

THE
PATRICK MELROSE
NOVELS

NEVER MIND
BAD NEWS
SOME HOPE
AND
MOTHER'S MILK

EDWARD ST. AUBYN

PICADOR

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PATRICK MELROSE
NOVELS

Never Mind
Bad News
Some Hope
and
Mother's Milk

Edward St. Aubyn

PICADOR

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For Eleanor and Lucian

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Also by Edward St. Aubyn

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NEVER MIND

1

AT HALF-PAST SEVEN IN the morning, carrying the laundry she had ironed the night before, Yvette came down the drive on her way to the house. Her sandal made a faint slapping sound as she clenched her toes to prevent it from falling off, and its broken strap made her walk unsteadily over the stony, rutted ground. Over the wall, below the line of cypresses that ran along the edge of the drive, she saw the doctor standing in the garden.

In his blue dressing gown, and already wearing dark glasses although it was still too early for the September sun to have risen above the limestone mountain, he directed a heavy stream of water from the hose he held in his left hand onto the column of ants moving busily through the gravel at his feet. His technique was well established: he would let the survivors struggle over the wet stones, and regard their dignity for a while, before bringing the thundering water down on them again. With his free hand he removed a cigar from his mouth, its smoke drifting up through the brown and grey curls that covered the jutting bones of his forehead. He then narrowed the jet of water with his thumb to battle more effectively an ant on whose death he was wholly bent.

Yvette had only to pass the fig tree and she could slip into the house without Dr Melrose knowing she had arrived. His habit, though, was to call her without looking up from the ground just when she thought she was screened by the tree. Yesterday he had talked to her for long enough to exhaust her arms, but not for so long that she might drop the linen. He gauged such things very precisely. He had started by asking her opinion of the mistral, with exaggerated respect for her native knowledge of Provence. By the time he was kind enough to show an interest in her son's job at the shipyard, the pain had spread to her shoulders and started to make sharp forays into her neck. She had been determined to defy him, even when he asked about her husband's back pains and whether they might prevent him from driving the tractor during the harvest. Today he did not call out with the '*Bonjour, chère Yvette*' which inaugurated these solicitous morning chats, and she stooped under the low branches of the fig tree to enter the house.

The chateau, as Yvette called what the Melroses called an old farmhouse, was built on a slope such that the drive was level with the upper floor of the house. A wide flight of steps led down one side of the house to a terrace in front of the drawing room.

Another flight skirted the other side of the house down to a small chapel which was used to hide the dustbins. In winter, water gurgled down the slope through a series of pools, but the gutter which ran beside the fig tree was silent by this time of year, and clogged with squashed and broken figs that stained the ground where they had fallen.

Yvette walked into the high dark room and put down the laundry. She switched on the light and

began to divide the towels from the sheets and the sheets from the tablecloths. There were ten tall cupboards piled high with neatly folded linen, none of it now used. Yvette sometimes opened these cupboards to admire this protected collection. Some of the tablecloths had laurel branches and bunches of grapes woven into them in a way that only showed when they were held at certain angles. She would run her finger over the monograms embroidered on the smooth white sheets, and over the coronets encircling the letter 'V' in the corner of the napkins. Her favourite was the unicorn that stood over a ribbon of foreign words on some of the oldest sheets but these too were never used, and Mrs Melrose insisted that Yvette recycle the same poor pile of plain linen from the smaller cupboard behind the door.

* * *

Eleanor Melrose stormed her way up the shallow steps from the kitchen to the drive. Had she walked more slowly, she might have tottered, stopped, and sat down in despair on the low wall that ran along the side of the steps. She felt defiantly sick in a way she dared not challenge with food and had already aggravated with a cigarette. She had brushed her teeth after vomiting but the bilious taste was still in her mouth. She had brushed her teeth before vomiting as well, never able to utterly crush the optimistic streak in her nature. The mornings had grown cooler since the beginning of September and the air already smelt of autumn, but this hardly mattered to Eleanor who was sweating through the thick layers of powder on her forehead. With each step she pushed her hands against her knees to help her forward, staring down through huge dark glasses at the white canvas shoes on her pale feet, her dark pink raw-silk trousers like hot peppers clinging to her legs.

She imagined vodka poured over ice and all the cubes that had been frosted turning clear and collapsing in the glass and the ice cracking, like a spine in the hands of a confident osteopath. All the sticky, awkward cubes of ice floating together, tinkling, their frost thrown off to the side of the glass and the vodka cold and unctuous in her mouth.

The drive rose sharply to the left of the steps to a circle of flat ground where her maroon Buick was parked under an umbrella pine. It looked preposterous, stretched out on its white-walled tyres against the terraced vines and olive groves behind it, but to Eleanor her car was like a consulate in a strange city, and she moved towards it with the urgency of a robbed tourist.

Globules of translucent resin were stuck to the Buick's bonnet. One splash of resin with a dead pine needle inside it was glued to the base of the windscreen. She tried to pick it off, but only smeared the windscreen more and made the tips of her fingers sticky. She wanted to get into the car very much but she went on scratching compulsively at the resin, blackening her fingernails. The reason that Eleanor liked her Buick so much was that David never drove it, or even sat in it. She owned the house and the land, she paid for the servants and the drink, but only this car was really in her possession.

When she had first met David twelve years ago, she had been fascinated by his looks. The expression that men feel entitled to wear when they stare out of a cold English drawing room on their own land had grown stubborn over five centuries and perfected itself in David's face. It was never quite clear to Eleanor why the English thought it was so distinguished to have done nothing for so long time in the same place, but David left her in no doubt that they did. He was also descended from

Charles II through a prostitute. 'I'd keep quiet about that, if I were you,' she had joked when he first told her. Instead of smiling, he had turned his profile towards her in a way she had grown to loathe, thrusting out his underlip and looking as if he were exercising great tolerance by not saying something crushing.

