

ARGUMENT

The Wolf and the Tarantula

A GREY WOLF fell into conversation with a tarantula. 'I love the chase,' the grey wolf said. 'Myself,' said the tarantula, 'I like to sit here and wait for my prey to come to me.' 'Don't you find that lonely?' the wolf asked. 'I could as soon ask you,' the tarantula replied, 'how it is that you don't get sick of taking your wife and kids along on every hunt.' 'I am by temperament a family man,' the wolf answered. 'And what is more there is power in numbers.'

The tarantula paused to crush a passing marmoset then said he doubted the wolf, for all the help he received, would ever be as successful a huntsman as he was. The wolf wagered a week's catch on his ability to outhunt the tarantula and, returning to his lair, told his wife and children of the bet.

'You owe me,' he told the tarantula when they next met.

'And your proof?'

'Well I expect you to trust my word, but if you don't, then go ahead and search the wilderness with your own eyes.'

This the tarantula did, and sure enough discovered that of all the wolf's natural prey not a single creature remained.

'I salute your efficiency,' the tarantula said, 'but it does occur to me to wonder what you are going to do for sustenance now.'

At this the grey wolf burst into tears. 'I have had to eat my wife,' he admitted. 'And next week I will start on my children.'

'And after that?'

'After that? After that I will have no option but to eat myself.'

Moral: Always leave a little on your plate.

BOOK ONE

ONE

The Big If

i

MORNINGS WEREN'T GOOD for either of them.

'Here we go again,' Ailinn Solomons said to herself.

She swung her legs out of the bed and looked at her feet. Even before Kevern's insult she had disliked them. The broad insteps. The squat scarab toes, more like thumbs, each the same length as the others. She would have liked Pan pipes toes, beautifully graduated, musical, such as a Sylvan god might have put his lips to. She slid them into slippers and then slid them out again. The slippers made them look, if anything, worse. Hausfrau feet. The same old graceless feet, carrying her through the same old graceless life. No wonder, she caught herself thinking . . . but couldn't finish. No wonder what?

In reality there wasn't much that was 'same old' about her life, other than the habit of thinking there was. By any objective measure – and she could see objectivity, just out of reach – she was living adventurously. She had recently moved into a new house. In the company of a new friend. In a new village. For the move she had bought herself new clothes. New sunglasses. A new bag. New nail polish. Even her slippers were new. The house, though new to her, was not new to itself. It felt skulkingly ecclesiastical, which Ailinn had reasons of her own to dislike, as though a disreputable abbé or persecuted priest – a pastor too austere for his congregation or a padre too fleshly for his – had gone to

ground there and finally forgotten what he was hiding from. It had stood stonily in its own damp in a dripping valley, smelling of wild garlic and wet gorse, for centuries. Neither the light of hope nor the light of disillusionment made it through its small, low windows, so deep into the valley. It deferred expectation – was the best you could say of it. Whoever had lived here before her, they had been, like the vegetation, neither happy nor unhappy. But though she shrank from its associations, it was still an improvement on the square slab of speckled concrete she had latterly grown up in, with its view that was no view of a silted estuary – the dull northern tide trickling in from nowhere on the way to nowhere – and the company of her frayed-tempered parents who weren't really her parents at all.

And – *and* – she had met a new man. The one who had insulted her feet.

True, he was no Sylvan god, and would not have put her feet to his lips even if he had been – but that was no consolation for her having probably lost him. He had – he'd had – promise.

As for the rest – including the new friend, who was much older than her and more a sort of guardian (funny the way she attracted guardians) – they struck her as incidentals, a rearrangement of the furniture, that was all. In every other regard she was still herself. That was what was cruel about superficial change: it exposed what could never change. Better to have stayed where she was and waited. As long as you are waiting you can't be disappointed. I was all right when I was in suspense, she thought. But that wasn't true either. She had never been all right.

Her heart, periodically, fluttered. Arrhythmia, the doctor called it. 'Nothing to worry about,' he said when the tests came back. She laughed. Of course it was nothing to worry about. Life was nothing to worry about. In the place she had come from people said that your heart fluttered when someone you loved had died.

'What if you don't love anybody?' she had asked her adoptive mother.

‘Then it’s the anniversary of the death of someone you loved in a previous life,’ the older woman had answered.

As though she wasn’t morbid enough on her own account without having to hear nonsense like that.

