PATRICIA DUNCKER

'Combines intellectual playfulness with deadly suspense'
Literary Review

The DEADLY SPACE BETWEEN

BLOOMSBURY

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'Patricia Duncker writes beautifully with a flamboyant immediacy . . . Her plot is complex, her characters' motives persuasively ambiguous and the encounters between Toby and the inexplicable Roehm have the requisite appurtenances of a creepy horror story'

Sunday Telegraph

'A psychological thriller-cum-ghost story in the great neo-Gothic European tradition, steeped with references to Frankenstein, Faust and Freud. With sparkling locations and Duncker's seamless, almost hypnotic prose . . . *The Deadly Space Between* is proof that the ghost story is back, and with a shocking twist'

Mirror

'*The Deadly Space Between* confirms Patricia Duncker's reputation as a writer who brilliantly realises ambitious themes . . . [her] ability to combine intellectual rigour with flamboyant storytelling is perfectly showcased in this powerfully imagined and most impressive novel'

Big Issue

'Such a compelling read that you really don't want to put it down. I only hope that Roehm doesn't come back to haunt me in my nightmares'

Scotland on Sunday

'Disturbingly haunting . . . the descriptions linger in the mind'

Times Literary Supplement

'An elegant, psychologically astute exploration of the way in which jealousy, love and fear combine to shape identity'

New Statesman

'The tale wins you over through its sheer eloquence and nerve . . . Holds the reader's attention to the last'

The Times

For S.J.D.

What moral lesson can be drawn from the story of Oedipus, the favourite subject of such a number of tragedies? – The gods impel him on, and, led imperiously by blind fate, though perfectly innocent, he is fearfully punished, with all his hapless race, for a crime in which his will had no part.

Mary Wollstonecraft

Death of the Father would deprive literature of many of its pleasures. If there is no longer a Father, why tell stories? Doesn't every narrative lead back to Oedipus?

Roland Barthes

To pass from a normal nature to him one must cross 'the deadly space between'. And this is best done by indirection.

Herman Melville

I

MEMORY

She came home smelling of cigarettes. She didn't smoke. So either she sat in a place where everyone else smoked, or she was going out with someone who did. Someone who smoked bitter, foreign cigarettes. Someone I hadn't met. Someone I had never seen. Where did she go? I began asking myself questions. Endless staff association meetings? She was no longer chairwoman. The Art Group Collective? This had been dormant since the last exhibition. The pub? Which pub? She never went to the pub. She never met her friends in the pub. She met them in restaurants. If she intended to meet them she told me where she would be in advance, or she rang from the restaurant itself, warning me that she would not be back for supper. Yet she came home late, smelling of cigarettes. She must be going out with someone who smokes.

It began in October, three weeks after my eighteenth birthday, the year I was preparing for my A-level exams. The wind was increasing, leaving damp leaves in piles down the pathways. She came home after dark. Once a week at first, on different days, then more often than that, late, often slightly anxious, jittery, excited. She kissed me quickly and asked me what homework I had to prepare. Then she flung her bags into the corner of her studio, that long room of shadows and gaunt spaces all along the back of the house, and made off into the kitchen. I heard the radio, the sound of water bursting from the taps, and the fridge door, opening, closing, again and again.

The smell of cigarettes, passing, incriminating, pungent, the smell I could taste, just for a moment, when she held me in her arms.

* * *

I can't remember any other house. I have always lived here in this draughty, comfortable, mid-Victorian mass of red brick and white gables. I have always played in the attics, come in at dusk from the long garden, knees stained green with moss. I marked the trees with my knife as a child and watched the bark ooze round the cuts as the years passed. I saw the white shed rot, turn green and black at the corners and finally end up on one of the Guy Fawkes bonfires. I killed woodlice on the tiles in the back porch, watching the remaining carapaces, squat like small tanks, scuttle into the cracked skirting boards for safety. And it was I who warned her when the greying stained floor above the cellar was rotten and dangerous.

My childhood is a long peaceful memory of rain. An English childhood of respectable suburbs, minor events and a pale stream of drizzle, punctuated by the odd June day of green lawns, pale sunshine, the sound of mowers cruising through damp grass, croquet and daisies.

This is my first experience of sex. I fell in love with the neighbour's daughter when I was five and she was seven. I followed her about down the prickly trails in the next-door garden, which was wilder than our garden and flowered weeds, turbulent, unchecked, unkempt. The girl accepted my adoration as a form of homage that was legitimate and deserved. My mother was obscurely disapproving. Then, one day, when I was playing with my tractor in the long grass, the neighbour's daughter declared, 'Let's show our bottoms!' and pulled down her plain white panties. She sat down flat on the grass with her legs apart and presented me with a surprising, narrow pink slit. I stared at it amazed. She assured me that I could lick it if I wanted to, but that I had to promise not to tell and that it would be our secret. I wasn't sure that I did want to, but I said that I might reconsider the situation on Sunday afternoon. This was my first sexual excuse, an attempt to buy time. She pulled her pants back up

and stormed off to her room in a huff. She didn't make her offer twice. I forgot all about the incident until, years later, after the family had moved away and I was about ten years old, my mother told me that the child's father, a paediatric physician, had been jailed for abusing his patients. He was also accused by his daughters, one after another, as they grew up. I asked what abuse meant, fearing that it might involve whipping. She said that it was fiddling with children in a way you shouldn't. I asked whether that involved licking other people down there. She stared at me and said that she supposed it might. I said nothing more, but was very pleased that I hadn't taken up the neighbour's daughter on her kind offer. It was clearly a game that led straight to jail.

