I first visited Dublin after the victory. And then again when word came through from Rhodesia." He shakes his head as sulfurous plumes of red smoke drift over London. "You don't know what the War was like, Griff. No one does who wasn't there..."

He's leaning forward now, eyes fixed on nowhere as the flashes of light catch and die over the planes of his face, the silver of his hair, his elbows resting on his knees as he grips the rim of his hat, turning it over and over.

"It was all so easy when I enlisted," he says. "There were men chatting with each other on the train as it took us down to this big park north of Birmingham. Suddenly we were all the same-bosses and laborers... I was a rifleman, Griff. Third best shot in the training battalion when the Lee Enfields finally arrived. Went to France in December as part of Kitchener's First Army... And don't believe any of the bloody rubbish about King and Regiment and Country, Griff. You fight for the bloke who's standing next to you. You put up with all the mud and the lice and the officers and the regimental bullshit for their sake."

"It must have been terrible."

"It wasn't terrible. Don't give me that. It wasn't terrible at all. I've never laughed more in my life, or felt more wanted, more as if I belonged. The rain. The rats. The mud. It was all like some stupid practical joke. And it was quiet a lot of the time and there were empty fields where you could lie down in the evening and stare up at a perfect sky. Then down to the town, most of us half-drunk already, and the fat white mademoiselles spitting on their fingers and saying *laver vous*. Yes, Griff, I did that too. And I had friends, mates, encounters. There were places. Nobody cared..." He stares down, his silvered head bowed as the rockets whoosh and wheel, scrawling out the sky.

"We were sent to the Somme in June 1916. It was supposed to be the big push that would win the War, but we knew that we were just covering a French cock-up. I lay awake that last night. We all knew we were going over the top in the morning. Not that they told you, but you could tell from the guns. I couldn't sleep. Boom, boom, and the stink of the trenches. Boom, boom, boom. Then the big guns stopped, and that silence was the worst thing of all. We were moved up to the front line. Thousands, thousands of us. And there was silence, just men breathing and the shuffle of our feet on the duckboards and the creak and jingle of our packs. And for the first time, I knew that I'd lost it. I felt terribly afraid.

"The whistle went and men started to climb out of the trenches. A lot of them just fell back, and I thought they were being clumsy until I realized they'd been shot already. And I just stood there. It was the worst moment of my life but I knew I couldn't go back, so I started to climb up out of that trench. My mates were already running around the pool of a big shell hole miles ahead, but I was just wandering in a nightmare, looking for somewhere to hide...

"I don't know when I got hit, Griff-or how long it took. But there was this heat across my side as I slid down into this long hollow. I knew it wasn't that bad... I could have gone on, Griff. I could have climbed out of that ditch and gone on. But I didn't. I just crouched there the whole day. Boom, boom-I could hear the shells whistling over. The bullets rattling. But I was alone with my fear, Griff. Quite alone.

"Darkness came and the flares went up. Men with stretchers found me and hauled me out, and I looked enough of a mess to be convincing as I was taken back to the field dressing station. I was given some water and a jab of morphine and quinine and carried across the fields to a big river barge just as dawn was coming. You could still smell the coal that they'd cleared out of the barge beneath all the other stench, and you could hear the water laughing around the sides as we pulled away from the jetty.

"A few men were crying and moaning. A lot were comatose or simply asleep. There was a man with his head half-blown off on the stretcher nearest to me. He couldn't possibly live, his brains were coming out, and then he started this terrible moaning. He was trying to speak, but his jaw was so wrecked I couldn't understand what he was saying. Something K and something M. His limbs were jerking and this noise he was making just went on and on. It was a sound out of hell. Then I looked at him again with the top of his skull ripped off like an egg, and I realized what he was saying. He was saying, Kill Me..."

"I managed to stand up, and he seemed to quieten for a moment then, and look back up at me from his ruined face with his one good eye. I took strength from that, and I understood that what he wanted was what you'd do for any mate of yours in the same position. He had a pistol on his belt, but I knew that it was too late to use it here. And I was still lost, still afraid. In fact, it seemed as if it was his strength that enabled me to take the blanket from by his feet and push it down over his face and hold it there. Of course, he began to fight and buck after a while-it takes longer than you'd imagine to kill a man-but eventually he stopped struggling, and I was glad that I still had this one soldierly act left in me. I knew that he'd died a hero's death, this man. This soldier.

"Perhaps it was that or the drugs I'd been given which made me do what I did next. I don't know. I felt for the waxed envelope that they'd tied to his tunic at the dressing station. His name was John Arthur, and he was a private in the Staffordshires like me, although from a different battalion. And it struck me that John Arthur was a good name for a soldier,

a good name for a man. I'd always hated being Francis Eveleigh, anyway. It was all done in that moment, in the foul air of that barge with the water laughing beside me, swapping names just to see how it felt to become him. And straight away, you know, as I lay down again on my pallet and the fever began to take a bigger hold, it felt better...."

John Arthur is silent for a moment as the sky above London foams with light, pushing at us like a wind.