She didn’t know who her actual mother and father were and remembered little about her life before her faux parents picked her out from the orphanage like an orange, except for how unlike the way she thought a little girl was supposed to be she felt. Today, whatever she could or couldn’t remember, she seemed older to herself than her twenty-five years. What about twenty-five hundred? What about twenty-five thousand? ‘Don’t exaggerate, Ailinn,’ people had always told her. (Twenty-five thousand years?) But it wasn’t she who exaggerated, it was they who reduced. Her head was like an echo chamber. If she concentrated long and hard enough, she sometimes thought, she would hear the great ice splitting and the first woolly mammoths come lolloping down from central Asia. Perhaps everybody – even the abridgers and condensers – could do the same but were embarrassed to talk about it. Unless infancy in the company of real parents had filled their minds with more immediate and, yes, trivial sensations. Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting – who said that?

Ha! – she had forgotten.

It was a good job that history books were hard to come by, that diaries were hidden or destroyed and that libraries put gentle obstacles in the way of research, otherwise she might have decided to ransack the past and live her life backwards. If only to discover who it was her heart periodically fluttered for.

A sodden old snail appeared from under her bed, dragging a smear of egg white behind it. It was all she could do not to crush it with her bare, ugly foot.

Before chancing his nose outside his cottage in the morning, Kevern ‘Coco’ Cohen turned up the volume on the loop-television, poured tea – taking care to place the cup carelessly on

the hall table – and checked twice to be certain that his utility phone was on and flashing. A facility for making and receiving local telephone calls only – all other forms of electronic communication having been shut down after WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED, to the rapid spread of whose violence social media were thought to have contributed – the utility phone flashed a malarial yellow until someone rang, and then it glowed vermilion. But it rarely rang. This, too, he left on the hall table. Then he rumbled the silk Chinese hallway runner – a precious heirloom – with his shoe.

The action was not commemorative in intent, but it often reminded him of a cruelly moonlit night many years before, when after a day strained by something – money worries or illness or news which the young Kevern gathered must have been very bad – his sardonic, creaking father had kicked the runner aside, raised the hem of his brocade dressing gown, and danced an enraged soft-shoe shuffle, his arms and legs going up and down in unison like those of a toy skeleton on a stick. He hadn't known his son was on the stairs, watching.

Kevern pressed himself into the darkness of the stairwell. Became a shadow. He was too frightened to say anything. His father was not a dancing man. He stayed very still, but the cottage thrummed to its occupants' every anxiety – he could sense his parents' troubled sleep through the floorboards under his bed, even though he slept in a room below theirs – and now the disturbance his fear generated gave his presence away.

'Sammy Davis Junior,' his father explained awkwardly when he saw him. His voice was hoarse and dry, a rattle from ruined lungs. Because he spoke with an accent even Kevern found strange, as though he'd never really listened to how people spoke in Port Reuben, he released his words reluctantly. He put two fingers across his mouth, like a tramp sucking on a cigarette butt he'd found in a rubbish bin. This he always did to stifle the letter *j* before it left his lips.

The boy was none the wiser. ‘Sammy Davis Junior?’ He too, religiously in his father’s presence – and often even when his father wasn’t there – sealed his lips against the letter *j* when it began a word. He didn’t know why. It had begun as a game between them when he was small. His father had played it with his own father, he’d told him. Begin a word with a *j* without remembering to put two fingers across your mouth and it cost you a penny. It had not been much fun then and it was not much fun now. He knew it was expected of him, that was all. But why was his father being Sammy Davis Junior, whoever Sammy Davis Junior was?

‘Song and dance man,’ his father said. ‘Mr Bo *j*angles. No, you haven’t heard of him.’

Him? Which him? Sammy Davis Junior or Mr Bo *j*angles?

Either way, it sounded more like a warning than a statement. *If anybody asks, you haven’t heard of him. You understand?* Kevern’s childhood had been full of such warnings. Each delivered in a half-foreign tongue. You don’t know, you haven’t seen, you haven’t heard. When his schoolteachers asked questions his was the last hand to go up: he said he didn’t know, hadn’t seen, hadn’t heard. In ignorance was safety. But it worried him that he might have sounded like his father, lisping and slithering in another language. So he spoke in a whisper that drew even more attention to his oddness.

In this instance his father needn’t have worried. Kevern hadn’t only not heard of Sammy Davis Junior, he hadn’t heard of Sammy Davis Senior either.