There had been a time when she admired the way that David became a doctor. When he had told his father of his intention, General Melrose had immediately cut off his annuity, preferring to use the money to rear pheasants. Shooting men and animals were the occupations of a gentleman, tending their wounds the business of middle-class quacks. That was the General's view, and he was able to enjoy more shooting as a consequence of holding it. General Melrose did not find it difficult to treat his son coldly. The first time he had taken an interest in him was when David left Eton, and his father asked him what he wanted to do. David stammered, 'I'm afraid I don't know, sir,' not daring to admit that he wanted to compose music. It had not escaped the General's attention that his son fooled about on the piano, and he rightly judged that a career in the army would put a curb on this effeminate impulse. 'Better join the army,' he said, offering his son a cigar with awkward camaraderie.

And yet, to Eleanor, David had seemed so different from the tribe of minor English snobs and distant cousins who hung around, ready for an emergency, or for a weekend, full of memories that were not even their own, memories of the way their grandfathers had lived, which was not in fact how their grandfathers had lived. When she had met David, she thought that he was the first person who really understood her. Now he was the last person she would go to for understanding. It was hard to explain this change and she tried to resist the temptation of thinking that he had been waiting all along for her money to subsidize his fantasies of how he deserved to live. Perhaps, on the contrary, it was her money that had cheapened him. He had stopped his medical practice soon after their marriage. At the beginning, there had been talk of using some of her money to start a home for alcoholics. In some sense they had succeeded.

The thought of running into David struck Eleanor again. She tore herself away from the pine resin on the windscreen, clambered into the car and drove the unwieldy Buick past the steps and along the dusty drive, only stopping when she was halfway down the hill. She was on her way over to Victoria Eisen's so she could make an early start for the airport with Anne, but first she had to straighten herself out. Folded in a cushion under the driver's seat was a half-bottle of Bisquit brandy. In her bag she had the yellow pills for keeping her alert and the white ones for taking away the dread and panic that alertness brought with it. With the long drive ahead of her she took four instead of two of the yellow pills and then, worrying that the double dose might make her jumpy, she took two of the white ones, and drank about half the bottle of brandy to help the pills down. At first she shuddered violently and then before it even reached her bloodstream, she felt the sharp click of alcohol, filling her with gratitude and warmth.

She subsided into the seat on which she had only been perched, recognizing herself in the mirror for the first time that day. She settled into her body, like a sleepwalker who climbs back into bed after a dangerous expedition. Silent through the sealed windows, she saw black and white magpies burrowing from the vines, and the needles of the pine trees standing out sharply against the pale sky, swept clean by two days of strong wind. She started the engine again and drove off, steering vaguely along the

steep and narrow lanes.

David Melrose, tired of drowning ants, abandoned watering the garden. As soon as the sport lost its narrow focus, it filled him with despair. There was always another nest, another terrace of nests. He pronounced ants 'aunts', and it added zest to his murderous pursuits if he bore in mind his mother's seven haughty sisters, high-minded and selfish women to whom he had displayed his talent on the piano when he was a child.

David dropped the hose on the gravel path, thinking how useless to him Eleanor had become. She had been rigid with terror for too long. It was like trying to palpate a patient's swollen liver when one had already proved that it hurt. She could only be persuaded to relax so often.

He remembered an evening twelve years before, when he had asked her to dinner at his flat. How trusting she was in those days! They had already slept together, but Eleanor still treated him shyly. She wore a rather shapeless white dress with large black polka dots. She was twenty-eight but seemed younger because of the simple cut of her lank blonde hair. He found her pretty in a bewildered, washed-out way, but it was her restlessness that aroused him, the quiet exasperation of a woman who longs to throw herself into something significant, but cannot find what it is.

He had cooked a Moroccan dish of pigeon stuffed with almonds. He served it to her on a bed of saffron rice and then drew back the plate. 'Will you do something for me?' he asked.

'Of course,' she said. 'What?'

He put the plate on the floor behind her chair and said, 'Would you eat your food without using a knife and fork, or your hands, just eat it off the plate?'

'Like a dog, you mean?' she asked.

'Like a girl pretending to be a dog.'

'But why?'

'Because I want you to.'

He enjoyed the risk he was taking. She might have said no and left. If she stayed and did what he wanted, he would capture her. The odd thing was that neither of them thought of laughing.

A submission, even an absurd one, was a real temptation to Eleanor. She would be sacrificing things she did not want to believe in – table manners, dignity, pride – for something she did want to believe in: the spirit of sacrifice. The emptiness of the gesture, the fact that it did not help anybody made it seem more pure at the time. She knelt down on all fours on the threadbare Persian rug, her hands flattened either side of the plate. Her elbows jutted out as she lowered herself and picked up a piece of pigeon between her teeth. She felt the strain at the base of her spine.

She sat back, her hands resting on her knees, and chewed quietly. The pigeon tasted strange. She looked up a little and saw David's shoes, one pointing towards her along the floor, the other dangling close to her in the air. She looked no higher than the knees of his crossed legs, but bowed down again, eating more eagerly this time, rooting about in the mound of rice to catch an almond with her lips and shaking her head gently to loosen some pigeon from the bone. When she looked up at him at last, one of her cheeks was glazed with gravy and some grains of the yellow rice were stuck to her mouth and nose. All the bewilderment was gone from her face.

For a few moments David had adored her for doing what he had asked. He extended his foot and

ran the edge of his shoe gently along her cheek. He was completely captivated by the trust she showed him, but he did not know what to do with it, since it had already achieved its purpose, which was to demonstrate that he could elicit her submission.

The next day he told Nicholas Pratt what had happened. It was one of those days when he made his secretary say that he was busy, and sat drinking in his club, beyond the reach of fevered children and women who pretended their hangovers were migraines. He liked to drink under the blue and gold ceiling of the morning room, where there was always a ripple left by the passage of important meetings. Dull, dissolute, and obscure members felt buoyed up by this atmosphere of power, as little dinghies bob up and down on their moorings when a big yacht sails out of the harbour they have shared.