"Didn't anyone ever suspect?"

"The rest of my platoon had been wiped out. So had John Arthur's. And I caught pneumonia, you see, Griff, so I was shipped back to England. By the time I was finally ready for active duty again, I could have been anyone for all the difference it made. So I went back to the front as S4538 Rifleman Arthur, D Company 7th Service Battalion, The Rifle Brigade, and I knew from the first time I heard the guns that this time it would be better, this time I wouldn't feel any fear. I was even made corporal, and I won the George Cross... But that's common knowledge."

"What was it like when the War ended?"

"I went up to Raughton, which was John Arthur's last address before enlisting. I found out that the Yorkshire accent I'd copied from one of the cooks was all wrong, but that didn't matter. We were like ghosts. Nobody seemed to belong anywhere then. The place was just a pit village and the address was a cheap boarding house. One or two people told me they remembered him, but I never really knew if they did. He'd been slightly older than me, but seemed to have made little impression on the world. His father had been an itinerant who'd started out in the West Country and had died in a mining accident...

"But I knew I had to do something more with this new life John Arthur had given me. Do you understand that, Griff? So I jumped on a cattle truck, took the train down to London. It was cold that winter and there was the flu epidemic. Each morning under the bridges and in the shop fronts, a few extra bodies didn't wake up. And the men in suits and the women in hats who'd never done anything but complain about the rationing just wrinkled their noses and stepped over them. And there were queers like you, Griff, who'd get a man to do anything for the price of a meal. And fat cats and Jews. And the bright young things. And the colonels who were back from the War, jingling with medals and a big pension.

"But I still remembered I was John Arthur. And I began to meet people who understood that there was nothing left in all the lies that had once kept this country afloat. And you saw what it was like-Griff, that night fifteen years ago. You saw how easy it is to be John Arthur. He was always waiting there. Even now, he's leading me on."

The big display is reaching its climax. Even here, what must be two miles off, there's a sweet-sour reek of gunpowder as the flares blossom overhead. John Arthur puts his trilby hat on, straightens it, checks that his coat collar is still up, and offers me his hand again. "Come on, Griff, I'll buy you that drink..."

I let him help me up, and an elderly woman in a hairnet and a housecoat glances across the road. Her hand goes up to her mouth for a moment, childlike in wonder. Is it? But no, no... it couldn't be. Relieved, she looks back toward the crackling sky.

John Arthur breathes easily beside me, helping me along as I wonder what I should say, what horrors I could tell him that he doesn't know already, what questions should I ask. But it's like all those letters that I never wrote to him. It's like all the promises of love that, even in that brief, glorious time when Francis and I were alone, were never given. It's like my unwritten book. It's like my whole life.

The sky is on fire now. The houses look flash-lit, pushed back into skeletons of their real selves. I stumble as renewed pain shoots through me. Our two linked shadows leap, burned and frozen ahead into the pavement, and it seems that we're at the lip of a vast wave that will soon break through everything, dissolving, destroying. Then, with one last final bellow, the display ends and we move on through the East End, the ordinary East End of

London in this night of the 21st of October 1940, beneath a bruised sky, in shocked, blotchy darkness.

A public house juts at the triangular meeting of the two streets facing toward the Mudchute and the Isle of Dogs. The sign is unilluminated, painted in dark colors. If I didn't know this place already, I probably wouldn't be able to make out the words Cottage Spring. The room inside is smaller than the place I remember stumbling into fifteen years before. But I recognize the counter that John Arthur leapt onto, and the pattern of the mirror, now cracked, that lies behind it; there, even, is the fat pillar in the corner that I once hid behind.

There's a moment of bizarre normality as John Arthur takes off his hat, lowers his coat collar, and walks up to the bar. Two cloth-capped men are playing darts, while three underage lads sit nursing their pints, and an old man stares at his evening glass of stout. They're some of the few who couldn't be bothered to see tonight's fireworks, or even watch them at home on TV, and it's amusing to observe their reactions as they realize who's just come in. There's puzzlement, doubt-like that old woman by the docks-followed by that standard British reluctance to make a fuss.

"I'll buy everyone their next round," John Arthur says, speaking with that soft Yorkshire accent: the very image of himself, and suddenly, they're all clustered around him, breathless and eager like children at a fete when Father Christmas finally arrives. John Arthur signs beer mats, he laughs and shares a joke. He really is John Arthur now, and these are his people. The old man downs the rest of his stout, spilling most of it down his shirt, and quavers that he'd like another. The lads ask for halves of ginger beer, which John Arthur laughingly changes to the pints of Fuller's that they were on before.

Outside, word of who's here must have got out, for there are children's and women's voices, the shadows of raised hands and heads shifting across the frosted windows. And I'm just standing here, tired and in pain. Drained of anger. Drained of hope. Soon to be drained of life. I shuffle closer to that pillar at the end of the bar, in need once more of its reassuring anonymity. John Arthur's forgotten about me anyway. These are his people. This is where he belongs. I'm just a name from the past that he couldn't remember well enough to get right when he made his speech to the Parliament that he later dissolved. A phone begins to ring at the back of the pub, unanswered. Somewhere, a car engine is racing.