Ailinn would not have said no to such a father, no matter how strange his behaviour. It helped, she thought, to know where your madness came from.

Once Kevern had closed and double-locked the front door, he knelt and peered through the letter box, as he imagined a burglar or other intruder might. He could hear the television and smell the tea. He could see the phone quietly pulsing yellow, as though

receiving dialysis, on the hall table. The silk runner, he noted with satisfaction, might have been trodden on by a household of small children. No sane man could possibly leave his own house without rearranging the runner on the way out.

He had a secondary motive for shuffling the rug. It demonstrated that it was of no value to him. The law – though it was nowhere written down; a willing submission to restraint might be a better way of putting it, a supposition of coercion – permitted only one item over a hundred years old per household, and Kevern had several. Mistreatment of them, he hoped, would quiet suspicion.

At the extreme limit of letter-box vision the toes of worn leather carpet slippers were just visible. Clearly he was at home, the fustpot, probably nodding in front of the television or reading the junk mail which had in all likelihood been delivered only minutes ago, in the excitement of collecting which he had left his tea and utility phone by the door. But at home, faffing, however else you describe what he was doing.

He returned to the cottage three times, at fifteen-second intervals, looking through his letter box to ascertain that nothing had changed. On each occasion he pushed his hand inside to be sure the flap had not stuck in the course of his inspections – a routine that had to be repeated in case the act of making sure had itself caused the flap to jam – then he took the cliff path and strode distractedly in the direction of the sea. The sea that no one but a few local fishermen sailed on, because there was nowhere you could get to on it – a sea that lapped no other shore.

Nothing had changed there either. The cliff still fell away sharply, sliced like cake, turning a deep, smoky purple at its base; the water still massed tirelessly, frothing and fuming, every day the same. Faffing, like Kevern. More angrily, but to no more purpose.

That was the great thing about the sea: you didn't have to worry about it. It wasn't going anywhere and it wasn't yours. It hadn't been owned and hidden by your family for generations. It didn't run in your blood.

He did, however, have his own bench. Not officially. It didn't have his name on it, but it was respected by the villagers of Port Reuben as they might have respected a wall against which the village idiot kicked his heels. *Coco sits here. The silly bleeder.*

They didn't think he was simple-minded. If anything they thought him a little too clever. But there are times in the history of humanity when cleverness might as well be simplicity.

At this hour, and especially at this season, when visitors were infrequent, he usually had the cliffs and the sea that went nowhere to himself. Sometimes Densdell Kroplik, his closest neighbour, would venture out of the reclaimed cowshed he called his bachelor pad and join Kevern briefly on the bench to complain, in the manner of a prophet without honour in his own country, about the madness of the world, the sunken condition of the village, and, by way of proof of both – for he was a self-published chronicler of the times and of this place – his plummeting sales figures. An itinerant barber and professional local, he policed the cliffs and public houses of Port Reuben, barring it to interlopers with his eyes, dressing like a landowner, a fisherman, a farmer, or a fool, depending on what clothes were uppermost on the pile on his floor – sometimes dressing like all of them at once – interposing his tuberous frame between Port Reuben and outside influence. Not so much the gatekeeper, Densdell Kroplik, as the gate. Though history, as another form of over-cherishing the past, was discouraged, he got away with being unofficial custodian of Port Reuben's secrets and teller of its tales, by keeping the narrative short and sweet – certainly shorter and sweeter than his conversation which, especially when he was cutting hair, boiled like the sea. Port Reuben, originally Ludgvennok, had once been an impregnable fortress of the old ways, and now it wasn't. THE END. This was the essence of Densdell Kroplik's *A Brief History of Port Reuben*, with a few maps and line drawings, done in his hand, and a number of comical footnotes, citing himself, thrown in.

No more, strictly speaking, than a pamphlet for visitors he

would rather have stayed away, *A Brief History of Port Reuben* was for sale by the till in every tourist shop. What few tourists there were bought it with their fudge. But for its author it stood between prosperity and ruination, and by that he meant the village's no less than his own. He checked his outlets every day to see how many had been sold, topping up stocks with signed copies from a sinisterly bulging rucksack that also contained combs, scissors, clippers, and shampoos and conditioners made to a secret formula from heather and thistles and wild flowers that grew in his scruffy clifftop garden. This he lugged, with exaggerated effort, as though making a sacrifice of his health to humanity, from shop to shop. Rather than have him engage them in conversation about his sales, which he never considered satisfactory, the shopkeepers kept out of his way, allowing him to load as many of his pamphlets on them as he thought appropriate. A number of them even bought multiple copies for themselves. They did as birthday presents to relations they didn't like. Anything not to have him fulminating against the bastardisation of the times in their shops, blowing out his weather-beaten cheeks, pulling at his knotted polka-dot neckerchief in sarcastic rage, as though that was all that kept his head attached to his body.