‘Why did you make her do it?’ asked Nicholas, hovering between mischief and aversion.

‘Her conversation is so limited, don’t you find?’ said David.

Nicholas did not respond. He felt that he was being forced to conspire, just as Eleanor had been forced to eat.

‘Did she make better conversation from the floor?’ he asked.

‘I’m not a magician,’ said David, ‘I couldn’t make her amusing, but I did at least keep her quiet. I was dreading having another talk about the agonies of being rich. I know so little about them, and she knows so little about anything else.’

Nicholas chuckled and David showed his teeth. Whatever one felt about David wasting his talents, he thought Nicholas, he had never been any good at smiling.

David walked up the right side of the double staircase that led from the garden to the terrace. Although he was now sixty, his hair was still thick and a little wild. His face was astonishingly handsome. Its faultlessness was its only flaw; it was the blueprint of a face and had an uninhabited feeling to it, as if no trace of how its owner had lived could modify the perfection of the lines. People who knew David well watched for signs of decay, but his mask grew more noble each year. Behind his dark glasses, however rigidly he held his neck, his eyes flickered unobserved, assessing the weaknesses in people. Diagnosis had been his most intoxicating skill as a doctor and after exhibiting it he had often lost interest in his patients, unless something about their suffering intrigued him. Without his dark glasses, he wore an inattentive expression, until he spotted another person’s vulnerability. Then the look in his eyes hardened like a flexed muscle.

He paused at the top of the stairs. His cigar had gone out and he flung it over the wall into the vineyard below. Opposite him, the ivy that covered the south side of the house was already streaked with red. He admired the colour. It was a gesture of defiance towards decay, like a man spitting in the face of his torturer. He had seen Eleanor hurrying away early in her ridiculous car. He had even seen Yvett trying to steal into the house without drawing attention to herself. Who could blame them?

He knew that his unkindness to Eleanor was effective only if he alternated it with displays of concern and elaborate apologies for his destructive nature, but he had abandoned these variations because his disappointment in her was boundless. He knew that she could not help him unravel the knot of inarticulacy that he carried inside him. Instead, he could feel it tightening, like a promise of suffocation that shadowed every breath he took.

It was absurd; but all summer long he had been obsessed by the memory of a mute cripple he had

seen in Athens airport. This man, trying to sell tiny bags of pistachio nuts by tossing printed advertisements into the laps of waiting passengers, had heaved himself forward, stamping the ground with uncontrollable feet, his head lolling and his eyes rolling upwards. Each time David had looked at the man's mouth twisting silently, like a gasping fish on a river bank, he had felt a kind of vertigo.

David listened to the swishing sound his yellow slippers made as he walked up the last flight of steps to the door that led from the terrace into the drawing room. Yvette had not yet opened the curtains, which saved him the trouble of closing them again. He liked the drawing room to look dim and valuable. A dark red and heavily gilded chair that Eleanor's American grandmother had prise from an old Venetian family on one of her acquisitive sweeps through Europe gleamed against the opposite wall of the room. He enjoyed the scandal connected with its acquisition and, knowing that it ought to be carefully preserved in a museum, he made a point of sitting on it as often as possible. Sometimes, when he was alone, he sat in the Doge's chair, as it was always called, leaning forward on the edge of the seat, his right hand clasping one of the intricately carved arms, striking a pose he remembered from the *Illustrated History of England* he had been given at prep school. The picture portrayed Henry V's superb anger when he was sent a present of tennis balls by the insolent King of France.

David was surrounded by the spoils of Eleanor's matriarchal American family. Drawings by Guardi and Tiepolo, Piazzetta and Novelli hung thickly over the walls. An eighteenth-century French screen, crowded with greyish-brown monkeys and pink roses, divided the long room in half. Partially hidden behind it, from where David stood, was a black Chinese cabinet, its top crowded with neat rows of bottles, and its inner shelves filled with their reinforcements. As he poured himself a drink, David thought about his dead father-in-law, Dudley Craig, a charming, drunken Scotsman who had been dismissed by Eleanor's mother, Mary, when he became too expensive to keep.

After Dudley Craig, Mary had married Jean de Valençay, feeling that if she was going to keep a man, he might as well be a duke. Eleanor had been brought up in a string of houses where every object seemed to have been owned by a king or an emperor. The houses were wonderful, but guests left them with relief, conscious that they were not quite good enough, in the duchess's eyes, for the chairs on which they had sat.

David walked towards the tall window at the end of the room. The only one with its curtain open, gave a view onto the mountain opposite. He often stared at the bare outcrops of lacerated limestone. They looked to him like models of human brains dumped on the dark green mountainside, or at other times, like a single brain, bursting from dozens of incisions. He sat on the sofa beside the window and looked out, trying to work up a primitive sense of awe.

2

PATRICK WALKED TOWARDS THE well. In his hand he carried a grey plastic sword with a gold handle, and swished it at the pink flowers of the valerian plants that grew out of the terrace wall. When there was a snail on one of the fennel stems, he sliced his sword down the stalk and made it fall off. If he killed a snail he had to stamp on it quickly and then run away, because it went all squishy like blowing your nose. Then he would go back and have a look at the broken brown shell stuck in the soft grey flesh and would wish he hadn't done it. It wasn't fair to squash the snails after it rained because they came out to play, bathing in the pools under the dripping leaves and stretching out their horns. When he touched their horns they darted back and his hand darted back as well. For snails he was like a grower up.

One day, when he was not intending to go there, he had been surprised to find himself next to the well and so he decided that the route he had discovered was a secret short cut. Now he always went that way when he was alone. He walked through a terrace of olive trees where yesterday the wind had made the leaves flick from green to grey and grey to green, like running his fingers back and forth over velvet, making it turn pale and dark again.