The voices of the men are easier now. Yes, they realize, he really is just as everyone says; an ordinary bloke you could share a drink with. John Arthur looks across as the roar of an approaching car fills the street. He seems to notice me now almost as he did all those years ago. It's as if nothing has ever changed. But this time, somehow, his smile is more genuine, and as he walks over with his arms a little apart, I can't help but smile back at him.

There comes a sharp sound of banging, and the thought passes, too quickly to be fully-formed, that the fireworks have resumed. Then, one by one, the frosted windows of the Cottage Spring begin to fall in. They burst into shining veils, and splinters of wood fly out as the room explodes in a reflecting spray of collapsing mirrors. The men at the bar are jerked, thrown back, lifted. The glass is like a great watery tide, rolling and rising. John Arthur pirouettes as the last window explodes and the shining air flowers silver and red around him, then the pillar I'm beside splatters and streams before everything stops and fills with sudden, terrible silence.

As I look down at this shattered place and these broken dolls lying on the crimsoned linoleum, there comes a sudden crash as the last of the big mirrors falls, and faint, at the very edge of everything, are the sounds of crying, fumbling, moaning, weeping. Then the roar, once again, of that car. Gears smash as it turns, and I wait for more bullets, but instead something large and metallic flies through a gaping window. A thick, round-cornered box with a single wire protruding, it hits an upended table and skids hissing through the sparkling wreckage to settle beside Francis's body.

Then the car pulls away with a screech of tires in the last moment before the world erupts into darkness.

Eight

Every morning now, I awake not knowing who or where I am, filled with a vague sense of horror and helplessness. I do not even know if I am human, or have any real identity of my own. For a moment then, I am under the rubble again and Francis is beside me. His hand is in mine, and flutters like an insect in the moment that he dies. My life seems to float out in both directions from that point. It's like unwrapping a complex present; tearing away at silvery ribbons of the future and the past, although I know that it's all just some trick-a party game-and that I will be left clutching nothing but tangled paper, empty air.

I unglue my eyes and look out at the world, accepting the strange fact of my continued existence. But it remains a slow process even though this beamed ceiling is familiar to me; fraught with a sense of aftermath. I am Brook, yes, I am Geoffrey Brook. I am a lecturer, a teacher-in fact, a true Professor of History now. And Oxford, yes, Oxford.

I feel for my glass, my tablets, which lie a long way beyond the Chinese pheasants cavorting on my eiderdown. I sense that it is early, still dark outside my window, although a strange light seems to wash up from the quad and there is a chill to the air beyond the crackling heat of my fire. Somewhere across the rooftops and towers, a bell, distant yet clear, begins to chime the hour. When silence and equilibrium return, I slide inch by inch across the sheets until my feet drop off the edge of the bed. I am old, I think. I am old. Perhaps that is the last shock I have been waiting for.

Bunioned, barefoot, trying not to exhaust myself by coughing, I stumble through the cavorting firelight toward my window, dribbling fingers of condensation as I wipe the mullions with my wrecked and arthritic right hand and gaze at the strange whiteness. It has snowed again in the night. Of course. This is Oxford and it has snowed again in the night... I have to close my eyes, then, as a twinge of pain and the rawness in my throat sets off another ugly memory.

I remember everything now. I am here. I am alive. This is the last day of the year of 1940. John Arthur is dead.

I'm still leaning there, still staring from my college window in a drugged half-doze, when the breakfast trolley rumbles toward my door. The knock sounds hesitant, mistimed, yet still I'm somehow expecting Christlow as the handle turns and the chill outer air touches my skin. But it's Allenby.

"Good morning, Professor. Terrible lot of snow in the night as you've doubtless seen. Got a nice fire going for you earlier while you were still asleep..." He slips my padded silk dressing gown from the hook near the fire where it's been warming. His breath is cool on my neck as he helps me into it; like the sense of the snow. He bends down to sheathe my feet in lambskin slippers. He's young and good-looking, is Allenby. He says all the right things; he doesn't even wear an EA badge. But he still seems like a barely competent actor, forever trying and failing to find the essential meaning of his role.

"You've got that appointment, by the way."

"Appointment?"

"Twelve o'clock at the George Hotel. Miss Flood is coming up from your publishers in London."

Then he lays the morning's papers out before me. Sheet upon warm rustling sheet that smell crisply of ink and freshly felled wood; all that history in the making. I'm tempted to ask Allenby to take the damn things away, but I know that that would seem ungrateful. And there's something-I remember now-something that still pricks my interest, although as yet I can't quite recall what.

I reach out toward the table, using my right hand like a scoop to push the Times into the better grip of my left. PM Announces Immediate Inquiry into Scandal of Jewish Homeland. RAF Airlifts Aid. The photograph beneath shows a group of people huddled outside a

rough hut. They are skeleton-thin, clothed in rags. I raise it closer to my eyes, so close that their faces become collections of printed dots.