Other people had grandparents. I didn't. When I reached the plastic animal and model weapons stage I asked my mother why. Other people's grandparents were a great source of Lego battleships and red-eyed dinosaurs. She hesitated a little, then told me part of the truth. They were serious, religious people. She had been very wild when she was younger. She had not been married to my father. Her parents had not been able to accept her decision to keep the child. She was speaking to me. But she still said 'the child' as if I were royalty and she had to use the third person. Or as if I were someone else. The Christian charity of her parents' religion did not extend to children that were loved, but not legal. I didn't understand this. No, she never wrote to them and they never wrote to her. No, they never sent Christmas or birthday cards. Then, oddly, as if she were imparting a mighty revelation, she told me that some things, sometimes, could never be forgiven. Somehow I knew that she was no longer talking about my grandparents. She was thinking of someone else.

'Remember that,' she retorted, as if we had been having an argument.

I promised to remember every word and dropped my demands for grandparents. In fact, I was simply disappointed that the new model laser kit, with coloured ray firing equipment and optional

sound effects, was now for ever beyond my grasp if no grandparental contribution could be expected. Children's desires are very material. Food, cuddles, guns.

Fortunately I was blessed with aunts. Aunt Luce was like a ship in full sail, layers of clothes in great gusts of colour, billowing around her. Aunt Luce invented new combinations of colour. She specialized in fabrics for women prancing down catwalks and rich people's furnishings. She made money, big money, out of cottons, silks, velours, crêpes, cheesecloths, felts, linens and rolls of 100 per cent acrylic. Everything she did was wholesale, generous, vast. She bought me a rocking horse. She was a great source of plastic and metallic equipment, some of which produced giant bangs. She did not disapprove of items which could realistically imitate mass slaughter in the way that my mother did. But her generosity stopped short of the animated laser gun.

From my earliest days I remember the smells of lipstick and independence, her frequent visits in a Volvo estate with the back flattened by rolls of fabric, huge cylinders of colour, an Arabian cave piled in the boot. I remember her house. She had blinds, not curtains, in Bauhaus patterns and a completely white kitchen.

Aunt Luce lived with another woman who was even younger than my mother and who therefore must have been at least twenty-five years younger than Aunt Luce. She was stocky and flushed and turned an even deeper shade of pink whenever she initiated a conversation. This made everyone smile. Aunt Luce's companion was called Liberty. I once asked her about her odd name. We were putting a new chain on my bicycle, sitting with our bums sunk in damp gravel out on the front drive. Our fingers were covered in oil. I scraped at the dirt caked under the back mudguard and it came showering down in little flakes. She explained.

'My parents were flower children. They bought a small-holding near Hebden Bridge but never managed to grow anything successfully. I was born there. I was born at home. They wouldn't risk the hospital. They educated me at home too, which wasn't so usual

then. Calling me Liberty was meant to symbolize the fact that I lived outside the capitalist state. Theoretically, at any rate.'

I shook my head doubtfully, wondering if this evil state was located in South Yorkshire.

'But did you want to live outside the capitalist state?'

'Dunno. They did.'

There was a pause. Then she said:

'I don't think my name's silly. One of their friends had a daughter called Ince. And we used to play. It was only when I was twelve or thereabouts that I discovered that it was short for Incense. And her second name was Rainbow. No hope there.'

I sat twirling the toecaps on my pedals.

'She called me Tobias. I wonder why.'

'Maybe your grandfather was Tobias. No, on second thoughts, given what Luce says about your grandparents she wouldn't want to name you after him. Maybe your father is called Tobias.'

'I don't know what my father's called.'

'Ask her. He can't have been the Angel Gabriel.'

'He could be. I've never seen him.'

Liberty realized that she was submerged in unknown family waters and changed the conversation.

But I did sometimes wonder if I had ever seen my father. When I dredged the silt at the bottom of my memories I was aware of an event which had terrified my mother. I must have been about four or five at the time. She had received a phone call, and upon hearing the voice, flung the machine against the wall. I stood open-mouthed in the hallway, while she ripped the wire out of the skirting board. Then she spun round in search of me, snatched me up onto the hall chair and forced my arms back into the woollen lining of my anorak so that I began screaming. Ignoring my yells, she strapped me into the stained child's seat in the Renault 4 and roared away down the road. I howled all the way with fright and pain. I can remember howling, but I can't remember where we went.

And this is the moment I can remember clearly.

We are hidden away with Aunt Luce. Someone is at the door. Aunt Luce locks us into a cupboard in the hall, which she calls 'Deep Cloaks'. There is a gap under the door and a zigzag series of holes to aerate the cupboard. We are crouched in a tangle of shoes and plastic covers from the dry-cleaners. There is a terrible reek of moth-balls. I have my nose in the sleeve of a real fur coat. My mother is stifling my every breath. Her hand is clamped over my mouth. Her breath is a sequence of hot gasps. I am terrified because she is frightened. The front door is to the right of the cupboard. The doorbell sounds again and again. Now Aunt Luce is opening the door. She tells lies.

'She isn't here. I would have thought that you would know better than to look for her now. And I won't have you in this house. If you don't leave I shall call the police. Go away.' Her voice rises. 'I said, go away at once.'

I hear a low voice. This voice is too low and too quiet for me to distinguish the words. This voice is calm, patient, firm. I see a pair of black shoes with a dotted swirling pattern pierced in leather. My mother now has one hand on my head, pushing me down, the other around my waist, clutching me to her chest. I am convinced that I am going to sneeze. I want to sneeze. Aunt Luce is shrieking.

'Get out. Get out. Get Out.'

And then the voices recede. For no reason that I can ever explain I am certain that this man is my father. But I never ask. I say nothing.

Years later there is another incident, which I never forget. It is summer. I am ten years old. We are having tea on the back lawn. My aunts are visiting. Liberty is making me a daisy chain. She slits each stem with a thumbnail and threads the flowers through. Aunt Luce already has two lots of fluttering daisies attached to her left ankle. My mother is wearing a necklace of flowers. Liberty has made me a white and gold crown. She sets it on my blonde straight crop. I look like an Aryan Cleopatra.