He had shown Andrew Bunnill the secret short cut and Andrew said it was longer than the other way, and so he told Andrew he was going to throw him down the well. Andrew was feeble and had started to cry. When Andrew flew back to London, Patrick said he would throw him out of the plane. Blub, blub, blub. Patrick wasn't even on the plane, but he told Andrew he would be hiding under the floor and would see a circle around his chair. Andrew's nanny said that Patrick was a nasty little boy and Patrick said it was just because Andrew was so wet.

Patrick's own nanny was dead. A friend of his mother's said she had gone to heaven, but Patrick had been there and knew perfectly well that they had put her in a wooden box and dropped her in a hole. Heaven was the other direction and so the woman was lying, unless it was like sending a parcel. His mother cried a lot when nanny was put in the box, she said it was because of her own nanny. That was stupid, because her own nanny was still alive and in fact they had to go and visit her on the train and it was the most boring thing ever. She had horrible cake with only a tiny bit of jam in the middle and millions of miles of fluff on either side. She always said, 'I know you like this,' which was a lie because he had told her he didn't the last time. It was called sponge cake and so he had asked was it for having a bath with and his mother's nanny had laughed and laughed and hugged him for ages. It was disgusting because she pressed her cheek next to his and her skin hung down loosely, like the chicken's neck he had seen hanging over the edge of the table in the kitchen.

Why did his mother have to have a nanny anyway? He didn't have one anymore and he was on

five. His father said he was a little man now. He remembered going to England when he was three. It was winter and he saw snow for the first time. He could remember standing on the road by a stone bridge and the road was covered in frost and the fields were covered in snow and the sky was shining and the road and the hedges were blazing and he had blue woollen gloves on and his nanny held his hand and they stood still for ages looking at the bridge. He used to think of that often, and the time they were in the back of the car and he had his head in her lap and he looked up at her and she smiled and the sky behind her head was very wide and blue, and he had fallen asleep.

Patrick walked up a steep bank on a path that ran beside a bay tree and emerged next to the well. He was forbidden to play by the well. It was his favourite place to play. Sometimes he climbed on the rotten cover and jumped up and down, pretending it was a trampoline. Nobody could stop him, not did they often try. The wood was black where the blistered pink paint had peeled off. It creaked dangerously and made his heart beat faster. He was not strong enough to lift the cover himself, but when it was left open he collected stones and clumps of earth to throw down the shaft. They hit the water with a deep reverberating splash and broke into the blackness.

Patrick raised his sword in triumph as he reached the top of the path. He could see that the cover of the well was pushed back. He started to search about for a good stone, the biggest one he could lift and the roundest he could find. He hunted in the surrounding field and unearthed a reddish stone which he needed both hands to carry. He placed it on the flat surface next to the opening of the well shaft and hoisted himself up until his legs no longer touched the ground and, leaning over as far as he could, looked down at the darkness where he knew the water was hiding. Holding on with his left hand, he pushed the stone over the edge and heard the plunging sound it made and watched the surface break and the disturbed water catch the light of the sky and gleam back at it unreliably. So heavy and black it was more like oil. He shouted down the shaft where the dry bricks turned green and then black. If he leaned over far enough he could hear a damp echo of his own voice.

Patrick decided to climb up the side of the well. His scuffed blue sandals fitted in the gaps between the rocks. He wanted to stand on the ledge beside the open well shaft. He had done it once before, for a dare, when Andrew was staying. Andrew had stood beside the well saying, 'Please don't, Patrick, please come down, *please* don't.' Patrick wasn't scared then, although Andrew was, but now that he was alone he felt dizzy, squatting on the ledge, with his back to the water. He stood up very slowly and as he straightened, he felt the invitation of the emptiness behind him, pulling him backwards. He was convinced that his feet would slip if he moved, and he tried to stop wobbling by clenching his fists and his toes and looking down very seriously at the hard ground around the well. His sword was still resting on the ledge and he wanted to retrieve it in order to make his conquest complete, and so he leaned over carefully, with an enormous effort of will, defying the fear that tried to arrest his limbs and picked up the sword by its scratched and dented grey blade. Once he got hold of the sword, he bent his knees hesitantly and jumped over the edge, landing on the ground, shouting hooray and making the noise of clashing metal as he slashed about him at imaginary enemies. He whacked a bay leaf with the flat of his sword and then stabbed the air underneath it with a morbid groan, clutching his side at the same time. He liked to imagine an ambushed Roman army about to be smashed to bits by the barbarians, when he arrived, the commander of the special soldiers with purple cloaks, and he was

braver than anybody and saved the day from unthinkable defeat.

When he went for a walk in the woods he often thought about Ivanhoe, the hero of one of his favourite comics, who cut down the trees on either side of him as he passed. Patrick had to walk around the pine trees, but he imagined he had the power to carve his own path, striding majestically through the small wood at the end of the terrace on which he stood, felling with a single blow each tree to his right and left. He read things in books and then he thought about them lots. He had read about rainbows in a soppy picture book, but then he had started to see them in the streets in London after it rained, when the petrol from the cars stained the tarmac and the water fanned out in broken purple, blue, and yellow rings.

He didn't feel like going into the wood today and so he decided to jump down all the terraces. It was like flying, but some of the walls were too high and he had to sit on the edge, throw his sword down, and lower himself as far as he could before he dropped. His shoes filled with the dry soil around the vines and he had to take them off twice and hold them upside down to shake out the earth and the pebbles. Nearer the bottom of the valley the terraces became wider and shallower and he could leap over the edge of all the walls. He gathered his breath for the final flight.