On some mornings, in return for the opportunity to rattle on, Densdell would shave Kevern free of charge. Afraid for his throat – because he was sure Densdell saw him as the incarnate proof, if not the prime cause, of Port Reuben's ruin – Kevern made noises of assent to everything he said. But he understood little of it. Once his razor was out, Densdell Kroplik gave up all pretence of speaking a language they shared. He dropped into a dialect that was older and wilder than the cliffs, coughing up sounds as though they were curses, using words Kevern had never heard before in his life and which he believed, half the time, did not actually exist. Rather than make an effort to decipher any of it, he would concentrate on the idea of the wind picking up the invisible hairs

Densdell barbered from him, and spiralling them out to sea in clusters, like dandelion spores.

Little by little the sea claiming him.

This morning, to Kevern's relief, Densdell Kroplik didn't put in an appearance, so he could sit and fret without company. The very seagulls, smelling his anxiety, kept their distance.

He was a tall, skinny, golden-mopped man (though his hair was thinning now), who moved as though apologetic of his height. He was considered, for all his strangeness, to have kind eyes. He unwound himself on to the bench and looked up at the sky. 'Jesus Christ!' he exclaimed, the moment he was comfortable, for no other reason than to pit his voice against those he heard in his head.

Better a voice he could control than a voice he couldn't. He was no visionary, but there were times when he would mistake the sound of a seabird or the distant laughter of fishermen – he didn't doubt it was a mistake – for a cry for help. 'Kevern!' he thought he heard. The two syllables pronounced with equal lack of emphasis. His dead mother's voice. A sick woman's voice, anyway. Quavering and reproachful, having to make itself heard above a jealous, jostling multitude of cries, detached from the person to whom it had belonged. 'Key-vern!'

He hadn't been close to his mother so he guessed this was a trick of longing. He would have liked her to be calling him.

But he recognised a danger in granting this primacy to his imagination: would he know the difference if one day someone really did cry out for his help?

He was not happy, but he was as happy here in his unhappiness, he accepted, as he was ever going to be. The sea confers a grandeur on the smallness of man's dissatisfactions, and Kevern Cohen gratefully accepted the compliment, knowing that his dissatisfactions were no bigger than most men's – loneliness and sense of lost direction (or was it the sense of never having had direction?) – of early-onset middle age. Nothing more. Like his father before

him, and he had felt a deeper bond to his father than to his mother, though that wasn't saying much, he turned and carved wood for a living – spindles, newels, candlesticks, bowls, lovespoons for the tourist industry which he sold in local shops – and turning wood was a repetitive and tedious business. He had no family alive, no uncles, nieces, cousins, which was unusual in this part of the world where everyone was as an arm joined to one giant octopus. Kevern was joined to no one. He had no one to love or be loved by. Though this was to a degree occupational – like the moon, a woodturner turns alone – he accepted that it was largely a fault of character. He was lonely because he didn't take or make calls on his utility phone, because he was a neglectful friend, and, worse, an easily dismayed, over-reflective lover, and because he was forty.

Falling in love was something he did from time to time, but he was never able to stay in love or keep a woman in love with him. Nothing dramatic happened. There were no cliff-top fallings-out. Compared to the violence with which other couples publicly shredded one another in Port Reuben, his courtships – for they were rarely more than that – came to an end with exemplary courtesy on both sides. They dissolved, that was the best way of putting it, they gradually came apart like a cardboard box that had been left out in the rain. Just occasionally a woman told him he was too serious, hard-going, intense, detached, and maybe a bit prickly. And then shook his hand. He recognised prickly. He was spiny, like a hedgehog, yes. The latest casualty of this spininess was an embryo-affair that had given greater promise than usual of relieving the lonely tedium of his life, and perhaps even bringing him some content. Ailinn Solomons was a wild-haired, quiveringly delicate beauty with a fluttering heart from a northern island village more remote and rugged even than Port Reuben. She had come south with an older companion whom Kevern took to be her aunt, the latter having been left a property in a wet but paradisaical valley called, felicitously, Paradise Valley.