'You're all ready to worship Dionysus,' Liberty exclaims.

'Goodness,' says my mother, 'that's the sort of thing his father would have said.'

'Oh, that's the sort of thing he said, is it?' snaps Aunt Luce, her voice suddenly dangerous. My mother glares at her. Everyone is silent, embarrassed.

Aunt Luce knows something. But not enough. And she feels that she ought to have been told. Liberty doesn't know. She hasn't been told. I will never be told. My mother hasn't refused to tell me. She has just never created the conditions within which it would be possible to ask. But I searched for Dionysus in her *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Myths*. He is the god of wine and ecstasy. Worship him, and you run mad, cannibal, murderous.

Aunt Luce made it clear, for reasons I could never quite grasp when I was small, that the existence of Liberty was one of the living imperatives that had transformed us into a family and in part, the cause of our continuing solidarity. She was fond of saying that we all had the honour to be family scandals. She described our lives, unrepentantly, as a sequence of delicious, deliberate disgraces. She urged me to keep up the family tradition of colourful infamy.

'Put it all in the papers if you can,' she said, 'or better still, go on television. Two minutes of television is worth six columns of print.'

Aunt Luce helped out with donations for holidays, special projects, major repair works and colossal financial undertakings; like updating the bicycle and the computer, re-roofing the studio and purchasing the car, second-hand, but with very low mileage. She gave us money, gifts without interest and apparently without strings, for any adventure which required large sums. She never offered her opinions until she was asked, but always made it clear when she was desperate to hand out her views, like an oracle, blessed with an excess of prophecy. She had a pointed arresting face, like a whippet. When my mother talked she would sit, reflective and intent, on the edge of her chair, with her clothes settling around her, waiting for the right moment to intervene. If Liberty wanted to say something Aunt Luce would hold up her hand like a traffic policeman until the

young woman's blushes had subsided. Whenever Luce and Liberty came to visit I brought them everything I had invented or drawn and stood there expectant, craving their approval.

This triangle of women, Aunt Luce, Liberty and my mother, was like a companionable Greek chorus. They were all the family I had. But there was another, disapproving chorus, offstage, which dared to comment on our private acts. I followed the scandals and disputes at second hand, absorbing the fact that we were not independent, autonomous, a little Amazon republic with a son to inherit the kingdom. Everything we did was watched. Family quarrels, always, finally, boil down to arguments about money. I imagined that we were cut off without a penny. This seemed Victorian and final, yet new outrages were always taking place, elsewhere, at regular intervals. Here was a history of share certificates in my mother's name, which nevertheless required my grandmother's signature to release them from fiscal bondage. Permission was angrily withheld. Aunt Luce was the messenger. I saw the tall, peculiar form of Aunt Luce, smouldering in the doorway, holding a letter.

'Outrageous! How dare she?'

It was my unseen grandmother who dared. Here stood Aunt Luce, elegant, intolerant and enraged, in the midst of an indiscreet waterfall of abuse, in which my name was mentioned, several times, while my mother brewed tea, murmuring replies to my aunt's threats.

'Why won't they sign? Is it because they don't like me?' I asked, interrupting the kitchen discussion of my grandmother's iniquity. They swivelled round in their seats to stare at me.

'It isn't because they don't like you. They've only ever seen you once. They don't know you.' My mother tried to be reassuring.

'I want to know why they never see us and why they write angry letters.'

Aunt Luce burst out laughing.

'Your grandmother is my sister,' she cried, 'she loathes other people and she loves writing angry letters and making scenes. Listen,

my dear, you may not have a grandmother, but you have been spared the discomfort of a dozen teatime scenes. My sister sits in a cloud of righteousness over her cheap Darjeeling and Mr Kipling's fairy cakes, criticizing other people, that is, other righteous people. The lower classes are de facto not righteous, and therefore beneath contempt. We ought to be grateful for her persecution. At least she takes notice of us. She has never had the misfortune to be in the wrong and is therefore perpetually on the attack. She has the right, not only to judge other people, but also to comment, with great candour from her position of Olympian rectitude, on their morals and behaviour. She thinks that being rude, which is the same thing as being right, is one of the cardinal virtues. Her New Year's resolution is to make more enemies.'

My mother sat grinning at Aunt Luce, who was now well into her stride, cigarette alight and aloft, clearing the harbour bar of restraint.

'One step off the narrow path of lower-middle-class morality, which is all recycled paper napkins and malice, and, my dear, you are doomed. You can never be visited. You can only be vilified.'

She stared at me speculatively.

'Thank God you don't look like her – or indeed, him,' said Aunt Luce, sighing. I wondered what would have happened if I had done. And concluded that I would not have been loved.

Everyone commented on the resemblance between my mother and myself. There's no doubt whose son you are, Aunt Luce always exclaimed emphatically, when she had not seen me for several weeks. And we were strikingly alike: short, straight, blonde hair, like a couple of Nordic heroes, pale freckled skins which burned easily, and the same grey-blue eyes. I looked into her face and saw the reassuring mirror of my own. All the hair on her body and on mine was ash-blonde, almost white. Our hands were slightly square. But by the time I was sixteen I could enclose her hand in my own. I was already as tall as she was. Our hands were the same shape, the same wide nails, the same fair skin, the same frank grip. She had painter's hands, stained,

strong hands, working hands. I loved watching her cleaning her brushes. They were expensive and she took good care of them. But these were the only things she ever cleaned carefully. From time to time I saw her scraping the thick chunk of glass she used for a palette and leaving huge, caked slabs of colour. My hands were smooth and untouched. I had the hands of a rich, spoilt woman. She had a man's hands. Neither of us ever wore any jewellery, any rings.