My college Daimler slides through the slush along High, Catte, and Broad. We park at the corner of George Street and the Cornmarket, where my driver helps me out onto the oystered ice of the pavement and leads me into the Ivy Restaurant. The colors that the snow and the cold have bleached out of Oxford all seem to have fled into these rooms. The ceilings are pink, the walls lean with gilded mirrors, there are flowers at every table. As is often the case now, rumor of my arrival has spread before me, and I must wait and smile and raise a trembling hand in acknowledgment as the dining room erupts into applause. But the moment isn't over-played as I shuffle toward the best table by the window where Miss Flood awaits me.

Her bracelets jangle as she sips her wine. Her fingers are restless as she picks at a bread roll, missing the chains of cigarettes that, since I succumbed to a coughing fit at one of our early meetings, she refrains from smoking in my presence.

"I was speaking to Publicity only yesterday, Geoffrey," she tells me. "And you're definitely the flagship of our spring list."

"That's good to know...," I wheeze. "I received your letter with the, er, galleys only the day before yesterday."

"Try not to think of them as galleys or proofs, Geoffrey. Think of them as..." Miss Flood waves her hand, clutching an imaginary cigarette. "Complimentary reading material." She smiles.

I nod. What she means is that she wants to keep me well away from the tricky business of correcting my own scholarly inaccuracies, my ungrammatical turns of phrase.

Miss Flood delves into her briefcase and shows me a glossy mock-up of the dustjacket. The first print run is thirty thousand, with the presses ready to roll with another thirty thousand after that. You'll never know from the look of this book that Miss Flood's other major authors write do-it-yourselfs and whodunnits. I really can't complain.

"As to the title," she says, tapping the celluloid with a scarlet fingernail, "you'll see that we've stuck with our original idea. That, er, other suggestion that you made. Good though it was, I'm afraid that it didn't quite click with our marketing people. Fingers of History was too close, if you see what I mean. There are a lot of people out there who still remember your work and who'd love to have a hardback copy of your best articles..."

Figures of History

Geoffrey Brook

"Oh, and we've finally cleared up the copyright business. Being who you are, Geoffrey, I really didn't think that the people at the Sketch would resist. But we'll need to hurry you..." Miss Flood says more quietly, slipping in the words when she imagines that I'm not really conscious as I gaze out of the window at the snow-softened spires, domes, towers of this city. Balliol, All Souls, Queens... the litany of my dreams... "If we're going to squeeze in that new extra chapter you were talking about."

"I've decided," I squeak, "what I want to write about. It fits in with research I was doing into the history of the Jews." Jews... My voice sounds even lighter than ever as I end the sentence, and I'm sure that the restaurant conversations fade around me. "What with all the fuss there's been in the papers these last few days about the Highlands..." Something sticks and crunches in my throat. "I was thinking... thinking that the time is right to remind people..."

Geoffrey, that sounds fascinating." Pause. "Although everyone's hungry to hear more about your links with John Arthur."

"Of course."

"Not that I want to steer you in any particular direction."

My eyes are watering. My nose is starting to run. I fumble to find a clean corner of my handkerchief as I begin to cough and the chime of bells and the clatter of lunchtime cutlery, the waitresses' whispering and the taste of the wine and the smell of the cooking and the

clangor in the kitchens and the whispers in ancient corridors and the scent of old stone and fresh snow, the dreaming towers of these rabbithole rooms-the sense of all Oxford-fractures around me.

Geoffrey Brook was born in Staffordshire, Lichfield, in 1875. He has devoted most of his life to teaching history, firstly in and around the City of his birth, where he influenced the young John Arthur, and later in his life at one of the most distinguished and ancient Oxford colleges...

Running my pen through the word ancient, scratching a question mark over distinguished, I close the file of publicity material as my college Daimler hisses slowly along High. Already, it's getting dark and the lights in the shop windows are glowing. Prices have gone up a lot recently-taxes, as well-and you'd think that people would have had enough of shopping after the frenzied weeks before Christmas. But the windows offer Biggest Ever Sale and Huge Post-Xmas Discounts, even though it won't be twelfth night until Sunday.

My college tower looms and the chill air bites as I dismiss my driver and wade unaided across the snowy quad. Wheezing, I slump down into one of the leather armchairs beside the fire in my rooms and drag my telephone, a new privilege, onto my lap and stab and turn, stab and turn, dialing out a number from the back page of the Times, willing all the ghosts of history to give me strength, and trying to picture a bustling newsroom filled with the same clean purposeful smell as the papers Allenby brings me...

But today's New Year's Eve, and there are no newspapers tomorrow. The telephone just rings and rings.

The world already knew that John Arthur was dead by the time I was hauled out from the rubble of the Cottage Spring. I could hear it in the crowd's sobbing howls as the masonry slid and crumbled, and in the firemen's angry voices.