No one had lived in the house for several years. The pipes leaked, there were spiders still in the baths, slugs had signed their signatures on all the windows, believing the place belonged to them, the garden was overgrown with weeds that resembled giant cabbages. It was like a children's story cottage, threatening and enchanting at the same time, the garden full of secrets. Kevern had been sitting holding hands with Ailinn on broken deckchairs in the long grass, enjoying an unexpectedly warm spring afternoon, the pair of them absent-mindedly plugged into the utility console that supplied the country with soothing music and calming news, when the sight of her crossed brown legs reminded him of an old song by a long-forgotten black entertainer his father had liked listening to with the cottage blinds down. 'Your feet's too big.'

On account of their innate aggressiveness, songs of that sort were no longer played on the console. Not banned – nothing was banned exactly – simply not played. Encouraged to fall into desuetude, like the word desuetude. Popular taste did what edict and proscription could never have done, and just as, when it came to books, the people chose rags-to-riches memoirs, cook-books and romances, so, when it came to music, they chose ballads.

Carried away by the day, Kevern began to play at an imaginary piano and in a rudely comic voice serenade Ailinn's big feet.

Ailinn didn't understand.

'It was a popular song by a jazz pianist called Fats Waller,' he told her, automatically putting two fingers to his lips.

He had to explain what jazz was. Ailinn had never heard any jazz, too, without exactly being proscribed, wasn't played. Improvisation had fallen out of fashion. There was room for only one 'if' in life. People wanted to be sure, when a tune began, exactly where it was going to end. Wit, the same. Its unpredictability unsettled people's nerves. And jazz was wit expressed musically. Though he reached the age of ten without having

heard of Sammy Davis Junior, Kevern knew of jazz from his father's semi-secret collection of old CDs. But at least he didn't have to tell Ailinn that Fats Waller was black. Given her age, she was unlikely to have remembered a time when popular singers *weren't* black. Again, no laws or duress. A compliant society meant that every section of it consented with gratitude – the gratitude of the providentially spared – to the principle of group aptitude. People of Afro-Caribbean origin were suited by temperament and physique to entertainment and athletics, and so they sang and sprinted. People originally from the Indian subcontinent, electronically gifted as though by nature, undertook to ensure no family was without a functioning utility phone. What was left of the Polish community plumbed; what was left of the Greek smashed plates. Those from the Gulf States and the Levant whose grandparents hadn't quickly left the country while WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED was happening – fearing they'd be accused of having stoked the flames, fearing, indeed, that the flames would consume them next – opened labneh and shisha-pipe restaurants, kept their heads down, and grew depressed with idleness. To each according to his gifts.

Having heard only ballads, Ailinn was hard pressed to understand how the insulting words Kevern had just sung to her could ever have been set to music. Music was the expression of love.

'They're not really insulting,' Kevern said. 'Except maybe to people whose feet are too big. My father never insulted anybody, but he delighted in this song.'

He was saying too much, but the garden's neglect gave the illusion of safety. No word could get beyond the soundproofing of the giant cabbage-like leaves.

Ailinn still didn't comprehend. 'Why would your father have loved something like that?'

He wanted to say it was a joke, but was reluctant, in her company, to put two fingers to his lips again. She already thought he was strange.

‘It struck him as funny,’ he said instead.

She shook her head in disbelief, blotting out Kevern’s vision. Nothing to see in the whole wide world but her haystack of crow-black hair. Nothing else he wanted to see. ‘If you say so,’ she said, unconvinced. ‘But that still doesn’t explain why you’re singing it to me.’ She seemed in genuine distress. ‘Are *my* feet too big?’

He looked again. ‘Your feet specifically, no. Your ankles, maybe, a bit . . .’

‘And you say you hate me because my ankles are too thick?’

‘Hate you? Of course I don’t hate you. That’s just the silly song.’ He could have said ‘I love you’, but it was too soon for that. ‘Your thick ankles are the very reason I’m attracted to you,’ he tried instead. ‘I’m perverse that way.’

It came out wrong. He had meant it to be funny. Meaning to be funny often landed him in a mess because, like his father, he lacked the reassuring charm necessary to temper the cruelty that lurked in jokes. Maybe his father intended to be cruel. Maybe he, Kevern, did. Despite his kind eyes.