Sometimes he managed to jump so far that he felt like Superman practically, and at other times he made himself run faster by thinking about the Alsatian dog that chased him down the beach on that windy day when they had gone to lunch at George's. He had begged his mother to let him go for a walk, because he loved looking at the wind when it exploded the sea, like smashing bottles against rocks. Everyone said not to go too far, but he wanted to be nearer the rocks. There was a sandy path leading to the beach and while he was walking down it a fat, long-haired Alsatian appeared at the top of the hill, barking at him. When he saw it move closer, he started to run, following the twists in the path at first and then jumping straight down the soft slope, faster and faster, until he was taking giant strides, his arms spread out against the wind, rushing down the hill onto the half circle of sand between the rocks, right up to the edge of the highest wave. When he looked up the dog was miles away up on the hill, and he knew it could never catch him because he was so fast. Later he wondered if it had tried.

Patrick arrived panting at the dried-up river bed. He climbed onto a big rock between two clumps of pale green bamboo. When he had taken Andrew there they had played a game that Patrick invented. They both had to stand on the rock and try to push each other off, and on one side they pretended there was a pit full of broken razor blades and on the other there was a tank full of honey. And if you fell on one side you were cut to death in a million places, and on the other you drowned, exhausted by a heavy golden swim. Andrew fell over every time, because he was so utterly wet.

Andrew's father was wet too, in a way. Patrick had been to Andrew's birthday party in London, and there was a huge box in the middle of the drawing room, full of presents for the other children. They all queued up and took a present out of the box and then ran around comparing what they'd got. Unlike them, Patrick hid his present under an armchair and went back to get another one. When he was leaning over the box, fishing out another shiny package, Andrew's father squatted down next to him and said, 'You've already had one haven't you, Patrick?' – not angrily, but in a voice like he was offering Patrick a sweet. 'It isn't fair on the other children if you take their presents, is it?' Patrick

looked at him defiantly and said, 'I haven't got one already,' and Andrew's father just looked all sad and utterly wet and said, 'Very well, Patrick, but I don't want to see you taking another one.' And so Patrick got two presents, but he hated Andrew's father because he wanted more.

Patrick had to play the rock game on his own now, jumping from one side of the rock to another, challenging his sense of balance with wild gestures. When he fell over, he pretended it had not happened, although he knew that was cheating.

Patrick looked doubtfully at the rope François had tied for him to one of the nearby trees so that he could swing over the river bed. He felt thirsty and started to climb back up to the house along the path where the tractor worked its way among the vines. His sword had become a burden and he carried it under his arm resentfully. He had heard his father use a funny expression once. He said to George, 'Give him enough rope and he'll hang himself.' Patrick did not know what that meant at first, but he became convinced, with a flash of terror and shame, that they were talking about the rope that François had tied to the tree. That night he dreamt that the rope had turned into one of the tentacles of an octopus and wrapped itself around his throat. He tried to cut it, but he could not because his sword was only a toy. His mother cried a lot when they found him dangling from the tree.

Even when you were awake it was hard to know what grown-ups meant when they said things. One day he had worked out a way of guessing what they were going to do: no meant no, maybe meant perhaps, yes meant maybe and perhaps meant no, but the system did not work, and he decided that maybe everything meant perhaps.

Tomorrow the terraces would be crowded with grape-pickers filling their buckets with bunches of grapes. Last year François had taken him on the tractor. His hands were very strong and hard like wood. François was married to Yvette who had gold teeth you could see when she smiled. One day Patrick was going to have all his teeth made of gold, not just two or three. He sometimes sat in the kitchen with Yvette and she let him taste the things she was cooking. She came up to him with spoon full of tomato and meat and soup and said, '*Ça te plait?*' And he could see her gold teeth when he nodded. Last year François told him to sit in the corner of the trailer next to two big barrels of grapes. Sometimes when the road was rough and steep he turned around and said, '*Ça va?*' And Patrick shouted back, '*Oui, merci,*' over the noise of the engine and the bumping and squealing of the trailer and the brakes. When they got to the place where the wine was made, Patrick was very excited. It was dark and cool in there, the floor was hosed with water, and there was a sharp smell of juice turning into wine. The room was vast and François took him up a ladder to a high ramp that ran above the wine press and all of the vats. The ramp was made of metal with holes in it and it was a funny feeling being so high up with holes under his feet.

When they got to the wine press Patrick looked down and saw two steel rollers turning in opposite directions with no space in between them. Stained with grape juice, they pressed against each other spinning loudly. The lower railing of the ramp only came up to Patrick's chin and he felt very close to the wine press. And looking at it, he felt that his eyes were like the grapes, made of the same soft translucent jelly and that they might fall out of his head and get crushed between the two rollers.

As Patrick approached the house, climbing as usual the right-hand flight of the double staircase because it was luckier, he turned into the garden to see if he could find the frog that lived in the f

tree. Seeing the tree frog was very lucky indeed. Its bright green skin was even smoother against the smooth grey skin of the fig tree, and it was hard to find it among the fig leaves which were almost the same colour as itself. In fact, Patrick had only seen the tree frog twice, but he had stood still for ages, staring at its sharp skeleton and bulging eyes, like the beads on his mother's yellow necklace, and the suckers on its front feet that held it motionless against the trunk and, above all, at the swelling sides which enlivened a body as delicate as jewelry, but greedier for breath. The second time he saw the frog, Patrick stretched out his hand and carefully touched its head with the tip of his index finger and it did not move and he felt that it trusted him.

The frog was not there today and so he climbed wearily up the last flight of steps, pushing against his knees with his hands. He walked around the house to the kitchen entrance and reached up to open the squealing door. He had expected to find Yvette in the kitchen, but she was not there. Bottles of white wine and champagne jostled and clinked as he opened the refrigerator door. He turned back into the larder, where he found two warm bottles of chocolate milk in the corner of the lower shelf. After several attempts he opened one and drank the soothing liquid straight from the bottle, something Yvette had told him not to do. Immediately after drinking he felt violently sad and sat for several minutes on the kitchen counter staring down at his dangling shoes.