One of the beer-drinking lads survived for two nights at Barts inside an iron lung. Another remains alive to this day, though a mindless cripple. There were also many deaths and disablements amid the onlookers who'd gathered in the street outside. Only I, Geoffrey Brook, protected by that pillar-and, perhaps, in some strange way, by the fact that I was already close to death-truly survived. I suffered a gash along my cheek that required five stitches, a dislocated shoulder, two septic lungfuls of plaster. Of course, I had my bad right hand already, although that fact often feels as lost to me as it is to the rest of the world. Even as I was carried to the ambulance, the flashbulbs were popping, the television lights were glaring. Three days later, as I lay propped up in my hospital bed, smoothed and groomed, sweetly drugged, the new Prime Minister William Arkwright called by at my hospital room. The flashbulbs of the many newsmen he'd brought with him popped and crackled as he shook my good left hand and grinned around his pipe. He already seemed bigger than the man I'd met in the gardens of New Buckingham Palace. "And it's Professor Brook from now on," he said as he picked up his trademark Homburg hat from my bed. "Did I mention that just now? No matter-it'll be in all tomorrow's papers."

John Arthur's death is already as much a part of his myth as everything that happened during his life. This time, unlike the fire at Old Buckingham Palace-and unless Jim Toller and the several senior officers of the KSG commit suicide in their cells-there will even be a trial. The national mood is predominantly one of sadness and disillusion. EA badges are less frequently worn, and KSG officers suffer children's jibes as they walk the streets, implicated as they all are by association in the death of our great leader. And the British economy, it seems, is far weaker than we ever imagined, damaged by ten years of over-expenditure. Conscription is being phased out, and negotiations with France and Germany about mutual disarmament will commence in February. There is even talk-oblique, as yet-of giving India and Ireland a semblance of Home Rule, and fresh elections for a new People's Assembly.

All the rest, that last glorious summer of hope and expansion, already feels like a dream. After all, the world is becoming an increasingly dangerous place-Japan has attacked China, Stalin has annexed eastern Poland-and it's obvious that the countries of Western Europe must draw together if they are not to be swept away by Communism and a commercially belligerent America. John Arthur's threats toward France and Germany, his canny alliance with Stalin, have simply given us a top seat at the table in the negotiations to come.

I found that his picture had vanished from the Gents beside Christ Church Meadow when I made my recent farewell visit there, although the nail-marks that I and my acquaintance made in the third cubicle remain. Somehow, as I touched their soft indentations, they spoke to me of nothing but hope and human decency.

The Cumbernalds' house shines out amid a spray of car headlights as I arrive that evening.

"All terribly kitsch, I know," Eric Cumbernald assures me as I hobble past the flashing fairy lights in the front porch. "Everyone's waiting for you..."

Within moments, I'm surrounded, touched, smiled at, reminded of previous meetings and promises of lunch. Grateful for the armor of my tablets, I shuffle across the carpets toward the largest and most inviting-looking chair. Cumbernald brings me a sweet sherry and a Spode plate with a sausage roll and the crowd around me thins as it becomes apparent that I'm not responding to their questions. From being a living link to John Arthur, I'm demoted to being an old relic, to be touched for luck, then forgotten. Music plays. The fire flickers. The Christmas decorations turn and sway. There are many hours to go yet before midnight and the coming of 1941.

Eileen Cumbernald sits for a while on the arm of my chair, brown as ever in a low-backed dress. Her husband Eric's impending promotion to Vice Chancellor of Oxford University has left her totally unchanged.

"I so enjoyed that time we spent together at Penrhos," she tells me. "You really must come down with us again next year..."

I have to smile. It's funny, how people choose to ignore my obvious physical decline. I suppose that they imagine it's only natural. In fact, it would be wrong for me to appear too hale and hearty after surviving an explosion that killed John Arthur.

"You're even more like dead Uncle Freddie now!" Barbara Cumbernald declares delightedly as she imprisons me in her hot arms while Christine hangs back a little, looking just as pale and hot as her sister, but more clearly the eldest now. "Will you tell us one of your funny stories?"

"Why don't you both tell me a story instead?" I suggest. "Tell me what you know about John Arthur."

"John Arthur," Barbara intones, her arms still around me, smelling of wine and sweat and toffee, "died a hero's death as we as a Nation celebrated Trafalgar Day. Bad people who wanted to-" But at this point, Christine begins to tickle her, and they collapse on the floor in a squealing heap.

Will the Cumbernalds' stay in this house on Raglan Street, I wonder, in the wake of Eric's promotion and the knighthood that will almost certainly follow? With the billiard room and the conservatory, the hugely expensive kitchen I got a glimpse of, they've clearly got things here exactly as they want them. But they will move, of course, ever-upward toward some semi-stately home. They'll continue to swim the warm English currents until age and frailty finally catch up with them. They'll probably even accept death with good grace-just like me, they'll have no cause to complain about the way history and these Summer Isles have treated them. Me, I really am a full Professor now. And MA, Modern History, from my own college, too. As Cumbernald has carefully explained, my Master's can be seen as either honorary or de-facto depending upon the angle from which you choose to view it. The thing often switches back and forth even in my own befuddled mind-a strange state of existence that I suspect the scientists you used to hear about a few years

ago would recognize from their studies of the hints and glimmers that apparently make up our universe. We're barely there, it seems, if you look closely enough; just energies and particles that don't belong in a particular time or place. Stare at the world too hard, breathe at it from the wrong direction, and it falls apart. Explodes.