I never had any pets. I never asked for rabbits or hamsters. Pets teach children the lessons of love and loss. I didn't need them. She was enough. The smell of her body, a sharp, florid, tacky perfume and the eternal whiff of linseed oil, dominated the house. Until I was fourteen, fifteen, sometimes even well after that, she came to my room every night, to kiss me goodnight. I saw the shadow of her hair, the curving line of her smile, still marking her cheek, felt the cold prod of her nose as she bent to kiss me. She kissed me on the forehead, the cheek, the mouth, she ran her lips gently down the curve of my neck. I felt our likeness in the dark. She tasted of paint. Her breasts brushed heavy against my chest. Sometimes she lay down beside me and held me in her arms until I was asleep. Once when I awoke in the morning she was still there, shivering, fully dressed, her eyes gummed together with exhaustion, fighting me for possession of the duvet. We squabbled crossly as if we were both children.

We were often mistaken for brother and sister. A man in the car park asked us whether our parents had paid. In giggling conspiracy we disclaimed all knowledge as to where our parents had gone. Then she went shopping. I sat in the car and we saved 80p for two hours. I found our likeness reassuring, a promise that she would give me the recognition and love which I feared would not always, as of right, be mine.

I inherited her concentration and discipline; we could both occupy ourselves peacefully for hours without speaking. But I did not have her gift for laughter and I minded the mess she made. I tidied up after her. I did all the washing-up she left. I scrubbed the sink with Vim. I scoured the kitchen floor. Without me the kitchen

would probably have become a health hazard filled with rotting food and crawling beasts. Sometimes, despite all my efforts, this happened anyway. When I did clean up she always kissed me, thanked me, but never changed her ways. Her room was a cavern of old clothes, abandoned washing, painting materials, scraps of cloth purloined from Aunt Luce for a collage experiment which didn't work, and several huge buckets of coloured sand. She never made the bed. She once told Aunt Luce, who was amused rather than disapproving, that she only changed the sheets when she stuck to them. I changed mine once a week. I did all the washing. I loathed hanging out her clothes. I did this even if it was frosty, just to air them. I was afraid of her underwear, which I stuffed into the machine, one load once a month, and avoided examining too closely. I even disliked touching her wet jeans and shirts, smart ones for work, shabby ones for painting. In those days I was prim, prurient, afraid of her zest for grime. She seemed to love matter, textures, odours, liquids, slime, in quite physical and visceral ways. I was a little afraid of all those things.

★ ★ ★

In every way, the child of a gifted artist labours under a terrible disadvantage. You live under the shadow of a tidemark on the wall, an unobtainable level of excellence, which remains there, accusing, just out of reach. Everything you produce is derivative, worked in another's colours. I never escaped the sensation that she was the original and I was the copy: second-hand, second-rate. I haunted her studio in order to be close to her. The room smelt of turpentine, linseed oil, glue, varnish and fixative. She had several huge chests, immovable, paint-spattered, which had been constructed to hold architectural drawings. These chests took up the entire wall backing onto the living room. They loomed out into the space. The handles of the drawers were often sticky with gum or wet paint mixed with sand. I was unable to open the drawers, which were too heavy for me when I was small. And when I was strong enough to peer into them I discovered that there was one which she kept locked.

She had a huge easel, but didn't always use it; sometimes she just stuck paper up on the wall with masking tape and painted on that. Sometimes she leaned huge canvases against the structure and negotiated paint at knee-level. There was nothing mysterious about her methods. She spent a long time preparing her canvas in the traditional manner, with layers of rabbit's foot glue, transparent substances, the texture of egg white. Then her ground wash, faint, light, pale, then her underpaint. Here she varied her colours. She never drew directly onto the canvas at all. She worked her designs in curtains of paint, each one falling over the canvas, layer after layer, deepening, changing. She soaked her brushes in plastic Vittel bottles with the tops chopped off. But these weren't her only tools. The kitchen was next door to her studio. She used the kitchen knives, the fish slice, the pastry brushes, the rolling pin, sheets of tin, her bare hands and forearms, the tips of her fingers and her clenched fists. Once she unpicked her jeans and used the frayed bottoms to create a repeated, fan-shaped pattern. She worked with appalling, inflexible intensity, always on more than one canvas at once, the radio blaring on the window sill. She never worked in silence. She worked every day. Even when she came home, tired out from teaching. I admired her readiness to make herself filthy, but was alarmed by the fact that whatever she cooked tasted of acrylic, glue or turps. The paintings probably tasted of elderly food. I was never quite at ease with her carelessness. I could not resist eliminating the trails she left behind her.

Her style was described by sexist critics as masculine. Or at least, she said they were sexist. She worked on a grand scale; huge abstracts, dense, knotted surfaces, worked and reworked, the paint thick and edible. When I was small she sometimes allowed me to play with the paint on one corner of the canvas. Sometimes she integrated my ideas. I longed to become her apprentice, gazing up at the huge geometric masses, their shifting volumes and uncompromising, monolithic intensity. Whenever she sold a picture she took me out to dinner. Not to a local wine bar, tandoori or McDonald's, but to

an expensive restaurant in the city, with real white tablecloths and napkins, where the waiters spoke French and she ordered snails, sizzling in individual craters, like smoking bombs, the kind of restaurant where there was never any background music and everyone spent a long time gazing at huge ledgers with the wine list handwritten inside. No ordinary cheque card was ever sufficient to cover the bill and she paid with her American Express. Once there was a knife fight just outside. I remember the wail of police sirens and the manager losing his temper.

'Shall we go and look?' I demanded.

'Nonsense. If somebody's dead we can read all about it tomorrow. Look at your salmon. It's much more important to eat well than to watch fights.'

Reluctantly, I attacked the fish.

'Listen,' she said, addressing my lust for the sensational directly, 'I'd go on eating – no matter what. Even if History was passing in the street.'

I immediately envisaged History as a giant chariot, covered in garlands, with a mob trailing behind.