He could hear the piano music, muted by distance and closed doors, but he did not pay any attention to it, until he recognized the tune his father had composed for him. He jumped off the counter and ran down the corridor that led to the hall, crossed the hall, and broke into a kind of cantering motion as he entered the drawing room and danced to his father's tune. It was wild music with harsh flurries of high notes superimposed on a rumbling military march. Patrick hopped and skipped between the tables and chairs and around the edge of the piano, only coming to rest when his father ceased to play.

'How are you today, Mr Master Man?' asked his father, staring at him intently.

'All right, thank you,' said Patrick, wondering if it was a trick question. He was out of breath, but he knew he must concentrate because he was with his father. When he had asked what was the most important thing in the world, his father had said, 'Observe everything.' Patrick often forgot about this instruction, but in his father's presence he looked at things carefully, without being sure what he was looking for. He had watched his father's eyes behind their dark glasses. They moved from object to object and person to person, pausing for a moment on each and seeming to steal something vital from them, with a quick adhesive glance, like the flickering of a gecko's tongue. When he was with his father, Patrick looked at everything seriously, hoping he looked serious to anyone who might watch his eyes, as he had watched his father's.

'Come here,' said his father. Patrick stepped closer.

'Shall I pick you up by the ears?'

'No,' shouted Patrick. It was a sort of game they played. His father reached out and clasped Patrick's ears between his forefingers and thumbs. Patrick put his hands around his father's wrists and his father pretended to pick him up by his ears, but Patrick really took the strain with his arms. His father stood up and lifted Patrick until their eyes were level.

'Let go with your hands,' he said.

‘No,’ shouted Patrick.

‘Let go and I’ll drop you at the same time,’ said his father persuasively.

Patrick released his father’s wrists, but his father continued to pinch his ears. For a moment the whole weight of his body was supported by his ears. He quickly caught his father’s wrists again.

‘Ouch,’ he said, ‘you said you were going to drop me. *Please* let go of my ears.’

His father still held him dangling in the air. ‘You’ve learned something very useful today,’ he said. ‘Always think for yourself. Never let other people make important decisions for you.’

‘Please let go,’ said Patrick. ‘Please.’ He felt that he was going to cry, but he pushed back his sense of desperation. His arms were exhausted, but if he relaxed them he felt as if his ears were going to be torn off, like the gold foil from a pot of cream, just ripped off the side of his head.

‘You *said*,’ he yelled, ‘you said.’

His father dropped him. ‘Don’t whimper,’ he said in a bored voice, ‘it’s very unattractive.’ He sat down at the piano and started playing the march again, but Patrick did not dance.

He ran from the room, through the hall, out of the kitchen, over the terrace, along the olive grove and into the pine wood. He found the thorn bush, ducked underneath it, and slid down a small slope into his most secret hiding place. Under a canopy of bushes, wedged up against a pine tree which was surrounded by thickets on every side, he sat down and tried to stop the sobs, like hiccups, that snarled in his throat.

Nobody can find me here, he thought. He could not control the spasms that caught his breath as he tried to inhale. It was like being caught in sweaters, when he plunged his head in and couldn’t find the neck of the sweater and he tried to get out through the arm and it all got twisted and he thought he would never get out and he couldn’t breathe.

Why did his father do that? Nobody should do that to anybody else, he thought, nobody should do that to anybody else.

In winter when there was ice on the puddles, you could see the bubbles trapped underneath and the air couldn’t breathe: it had been ducked by the ice and held under, and he hated that because it was so unfair and so he always smashed the ice to let the air go free.

Nobody can find me here, he thought. And then he thought, what if nobody can find me here?

3

VICTOR WAS STILL ASLEEP in his room downstairs and Anne wanted him to stay asleep. After less than a year together they now slept in separate rooms because Victor's snoring, and nothing else about him, kept her awake at night. She walked barefoot down the steep and narrow staircase running the tips of her fingers along the curve of the whitewashed walls. In the kitchen she removed the whistle from the spout of the chipped enamel kettle, and made coffee as silently as possible.

There was a tired ebullience about Victor's kitchen, with its bright orange plates and watermelon slices grinning facetiously from the tea towels. It was a harbour of cheap gaiety built up by Victor and his ex-wife, Elaine, and Victor had been torn between protesting against her bad taste and the fear that his protest might be in bad taste to protest. After all, did one notice the kitchen things? Did they matter? Wasn't indifference more dignified? He had always admired David Melrose's certainty that beyond good taste lay the confidence to make mistakes because they were one's own. It was at this point that Victor often wavered. Sometimes he opted for a few days, or a few minutes, of assertive impertinence, but he always returned to his careful impersonation of a gentleman; it was all very well to *épater la bourgeoisie*, but the excitement was double-edged if you were also one of them. Victor knew that he could never acquire David Melrose's conviction that success was somehow vulgar. Though sometimes he was tempted to believe that David's languor and contempt masked regret for his failed life, the simple idea dissolved in David's overbearing presence.

What amazed Anne was that a man as clever as Victor could be caught with such small hooks. Pouring herself some coffee she felt a strange sympathy for Elaine. They had never met, but she had come to understand what had driven Victor's wife to seek refuge in a full set of Snoopy mugs.

* * *

When Anne Moore had been sent by the London bureau of the *New York Times* to interview the eminent philosopher Sir Victor Eisen, he had seemed a little old-fashioned. He had just returned from lunch at the Athenaeum, and his felt hat, darkened by rain, lay on the hall table. He pulled his watch out of his waistcoat pocket with what struck Anne as an archaic gesture.

'Ah, exactly on time,' he said. 'I admire punctuality.'

'Oh, good,' she answered, 'a lot of people don't.'

The interview had gone well, so well in fact that later in the afternoon it moved into his bedroom. From that point on Anne had willingly interpreted the almost Edwardian clothes, the pretentious house, and the claret-stained anecdotes as part of the camouflage that a Jewish intellectual would have had to take on, along with a knighthood, in order to blend into the landscape of conventional English life.