Christlow was found drowned on a muddy bank of the Thames down by the Isle of Dogs the morning after the Cottage Spring. A presumed suicide, there were whispers on the Oxford grapevine of evidence found in his rooms of preferences that should never be entertained by a man who works with children.

I don't doubt, in fact, that he was following me. Where and how it began, and whether he always knew of my sexual dalliances, I will never know. But I'm also sure that he found the pistol in the suitcase beneath my bed. No doubt he imagined he was doing no more than his patriotic duty by reporting this fact, and my movements. But here the picture grows fuzzy, unscientific, unhistoric...

My thoughts always come back to the man who has most plainly benefited from John Arthur's death. More than ever now, it's clear that we all underestimated William Arkwright. He's a consummate survivor, a dealer and a fixer, a betrayer, a politician in the sense that John Arthur—who lived, for all his faults, by the heart, by the flame and the fire—never was. It must have been plain to Arkwright long before it was to the rest of us that Modernism was in crisis, seduced by its own myth, in danger of launching itself into economic catastrophe and a disastrous European war. So perhaps Arkwright finally persuaded the relics of an establishment that is now resurgent that enough was enough. As even the arrest of Jim Toller and his senior KSG colleagues acknowledges, John Arthur's death was executed too professionally to be the work of mere fanatics.

From this, I soon find myself taking the kind of wild flights that, even when I was spinning through the most dangerously speculative pages of my long-projected book, I would never have considered undertaking. History—the only kind of history, anyway, that anyone ever cares about—is always reducible to solid facts that can be learned by students in hour-long lessons and then regurgitated in exams, or used to add color to television dramas, or as the embroidery in escapist novels. But what could have been more convenient than to have some dying madman kill John Arthur, alone and unaided? So I wasn't arrested. I remained an idea to be toyed with—or at least not discarded until the last appropriate moment. Even as I wandered the gardens of New Buckingham Palace, it was still quite possible that I would be allowed access to John Arthur with my gun. After all, there was no particular reason why I shouldn't succeed, other than the question mark that hung over my own character. And whom should I meet there amid the terraced fountains, but none other than William Arkwright?

It was then, I think, that I was finally weighed in the balance and found lacking. Arkwright ordered that I be arrested by his own officials, perfunctorily questioned to make sure I wasn't hiding anything, then shot while more reliable contingencies were put in hand. Only some chance enquiry from John Arthur's office about my whereabouts—that midnight phone call echoing in that shaft between the buildings—saved my life.

Did John Arthur know that an assassination attempt was likely? Was it I who led him to his killers at the Cottage Spring? But no, no. All of this is too fantastic—worse than those dreadful Modernist books that I forced myself to read. The fact is that I will never know. Perhaps in years to come when the truth is no longer potent, some hack or scholar will come up with a theory that questions the role of Jim Toller's KSG in John Arthur's death. They may even stumble across the strange fact that another figure, an obscure populist academic named Brook, was arrested in possession of a gun. Odder still, this Brook character was then released and was with John Arthur at the time of his death—survived, even, the bullets and the explosion. I cannot imagine what threads they will draw out from these odd facts. Of their nature, the true conspiracies are the ones that are least likely to be unearthed in the future. The truth, at the end of the day, remains forever silent. We are only left with history.

"There you are, Brook!" Cumbernald looms from the ceiling decorations and lays his hand on my shoulder. "Can't just drift off like this, you know. There's a phone call for you. A Miss Flood."

My knees pop and crack like tiny fireworks as he helps me up. His right arm supports me as he leads down the corridor. "You can take it in here in my study," he says, pushing open the door, watching for a few moments as I settle down on a new leather chair to make sure that I know how to operate this fancy-looking phone of his.

"Geoffrey, there you are!" Miss Flood sounds excited. "I got your number here from that creepy chap who works for you at the college."

"Christlow?"

"Whatever. I've marvelous news, Geoffrey..."

I wait as Miss Flood bumbles on, studying the ample bookshelves that cover these study walls (mostly do-it-yourself and whodunnits, a few biographies and thin histories; a small space where my own forthcoming work will fit in easily), doing my best to banish the sense of gloomy premonition that still comes over me when people announce they have news.

"...so Arkwright's own Private Secretary asked if it wasn't too much of a presumption. I mean, as if we'd really mind. Of course, we'll have to re-do the dustjacket to give his name due prominence...."

"You mean Arkwright is-"

"-Yes, going to write an Introduction to your book! I know, I know. I still haven't got over it either. I haven't even started to think what this'll do to the print runs! Of course, it means that you, Geoffrey, can relax. You won't have to write a thing more..."