* * *

She taught part-time at the local art college. This was not a particularly distinguished institution, her colleagues were much given to espousing passing fads. One year everyone had to work with bricks and cardboard boxes. But a year later the apotheosis of modernity was sculptures in concrete. A group of Easter Island look-alikes on the same scale as the originals won the end-of-year award. They proved impossible to transport and became a permanent fixture outside the sculpture studio. Then they went out of fashion, and like much civic art, became an awesome and indestructible warning against temporary enthusiasms. They attracted graffiti, red rubber noses and giant penises during the festive season.

My mother was in charge of the painting studio. She was convinced by the ideology of art in the community, and even

organized a live paint-in, which anyone could attend. The deeply courageous, a happy few among the public, actually took part. Much against the better judgement of her immediate boss, she set up several huge wall-painting projects along the motorway and in the shopping centre with her students. One of them caused a public scandal. It was a giant frieze of dancing, copulating couples, all uncannily alike. The design was censored for overt eroticism, rather than androgyny, quite unsuitable for a car-park wall overlooking the main entrance at Safeway, and had to be withdrawn. She reworked the plan, excising the frolicking nudes and including portraits of the local drug pushers in their silver Mitsubishis. The car park was one of their night haunts. There was a public phone box, which they used in the early days when they began to frequent the suburb. Later on, when they all had their own mobile phones, they still parked by the phone box, talking into their receivers. Thus the fresco became a surreal public icon, a tribute to the men selling death beneath their own warning images. Neither the public arts committee on the Tory council nor the dealers ever noticed. But her students knew. They were converts to her ideology. Her students loved her. She had a talent for subversion.

* * *

Aunt Luce told her, in my hearing, that if she was serious about being heterosexual, then she ought to find herself a man.

She had two affairs which I could remember, or knew about for certain. One man was a younger colleague at the college called Jo, who was there on a one-year teaching assistantship. He was tall, with spiky hair cut close, and rows of vicious-looking earrings rising up the side of his reddening lobes. He was her immediate junior colleague. She was supposed to be showing him the ropes. When she promoted him, very shortly after his arrival, to the official position of lover there was a muted frisson of scandal in the staff common room. He took to staying over on Friday and Saturday nights. I liked the new lover, who was cheerful, offhand and made the Weetabix

lorry off the back of the packet to amuse me. Then Jo came home with a DIY kite in a box and we stitched it up so that it floated like a dragon over the bracken and horseshit on the common, with the three of us rushing after it, far below, tugging the invisible floating wire and shrieking. As a sexual presence Jo was good-natured, irresponsible. He walked about the house stark naked, to my astonished delight, referred to his penis as his 'donger' and played two of her reggae records, *Black Uhuru* and *The Harder They Come*, until they wore out. He helped me with my homework, and promised to take me to a punk concert, where the band pissed on the stage and then into the audience, but never did. I was bitterly disappointed.

Liberty liked him and Aunt Luce didn't. He was never allowed to share the studio. He moved on to another college at the end of the year and rang once to say that he loathed it and that he missed us. Then we never heard from him again. She seemed a little sad for a week or so after his departure. There was more muttering in the staff common room. The scandal blew over, although, like all scandals, it was never quite forgotten.

The other lover was a more sinister affair. I can only just remember him. I must have been about four years old. Aunt Luce was never even allowed to know of his existence. He was never named, never mentioned. Sometimes I wondered if he had ever been there. He was an older man with a large car and a butterfly tattoo on his forearm. I caught sight of the tattoo on the first morning that the man was still there when I woke up. The man is shaving, with the bathroom door ajar. The bathroom is at the top of the stairs; a long, thin, converted corner of a much larger room. The moulded leaves of the cornice circle three sides of the walls, nuzzling the ceiling and nurturing cobwebs, then vanish suddenly into the blank, undecorated fourth wall. I stand, gazing at the light wavering across the walls, splintering against the cornice, guttering on the water in the bath. This is a very early memory. His mouth gapes as he draws the razor carefully across his upper lip. His forearms are dense with black hair and there, in the midst of the foliage,

as if struggling free, is a butterfly, a dark blue butterfly with a touch of darkening red, thick lines, larger than life, shimmering in the watery light. This is what I remember, the man's gaping mouth and the fluttering, extraordinary tattoo.

But I know, I have always known, that neither of these men is my father.

* * *

When you live, always, in the same house, with the same suburban landscape cradling your memories, one year becomes another. It is hard to remember whether it was that year, the same year I bought my first bicycle, the year the willow tree blew down and the men came to cut it up with chainsaws, and it was rotten inside, crumbling, yellow dust, and how extraordinary that it hadn't blown down before. I measured out my life not in years, but in events. That was the year of the art teacher lover and the dragon kite. That was the year she bought a new car, with a handout from Aunt Luce, second-hand, but new really. When I was five the neighbour's daughter asked me to lick that suggestive pink slit between her legs. And further back, that was the year of the man with the butterfly tattoo, the year my mother sold three of the giant blood-red monoliths and I drank a whole half-glass of champagne. I remember that year.

That was how I remembered things.

There were some things to which I could attach a precise date, a date like a luminous marker, an orange buoy on a grey sea. Some dates I planned in advance. I made a pact with myself. I would ask her when I was twelve. I would ask her on her birthday. She was born on August 1st. We were always on holiday for her birthday. And because we were never at home, but in exceptional circumstances, it was easier to make exceptional demands. And to the mysterious Oedipal question – who was my father? – when I had no birthmarks, no memories, no purple swaddling to identify my origins, the reply was bound to be exceptional. But she responded by breaking all the classical rules. She laughed. She shouted with

laughter. She hugged me. She unsteadied my dignity while I wobbled in red shorts: pompous, egotistical, righteous, white-faced, demanding my rights, the right to know, the right to identity, the birthright, my inheritance.

But she laughed and laughed, her straight gold hair, her breasts, laughing, shaking.