During the months that followed she lived with Victor in London, ignoring any evidence that made this mild interpretation look optimistic. Those interminable weekends, for instance, which started with briefings on Wednesday night: how many acres, how many centuries, how many servants. Thursday evening was given over to speculation: he hoped, he really hoped, that the Chancellor wouldn't be there this time; could Gerald still be shooting now that he was in a wheelchair? The warnings came on Friday, during the drive down: 'Don't unpack your own bags in this house.' 'Don't keep asking people what they do.' 'Don't ask the butler how he *feels*, as you did last time.' The weekends only ended on Tuesday when the stalks and skins of Saturday and Sunday were pressed again for their last few drops of sour juice.

In London, she met Victor's clever friends but at weekends the people they stayed with were rich and often stupid. Victor was *their* clever friend. He purred appreciatively at their wine and pictures and they started many of their sentences by saying, 'Victor will be able to tell us...' She watched them trying to make him say something clever and she watched him straining himself to be more like them, even reiterating the local pieties: wasn't it splendid that Gerald *hadn't* given up shooting? Wasn't Gerald's mother amazing? Bright as a button and still beavering away in the garden at ninety-two? 'She completely wears me out,' he gasped.

If Victor sang for his supper, at least he enjoyed eating it. What was harder to discount was his London house. He had bought the fifteen-year lease on this surprisingly large white stucco house in Knightsbridge crescent after selling his slightly smaller but freehold house at a less fashionable address. The lease now had only seven years to run. Anne stoutly ascribed this insane transaction to the absent-mindedness for which philosophers are famous.

Only when she had come down here to Lacoste in July and seen Victor's relationship with David had her loyalty begun to wear away. She started to wonder how high a price in wasted time Victor was prepared to pay for social acceptance, and why on earth he wanted to pay it to David.

According to Victor, they had been 'exact contemporaries', a term he used for anyone of vaguely his own age who had not noticed him at school. 'I knew him at Eton' too often meant that he had been ruthlessly mocked by someone. He said of only two other scholars that they were friends of his at school, and he no longer saw either of them. One was the head of a Cambridge college and the other a civil servant who was widely thought to be a spy because his job sounded too dull to exist.

She could picture Victor in those days, an anxious schoolboy whose parents had left Austria after the First World War, settled in Hampstead, and later helped a friend find a house for Freud. Her images of David Melrose had been formed by a mixture of Victor's stories and her American vision of English privilege. She pictured him, a demigod from the big house, opening the batting against the village cricket team, or lounging about in a funny waistcoat he was allowed to wear because he was Pop, a club Victor never got into. It was hard to take this Pop thing seriously but somehow Victor managed. As far as she could make out it was like being a college football hero, but instead of making out with the cheerleaders, you got to beat young boys for burning your toast.

When she had met David, at the end of the long red carpet unrolled by Victor's stories, she spotted the arrogance but decided that she was just too American to buy into the glamour of David's love promise and failure. He struck her as a fraud and she had said so to Victor. Victor had been solemn

and disapproving, arguing that on the contrary David suffered from the clarity with which he saw his own situation. 'You mean he *knows* he's a pain in the ass?' she had asked.

Anne moved back towards the stairs, warming her hands with a steaming orange mug covered in purple hearts of various sizes. She would have liked to spend the day reading in the hammock that hung between the plane trees in front of the house, but she had agreed to go to the airport with Eleanor. This American Girls' Outing had been imposed on her by Victor's unquenchable desire to be associated with the Melroses. The only Melrose Anne really liked was Patrick. At five years old he was still capable of a little enthusiasm.

If at first she had been touched by Eleanor's vulnerability, Anne was now exasperated by her drunkenness. Besides, Anne had to guard against her wish to save people, as well as her habit of pointing out their moral deficiencies, especially as she knew that nothing put the English more on edge than a woman having definite opinions, except a woman who went on to defend them. It was as if every time she played the ace of spades, it was beaten by a small trump. Trumps could be pieces of gossip, or insincere remarks, or irrelevant puns, or anything that dispelled the possibility of seriousness. She was tired of the deadly smile on the faces of people whose victory was assured by their silliness.

Having learned this, it had been relatively easy to play along with the tax-exiled English duke George Watford, who came up from the coast for weekends with the Melroses, wearing shoes that tapered to a quite impossible thinness. His rather wooden face was covered in the thinnest cracks, like the varnish on the Old Masters he had 'shocked the nation' by selling. The English didn't ask much of their dukes in Anne's opinion. All they had to do was hang on to their possessions, at least the very well-known ones, and then they got to be guardians of what other people called 'our heritage'. She was disappointed that this character with a face like a cobweb had not even managed the small task of leaving his Rembrandts on the wall where he found them.

Anne continued to play along until the arrival of Vijay Shah. Only an acquaintance, not a friend of Victor's, they had met ten years before when Vijay, as head of the Debating Society, had invited Victor down to Eton to defend the 'relevance' of philosophy. Since then Vijay had cultivated the connection with a barrage of arty postcards and they had occasionally met at parties in London. Like Victor, Vijay had been an Eton scholar, but unlike Victor he was also very rich.

Anne felt guilty at first that she reacted so badly to Vijay's appearance. His oyster-coloured complexion and the thick jowls that looked like a permanent attack of mumps were the unhappy setting for a large hooked nose with tufts of intractable hair about the nostrils. His glasses were thick and square but, without them, the raw dents on the bridge of his nose and the weak eyes peering out from the darker grey of their sockets looked worse. His hair was blow-dried until it rose and stiffened like a black meringue on top of his skull. His clothes did nothing to compensate for these natural disadvantages. If Vijay's favourite flared green trousers were a mistake, it was a trivial one compared to his range of lightweight jackets in chaotic tartan patterns, with flapless pockets sewn onto the outside. Still, any clothes were preferable to the sight of him in a bathing suit. Anne remembered with horror his narrow shoulders and their white pustules struggling to break through a thick pelt of wild black hair.