Part of me drops away as I gaze down at the receiver. There are two ways, I decide, to gain a person's silence and compliance. You either take away their lives and scrub out their identity. Or you give them everything.

"So that's it, then?"

"Marvelous! And Happy New Year. Oh, Geoffrey... not that it matters now as far as the book's concerned, but I do have a contact for that research you were talking about. Someone in the Government who's co-ordinating the Jewish relief effort."

I cradle the phone between my shoulder and chin, searching the leather-and-ash expanse of Eric Cumbernald's desktop for something resembling a pen or a pencil. I begin to write out the number and the name that Miss Flood dictates in my left-handed scrawl, then stop half way and put down the phone without wishing her goodbye.

"Everything okay in there?" Cumbernald asks. His eyes travel down to my bit of paper. "If you want to make another call..."

"I don't think I'll bother."

"In that case..." He slides back a cabinet front to reveal a television screen surrounded by nests of equipment, "there's something I'd very much like to show you..."

I crumple the note as the comforting smell of warming valves slowly fills the room. The name Miss Flood's given me of the Home Office official who's overseeing the operation to provide food, medical treatment, and shelter to the Jews is Reeve-Ellis. The television screen snows. Then there are ghostly figures that make me think of my acquaintance and his family, huddled in their crude huts or blanketed in the hurricane wilderness. Of course, the Government has come to their rescue now. The terrible situation has been proclaimed by Ministry of Information Press Release, and the newspapers have lapped it up unquestioningly. Soon, it will be dealt with, and-a little sadder, a little wiser, a little less trustful-we Britons will watch the results on the BBC News. This Jewish Scandal has come at just the right time. It shows Arkwright as a man of honesty who is prepared to deal with the aberrations that so blackened Modernism's reputation in the rest of the world. It may even get us back into the League of Nations. In a few months-or years, perhaps, depending upon political contingencies-a similarly narrow spotlight will fall upon the treatment camps

in the Isle of Man. But, even if my acquaintance and his family have survived, angel of death that I am, I realize that I must never try to contact them.

Cumbernald places a large silver disk on a spinning turntable. "I had the cine-recording transcribed to video," he explains as I watch the jumpy white outlines of Eileen, Christine, Barbara, and myself sitting outside the summer lodge in Penrhos Park on the television screen. Behind it all is a crackle and a rumble. Eggs and bacon, Eggs and bacon. Apple and custard...

"Been thinking, by the way," he says, leaning against a bookshelf as he admires his camerawork. "About who should replace me as principal at college. We need someone with reputation, don't you think? Someone with an agile mind... And I don't really think you'll be surprised, Brook, when I tell you that your name was the first that came to mind."

"I'm far too old," I mutter, still gazing at the screen as Christine and Barbara run up to me, their tongues stuck out like gorgeous gargoyles, their whole futures ahead of them. "Far too ill..."

"Such a pity," Cumbernald says, re-folding his arms, adding just the right note of regret, "even if it were true..." But he doesn't push it. In fact, he sounds relieved.

"Anyway," he stoops down, preparing to lift the needle from the record as the matchstick figures dance and shift, grey on white. "Time we got back into the throng, old man." Christine and Barbara dissolve into a flash of light, then shrink down through a pin dot into the blackness. "It's nearly midnight."

The lights are off now in the main room as the bells of Big Ben begin their famous chime. Bong-and there it is. Bong-a New Year is beginning. Lips and hands press against my own with the rustle of tweed and rayon, the dig of jewelry, wafts of perfume. Afterward, as I'm sipping the sweet fizzy alcohol and thinking of getting back to my tablets, my rooms, the doorbell sounds along the hall. I'm already on my way toward it in the hope that it's my driver come to rescue me when I realize that eager hands are assisting my passage, eager voices are urging me on. The doorbell sounds again. It's clearly some neighbor out first-footing with a piece of shortbread, a lump of coal. And who better than I, the famous Geoffrey Brook, to greet them?

The Cumbernalds' front door swings inward, and I'm expecting a figure, perhaps even the dark handsome stranger of tradition, to be standing on the doorstep. But the doorway remains empty, and I, pushed on, seem to travel into blackness and terrible, empty, cold.

Nine

I've been reading - or re-reading, I'm really not sure now-that stained copy of William Morris's *News from Nowhere*. The curled pages, brittle with dried mud and the dusty air of nearly half a century, speak of nothing that resembles the vision of Greater Britain that came to pass. Morris hated big industry, he hated all big things, he hated terror and injustice. How, then, was his name pulled so deeply into the currents of Modernism that Blackwell's are even now trying to get rid of discounted piles of copies of *The Waters of the Wondrous Isles*? All that Morris and Modernism ever shared was a preparedness to dream, and a love of a bright, clean, glorious past that never was. But perhaps that was enough; perhaps the dream, any dream, is always the seed from which nightmares will follow.