Then she declared that she had often wondered if I was ever going to ask directly and had considered proposing the Archangel Gabriel. No, my father was quite real. She giggled a little more. I felt utterly ridiculous.

'He was much older than I was, very sexy, rich and married. I never met his wife. But I noticed his wedding ring.'

'Do I resemble my father?'

'No, mercifully, not at all. You look like me.'

'Have I ever met my father?'

'No, not to my knowledge. You never have.'

'Do you still see him?'

'No. Never.'

This was an astute question because it brought my father into the present and she looked at me, surprised, no longer laughing.

'Were you very, very young at the time?'

'Yes, fifteen. Three years older than you are now.'

'Did you really truly love him? As much as you do Aunt Luce?'

'That's my business.'

'Did he ask you to marry him?'

'How could he, twit? He was already married. And I was under age.'

And here she closed the conversation by sidling off to the kitchen, that stranger's kitchen in the beach house, where we could never find the cutlery, the salad servers, the bottle opener, the plug for the TV aerial, the pump for the lilo. And I didn't ask again.

But she made it up to me. We spent all the days and all the nights together at the beach house. By day we scoured the beaches, whatever the weather, searching for unusual stones, skulls, driftwood,

shells, bones picked clean by the sea. We took huge collections home in boxes and the smell of the sea dawdled in her studio for weeks. By night we slept together in the huge sagging bed, curled around one another like sunburned clams.

I had her full attention. I needed no one else.

* * *

She was careless with her own money. She was generous with my pocket money. If she saw something she liked or wanted, she bought it: a food processor, a new CD system, a Kelim rug, in a sale, but it was still £700 and she paid in cash, an old smuggler's trunk with a broken iron lock, which she repaired herself and used to store her rolls of canvas, a naturalist's cabinet in which she amassed objects for still life studies, flints, bird's bones, crystals, a thirteen-speed mountain bike I had coveted, a pair of Indian cushions with tiny mirrors, thick, stitched threads and tassels at each corner. She never hesitated. She spent money as if she was a rich woman.

But she never bothered with the everyday things. The light in the hall was never mended. Every new bulb fused at once. She never rang the electrician. The white shed in the garden had rotted, leaving the croquet hoops and mallets rusting and exposed. She didn't bring them inside. The neighbours said it was a shame, to have such nice things and to allow them to deteriorate. The hedges were never clipped and grew to fabulous heights. The neighbours complained. They were deprived of light. She climbed up a stepladder, cut back the hedge and shaped the top. I heard her singing as she did it. When the neighbours came home they were faced with a large prick and balls and two suggestive green breasts, carved in privet all along the top of the hedge. The penis blew over in October and she lopped it off. She never employed a gardener. But she never did the garden. The windows needed repainting. The sills on the south side were crumbling with damp rot. In every room one of the sash cords hung frayed like an unsuccessful hangman's rope. She didn't bother. She didn't care. And it wasn't that she couldn't afford it. Although

sometimes she said that she couldn't. If it was a lean time Aunt Luce would have paid. She couldn't be bothered to ring up the builder, the plumber, the electrician. Yet the one thing she always had mended at once was the telephone.

She never looked into the stack of free daily papers which accumulated in a pile of woolly dust behind the door. But she wouldn't throw them out and she wouldn't let me do so. She hardly ever hoovered and whenever I did the housework she told me I was wonderful: that I was a thoughtful man, a man who noticed dirt, scoured worktops, plumped up cushions. But I could feel her smirking, sensed her smothered laughter when she said those things. Somewhere, in some other place, there was another kind of man. One I wasn't like. One she liked better.

When I was very young I suffered from appalling, violent jealousies and made scenes. I hated it when she settled down with the phone, sinking into the big smelly sofa, pulling the rugs round her legs, shutting herself off from me to listen, to talk. She gossiped about people I didn't know, had never seen. Her voice rose and echoed. She laughed; there was a gurgle humming in her throat. I loitered in the kitchen with the door ajar, an inefficient spy, hearing every third or fourth word, bitter and angry. She had a secret life that was not mine, about which I knew nothing.

Yet she was always aware of me. She read my face like a landscape. I saw my shadowed surfaces and animated planes reflected in her own. You should get out on your bike more often, go to the club at the pool, make more friends. You can bring them home if you like. Why don't you bring them home? I survived at school by resisting the pack, never answering in class, getting the top marks silently, secretly. They only picked on me once. A group of them, in the lavatory. I knew who the ringleader was. I never answered their taunts. I just waited, waited for him to make his move. Then I stabbed his hand with a compass. After that they called me Sparafucile, after the assassin in the comic. But they left me alone.

What filled my life was books, books, books. I read my way across

great plains of irrelevant trivia, occasionally striking gold. I preferred fantastic Empire Stories to Tolkien or *Star Wars*. I wanted to read about the adventures of brave English heroes, in khaki shorts, pushing through undergrowth filled with snakes, followed by lines of native bearers, uncovering secret caves with gleaming, precious seams of stone. I liked suspense. I also liked the big-breasted black women, who had magic knowledge and unbounded power at their fingertips, but who were always left regretfully in Africa to inherit their father's kingdoms. The English heroes of Empire returned to the quiet, damp lawns, pale sunshine, croquet and daisies, to houses smelling of roses and lavender, to quiet women in white dresses and the discreet clink of crockery in the distance. The huge black breasts of the lost African queens were an initiation ritual, a ravine traversed in the mind and only dimly remembered in all their uneventful lives to come.