Had Vijay's character been more attractive his appearance might have elicited pity or even indifference, but spending just a few days with him convinced Anne that each hideous feature had been moulded by internal malevolence. His wide, grinning mouth was at once crude and cruel. When he tried to smile, his purplish lips could only curl and twist like a rotting leaf thrown onto a fire. Obsequious and giggly with older and more powerful people, he turned savage at the smell of weakness, and would attack only easy prey. His voice seemed to be designed exclusively for simpering and yet when they had argued on the night before he left, it had achieved the shrill astringency of a betrayed schoolmaster. Like many flatterers, he was not aware that he irritated the people he flattered. When he had met the Wooden Duke he had poured himself out in a rich gurgling rush of compliments, like an overturned bottle of syrup. She overheard George complaining afterwards to David, 'Perfectly ghastly man your friend Victor brought over. Kept telling me about the plasterwork at Richfield. Thought he must want a job as a guide.' George grunted disdainfully and David grunted disdainfully back.

A little Indian guy being sneered at by monsters of English privilege would normally have unleashed the full weight of Anne's loyalty to underdogs, but this time it was wiped out by Vijay's enormous desire to be a monster of English privilege himself. 'I can't bear going to Calcutta,' he giggled, 'the people, my dear, and the noise.' He paused to let everyone appreciate this nonchalant remark made by an English soldier at the Somme.

The memory of Vijay's ingratiating purr died away as Anne tried to push open her bedroom door which always stuck on a bulge in the quaintly uneven floor. This was another relic of Elaine, who had refused to change what she called 'the authentic feel of the house'. Now the hexagonal tiles were worn to a paler terracotta where the door scraped them each time it was opened. Afraid of spilling her coffee she let the door stay stuck and edged sideways into the room. Her breasts brushed the cupboard as she passed.

Anne put her coffee mug down on the round marble-topped table with black metal legs which Elaine had carried back in triumph from some junk store in Apt and cunningly used as a bedside table. It was far too high and Anne often pulled the wrong book from the pile of unseen titles above her. Suetonius' *Twelve Caesars*, which David had lent her way back at the beginning of August, kept turning up like a reproach. She had glanced at one or two chapters, but the fact that David had recommended the book made her reluctant to become intimate with it. She knew she really ought to read a bit more of it before dinner so as to have something intelligent to say when she gave it back to him tonight. All she remembered was that Caligula had planned to torture his wife to find out why he was so devoted to her. What was David's excuse, she wondered.

Anne lit a cigarette. Lying on a pile of pillows and smaller cushions, slurping her coffee and playing with her cigarette smoke, she felt briefly that her thoughts were growing more subtle and expansive. The only thing that compromised her pleasure was the sound of running water in Victor's bathroom.

First, he would shave and wipe the remnants of the shaving cream on a clean towel. Then he would plaster his hair as flat as he could, walk to the foot of the stairs and shout, 'Darling.' After a brief pause he would shout it again in his let's-not-play-foolish-games voice. If she still did not appear he

would call out, 'Breakfast.'

Anne had teased him about it just the other day, and said, 'Oh, darling, you shouldn't have.'

'Have what?'

'Made breakfast.'

'I haven't.'

'Oh, I thought when you shouted, "Breakfast," you meant it was ready.'

'No, I meant that I was ready for breakfast.'

* * *

Anne had not been far wrong, Victor was indeed in his bathroom downstairs brushing his hair vigorously. But, as always, a few seconds after he stopped the wave of hair which had tormented him since childhood sprang up again.

His pair of ivory hairbrushes had no handles. They were quite inconvenient, but very traditional like the wooden bowl of shaving soap, which never thickened as satisfactorily as foam from a can. Victor was fifty-seven, but looked younger. Only a drooping in his flesh, a loss of tension around the jaw and the mouth and the tremendous depth of the horizontal lines in his forehead, revealed his age. His teeth were neat and strong and yellow. Though he longed for something more aerodynamic his nose was bulbous and friendly. Women always praised his eyes because their pale grey looked luminous against his slightly pitted olive-brown skin. All in all, strangers were surprised when a rapid and rather fruity lisp emerged from a face which could well have belonged to an over-dressed prizefighter.

In pink pyjamas from New & Lingwood, a silk dressing gown, and a pair of red slippers, Victor felt almost sleek. He had walked out of the bathroom, through his simple whitewashed bedroom with its green mosquito netting held in place over the windows by drawing pins, and out into the kitchen where he hovered, not yet daring to call Anne.

While Victor hesitated in the kitchen, Eleanor arrived. The Buick was too long to twist its way up Victor's narrow drive and she'd had to park it on the edge of a small pine wood at the bottom of the hill. This land did not belong to Victor but his neighbours, the Fauberts, well known in Lacoste for their eccentric way of life. They still used a mule to plough their fields, they had no electricity, and in their large dilapidated farmhouse they lived in just one room. The rest of the house was crowded with barrels of wine, jars of olive oil, sacks of animal feed, and piles of almonds and lavender. The Fauberts had not altered anything since old Madame Faubert died, and she had never changed anything since she arrived as a young bride, half a century before, bearing a glass bowl and a clock.

Eleanor was intrigued by these people. She imagined their austere and fruitful life like a stained glass window in a medieval church – labourers in the vineyard with grape-filled baskets on their backs. She had seen one of the Fauberts in the Crédit Agricole and he had the sullen air of a man who looks forward to strangling poultry. Nevertheless, she treasured the idea that the Fauberts were connected to the earth in some wholesome way that the rest of us had forgotten. She had certainly forgotten about being wholesomely connected with the earth herself. Perhaps you had to be a Red Indian, or something.

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