John Arthur is fading. His memory is twisted and pulled to suit whatever meaning people choose to give it as easily as were Morris's unread pages. It's almost as if I'm the only person left in this nation who grieves for him, or who still wishes to understand. And that last fatal night when we were together follows me even now. All the questions I should have asked, the challenges I should have made. Either I loved, I suppose, the incarnation of something evil, or John Arthur was a puppet like me, jerked by the whims of some incomprehensible greater will. Between these two horrors, I keep trying to find some middle way, a decent path that anyone might wander along in their life and find themselves

unexpectedly and irrevocably lost. Francis was no monster, for all that I know that he used me much more than he loved me in the brief time that we were truly together.

So I keep thinking instead of Mrs. Stevens, my acquaintance's neighbor, who offered me tea and the bright warmth of her kitchen, and of Cumbernald, and of the woman behind the counter in the Post Office, and the doctors and the policemen, and, yes, of Christlow, and even Reeve-Ellis, and the faces you see looking out from train windows, and the children you see playing in the street. And my own face in the mirror is there, too, although haggard as death now, the stranger-corpse that will soon be all that is left of me. Francis belongs there, with us. He didn't close the cell doors himself, he didn't pull the ropes, touch the wires, kick shut the drawers of filing cabinets.

We all did that for him.

For a few short days of our Scottish holiday, Francis and I lived in a ramshackle stone cottage. The place had a rough slate floor like something carried in by the tide, thick walls with tiny windows that overlooked the beach. In storms, in winter, the thin turf roof would have leaked the sea and the wind and the rain. But the weather was like honey when we were there. The sea was like wine. Alone, miles from the world, we swam naked and caught translucent shrimps from the pools beyond the dunes.

Time stopped. The whole universe turned around us. Francis's skin was browned and bleached to lacy tidemarks by the sea and the sun, and he tasted like the shrimps; briny salt and sweet. Lying one night amid the blankets of our rough cot, my skin stiff from the sun and the soles of my feet gritty, some twist of emptiness made me reach out and open my eyes. Francis had gone from beside me, was standing naked at the open cottage doorway, looking out at the pale sea, the star-shot night.

"You see over there... ?" he said, sensing from the change in my breathing that I was awake. "Right over there, Griff, toward the horizon...?"

I propped myself up, following his gaze out along the white shingle path, the low wall, the pale dunes that edged into the luminous ripple of the waves. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps there was something out there, the shining grey backs of a shoal of islands that daylight made the air too brilliant to see.

"I think we should go there, Griff," he said, his shoulders and limbs rimed with starlight. "Remember? That lovely name...?"

"There won't be anything to see," I laughed, lying back in the blankets. "There'll be no ferry..."

But I could see those islands more clearly now as I closed my eyes again and the darkness began to take me. Heathered hills rolling down to dark green copses of pine. Sheep-dotted lowlands. The summer-sparkling rim of the sea. I could even smell a uniquely milky scent of summer grass and flowers carried to me on the soft breeze from off the Atlantic. Yes, I thought, we will go there.

But the weather had changed in the morning when we awoke. Low grey clouds lay across the dunes and met with the sea. So we never did get to visit the Summer Isles, and Francis pushed quickly down the track as we left our cottage beneath a sky that threatened nothing but rain, cycling fast as he always cycled, forever heading on. I even feared that I, teetering with my older legs as I bumped along with my heavy suitcase strapped behind me, would never catch up. It was then, I think, as he crested the top of the first hill and vanished from sight, freewheeling eagerly down toward the farm on the headland where we would hand in the keys, that I finally lost my Francis. It was then that he was swallowed by history, and that everything else that was to happen began.

Well-anchored in my wheelchair on this steamship's juddering deck, I gaze at those famous white cliffs, as grey on this late January morning as is the sea, the sky, these circling gulls. The air is bitter and cold, filled with the groan of engines and the smoke and

salt they churn in their wake. There will be no last glimpse of England-I realize that now-just this gradual fading.

Like so many other things I have done in my life, my departure has proved surprisingly easy. I could detect no resistance as my driver ferried me about Oxford and I withdrew my funds and made my travel arrangements. In any event, the number of stamps and passes required to leave this country are greatly reduced. Back in Oxford, I suppose, Allenby will have found my note by now, and passed it on to Cumbernald as he tidies his desk and prepares to leave. My letter, posted to London the day before, will probably also be waiting for Miss Flood. Of course, there will be concern about my semi-mysterious disappearance, but that will soon be followed by weary, head-shaking amusement at the thought that I still had this one last act in me.

Thus I travel, ill, wealthy, and alone. My precise plans, as the maps and the possibilities widen in my mind, remain vague. Long journeys hold no fears for me now: if you are rich enough, there are always people who will give you what you think you need. All I know is that I want to end my days somewhere far from England where the climate is dry and warm, where there are lizards on the walls and the stars are different. From Calais, I shall continue east and south for as far as this body will take me. First Class, and preferably by train. Preferably by sleeper.

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