* * *

It was October. My bedroom was at the top of the house, tucked into the peeling white gable. I hung damp towels on the radiator under the window and looked out down the street. Our front garden was overgrown with browning dying buddleia, a dwarf conifer which, unbidden, had magnified itself to giant size, a camellia sheltered in the lee of the porch, a hedge of eleagnus which had never flourished and remained in a stunted condition of disappointment. The banks of evergreen darkened the bay window of the sitting room. The only point from which the entire, quiet, suburban street was visible was my bedroom window. There was never anything to see. I could always hear the distant ebb and flow of shrieking children. I never saw them. The husbands came home every weekday after dark, washed their cars on fine Sundays, even in the winter if there was no frost. The neighbours marched their dogs forth to the commons. A flicker of gorse marked the end of cultivated domesticity over a hundred yards away. The view never, never changed.

It began in October. I was perched in my bedroom translating

French for my S-level exams. I was the only candidate. One of the passages was very mysterious.

> *J'appelle* Triangle arithmétique, *une figure dont la construction est telle. Je mène d'un point quelconque, G, deux lignes perpendiculaires l'une à l'autre, GV, GL, dans chacune desquelles je prends tant que je veux de parties égales et continue, à commencer par G que je nomme 1, 2, 3, etc; et ces nombres sont* les exposants *des divisions des lignes.*
>
> I have named the following construction the Arithmetical Triangle. From a random point, G, let there be two perpendicular lines, GV, GL, from each of which I take equal sections and continue, beginning with G, which I call 1, 2, 3, etc; and these numbers are the 'exposants' of the divisions of the lines.

I ceased to translate. Idly, I began to draw the mathematical figure described in the text. Then I heard her voice, calling, calling from the bottom of the stairs. I did not move. She was going out. I shouted back, a noncommittal assent. I heard the door clamp shut behind her. Then, automatically, I rose and stood at the window looking down the street. She appeared in the fading grey light beyond the shadows of the evergreens. The orange lamps were already shimmering in the dimness. Her boots rapped the concrete. She never carried a handbag. I saw her hair, bobbed short like a 1920s good-time girl, swinging gently in the orange glare. I raised my hand to my own head. I imagined her hair in my hands. She walked past her own car, peering briefly into the back seat. Then she looked up and quickened her stride. I followed the line of her gaze. From the angle of the window I was secure at the apex of the triangle, watching her flicker across the void, converging on the obscure point, fixed, unseen. There was a slight movement, a hand descending. And my gaze came to rest on the figure in the coming dark.

I saw the other man for the first time. He leaned against a heavy black car, a panzer with giant rutted wheels, bull bars and special plates. At first I could make no sense at all of the male shape, and

understood only details, a loose black suit, very short grey hair, it shone slightly, a man like any other man, larger perhaps, no, much larger, I can see that now as he moves, a barrel chest, a heavy step as he turns to gaze at the woman coming. Then he looks up. He is clean-shaven, fifty years old, maybe more. His face is heavy, white, as if he is wearing an actor's mask. I am too far away to see his eyes. Then he raises his hand to his lips. He is smoking. So this is the man whose smell engulfs her body. This is the man, whose hands, reeking of nicotine, enclose hers. This is the man whose voice displaces hers, drowns her out. This is the man whose outline bulks in the doorway. This is the man whose weight crushes her ribs. This is the man who opens her secrets. This is the man she loves.

> *Ensuite je joins les points de la première division qui sont dans chacune des deux lignes par une autre ligne qui forme un triangle dont elle est* la base.
>
> Then I join the points of the first division which are in each of the two lines by another line which forms the base of the triangle.

I crumbled over the French translation. I knew I was going to be sick, a hot wave of acid rose up from my stomach. But when I reached the lavatory nothing came, just raw waves of wretchedness. I sat there gripping the bowl that I had carefully cleaned earlier in the day, feeling lonely and cold.

She came home late that night, smelling of cigarettes.

I knew I would always remember that night as the first sighting. It was October. I was eighteen. I had never been separated from her. I had never left home.

* * *

It was a great mystery to me why this huge, heavy man with the black car was never introduced. I had a fairly clear memory of her other lovers and of the friends who appeared on rare occasions. She always brought them home. Indeed, I had the distinct impression that I was the acid test they had to pass. My inspection was a sort of

initiation ritual. She was proud of me. She said so. She boasted how clever I was. If I liked the look of her companions, and she never misread my unspoken judgements, they were warmly welcomed through the external foliage and over the threshold. Usually, I did like them, although I persuaded myself that I had been wary of the man with the butterfly tattoo. She had no very close friends outside the Amazonian triangle. When she went out, it was either to attend public functions or to do something – eat, discuss, raise money – with a group. No one took precedence over me. She held others at a distance. But she used to tell me about her work, her fears, her plans. Like all children confronting adult confidences, I didn't always understand what she said, but I hoarded every word. I was intensely jealous of our quiet evenings snuggled together, half asleep, in front of an unsuitably violent thriller on the television. We were like a comfortably married pair, confident of each other's silences, weaknesses and rhythms. Apart from the great mystery of my origins and my alienated grandparents, I had never been aware of anything hidden, unspoken, taboo. So why did this man remain her open, but unacknowledged secret? If I had wanted to raise the matter I would have had to make a scene. She gave me no opportunity to ask.

I no longer had to be in school every day. Sometimes I came home early in the afternoon, smelling the fumes of coal fires already lit, hanging in the damp air. If she was still at college I listened to the messages on her answerphone. Her French friends of frequent phone calls and illegible postcards, ringing from the rooms dark with woodsmoke, antiques, and dim, ancestral memories of generations and generations.

'Ecoute, Isobel – c'est moi, Françoise. Tu me rappelles? J'ai déjà des idées pour Noël. Bisous, bisous à toi et Toby . . .'

The woman at the gallery who exhibited her work, and occasionally sold giant canvases for thousands, sharptoothed, aggressive, much criticized by Aunt Luce: *'I may have a lead on that gallery in Cologne. After that huge success in Munich we mustn't let Germany go off the boil . . . call me back asap . . .'*

Aunt Luce herself, resplendent, confident, on the crest of another huge financial connection: *'Can you both come to dinner next Saturday? Let me know. Liberty and I are definitely off to New York at the beginning of November. It's all fixed and I can't wait to tell you . . .'*

. . . and at last, the voice I had waited to hear, feared to hear recorded, fixed, implicated in demand. *'Hello'* – a pause, he doesn't say her name – '*I'm still in the lab . . .'*

He's a scientist, then. Or a doctor? A pathologist? A coroner? What laboratory? Where? A hospital? A research institute, a university? Where? Does he live here? Or in London?

'I'm here till eight. Call me.'

Instinctively, I look at my watch. It is nearly three. She is not here. She will not be back until after six. Will she listen to the messages immediately? Usually she never does. Has she started doing that, hoping to hear him? Does he ring her at work? When she hears his voice, will she ring him back at once? 07710 283 180. This is his mobile number. I have neither his address nor his name. I have no concrete information. I do not hesitate. I sit down on the floor beside the phone, listening to the sizzle of the rewinding tape, watching the red light winking steadily, fluttering through her book of numbers, addresses. I have never done this before. She is not methodical. She writes new names on empty pages, any empty page, regardless of the alphabetical letters embossed on the serrated edge. There is no detectable pattern in her collection of names, numbers, addresses. It is quite arbitrary, slapped down at any angle. Here are the names of people I do not know, have never seen. I have never been interested before. Some names are crossed out, written again elsewhere, but still not under the apparently correct letter. There are numbers floating free, without locations or identities. Some have initials attached to them. I stare at blank initials, which hide everything, even the sex. It must be an institute, a hospital. I search the entire book for official addresses. I note the London numbers, which have no names attached. In desperation, for it is now nearly four o'clock, I ring one of these at random. It is a dry-cleaning service,

impatient to know another number, the number on my green ticket, without which they can tell me nothing. Coat, jacket, trousers? What make? What colour? In despair I give up. I lean against the wall. Then listen to the tape again.

The voice is steady, confident, unhurried. This is someone who is not afraid, neither of the answerphone nor of the tape. But, I realize this on the third hearing, from the question implicit in his tone, he had expected her to be there. He had missed her. Just missed her? When had he rung? He doesn't say. And our answerphone doesn't record the time of the messages. So she knows he would ring? Has he rung often before? Why didn't I know? Why wasn't I told? The boy on the floor, leaning against the comfortable tattered wallpaper of the hallway, is very near to tears. Obscurely, I feel shut out and betrayed. The prickle of tears begins at the back of my eyes, then slithers on down my face. The woman I love is slipping away. I no longer know her. She is no longer mine.

I raise my hand to the rewind button. The answering machine is switched off. The phone suddenly rings. I jump backward, discovered, appalled. I stare at the clattering, vibrating phone, incapable of touching it again. I am absolutely certain that it is her lover, that vast, obscure and crushing presence, invisible, all-seeing, who is waiting, smirking with contempt on the other end. It rings and rings. I cower beside it, enraged and hysterical. Suddenly it is all over.

I spent the rest of that afternoon grappling with an unseen from a Greek treatise on mathematics. The language of mathematics is biblical. Let A be equal to B. Let there be light. I found myself writing like the scribes, translating the prophets. It was a language of power. Henceforth the necessary characteristics of an axiom are: (i) That it should be self-evident; that its truth should be immediately accepted without proof. (ii) That it should be fundamental; that is, that its truth should not be derivable from any other truth more simple than itself. (iii) That it should supply a basis for the establishment of further truths. An axiom then, is a self-evident truth, which neither requires nor is capable of proof, but which serves as

a foundation for further reasoning. I sat up, awash with a gust of clarity. The language of mathematics is very beautiful. My mother loves another man.

I hear the door bang behind her. She has seen my bicycle, my new bicycle, the one she bought for my eighteenth birthday, shoved inside the gate. She shouts up the stairs. I do not reply. She goes into the kitchen. She turns on the radio. It is well after six. I hear the news headlines, floating up the landing. She opens the fridge. I hear the plastic rattle of the crisper. Electric with tension, I go down the staircase. All the bronze stair-rods are green with iron oxide, this banister loose, shaking, the carpet worn to brown threads. I see the world too close, as if I had swallowed hallucinogenic drugs. She pauses, smiling in the kitchen doorway, her old, habitual, generous wide smile, full of pleasure to see me. I am well above her height now, next year I will be taller still. Her blonde straight hair, my own is the same, swings as she turns to fling the courgettes into the sink. I cannot take my eyes off the red winking light on the answerphone in the hallway. The number four glints steadily. Four messages. But she is asking about my mathematics homework. She is telling me about another argument with her head of department about the studio budget. She is opening a bottle of mineral water, she is handing me the garlic, the one sharp knife we still possess and the chopping board. She hasn't even looked at the answerphone. She doesn't care.

Like a murderer, convinced that the corpse will be discovered any minute, my gaze is fixed on the glittering, revelatory red light.

In the midst of a quite different story she suddenly asks if there were any calls. No, I didn't take any, but there were messages left on the machine. I cut the garlic, which is stinging my bitten cuticles, into tiny unsuitable quadrilaterals. She adds mixed dried herbs from a plastic sachet, gives the courgettes one more stir then bounds off down the hall. Why do you seem so young? You aren't old enough to be my mother. The radio is still on, so she turns up the sound on the tape. All the voices to which I have listened, again and again,

crackle and echo in the steam. I stand there, staring into the filthy sink. The French gutturals, the gallery owner's twang, Aunt Luce's breezy chatter, and then the pause, before that last voice begins, firm, unhurried, confident.

'*I'm here till eight. Call me.*'

She is still smiling as she races for the courgettes. It's OK. Nothing urgent. As she slithers past me, pressed against the table, I catch the unmistakable, incriminating, pungent stench of cigarettes.

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Fiction

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Criticism

Sisters and Strangers
Writing on the Wall: Selected Essays

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