Ailinn Solomons flushed and rose from her deckchair, knocking over the console and spilling the wine they’d been drinking.

Elderflower wine, so drink wasn’t his excuse.

In her agitation she seemed to tremble, like the fronds of a palm tree in a storm.

‘And your thick head’s the very reason I’m perversely attracted to you,’ she said . . . ‘Except that I’m not.’

He felt sorry for her, both on account of the unnecessary unkindness of his words and the fear that showed in her eyes in the moment of her standing up to him. Did she think he’d strike her?

She hadn’t spoken to him about life on the chill northern archipelago where she had grown up, but he didn’t doubt it was in all essentials similar to here. The same vast and icy ocean crashed in on them both. The same befuddled men, even more thin-skinned

and peevish in the aftermath of WHAT HAPPENED than their smuggler and wrecker ancestors had been, roamed angrily from pub to pub, ready to raise a hand to any woman who dared to refuse or twit them. *Thick head?* They'd show her a thick fist if she wasn't careful! Snog her first – the snog having become the most common expression of erotic irritation between men and women: an antidote to the bland ballads of love the console pumped out – snog her first and cuff her later. An unnecessary refinement in Kevern's view, since a snog was itself an act of thuggery.

Ailinn Solomons made a sign with her body for him to leave. He heaved himself out of the deckchair like an old man. She felt leaden herself, but the weight of his grief surprised her. This wasn't the end of the world. They barely knew each other.

She watched him go – as at an upstairs window her companion watched him go – a man made heavy by what he'd brought on himself. Adam leaving the garden, she thought.

She felt a pang for him and for men in general, no matter that some had raised their hands to her. A man turned from her, his back bent, ashamed, defeated, all the fight in him leaked away – why was that a sight she felt she knew so well, when she couldn't recall a single instance, before today, of having seen it?

Alone again, Ailinn Solomons looked at her feet.

ii

A score or so years before the events related above, Esme Nussbaum, an intelligent and enthusiastic thirty-two-year-old researcher employed by Ofnow, the non-statutory monitor of the Public Mood, prepared a short paper on the continuance of low- and medium-level violence in those very areas of the country where its reduction, if not its cessation, was most to have been expected, given the money and energy expended on uprooting it.

‘Much has been done, and much continues to be done,’ she wrote, ‘to soothe the native aggressiveness of a people who have fought a thousand wars and won most of them, especially in those twisted knarls and narrow crevices of the country where, though the spires of churches soar above the hedgerows, the sweeter breath of human kindness has, historically, been rarely felt. But some qualities are proving to be ineradicable. The higher the spire, it would seem, the lower the passions it goes on engendering. The populace weeps to sentimental ballads, gorges on stories of adversity overcome, and professes to believe ardently in the virtues of marriage and family life, but not only does the old brutishness retain a pertinacious hold equally on rural communities as on our urban conurbations, evidence suggests the emergence of a new and vicious quarrelsomeness in the home, in the workplace, on our roads and even on our playing fields.’

‘You have an unfortunate tendency to overwrite,’ her supervisor said when he had read the whole report. ‘May I suggest you read fewer novels.’

Esme Nussbaum lowered her head.

‘I must also enquire: are you an atheist?’

‘I believe I am not obliged to say,’ Esme Nussbaum replied.

‘Are you a lesbian?’

Again Esme protested her right to privacy and silence.

‘A feminist?’

Silence once more.

‘I don’t ask,’ Luther Rabinowitz said at last, ‘because I have an objection to atheism, lesbianism or feminism. This is a prejudice-free workplace. We are the servants of a prejudice-free society. But certain kinds of hypersensitivity, while entirely acceptable and laudable in themselves, may sometimes distort findings such as you have presented to me. You are obviously yourself prejudiced against the church; and those things you call “vicious” and “brutish”, others could as soon interpret as expressions of natural vigour and vitality. To still be harping on about WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT

HAPPENED, as though it happened, if it happened, yesterday, is to sap the country of its essential life force.'

Esme Nussbaum looked around her while Rabinowitz spoke. Behind his head a flamingo pink LED scroll repeated the advice Ofnow had been dispensing to the country for the last quarter of a century or more. 'Smile at your neighbour, cherish your spouse, listen to ballads, go to musicals, use your telephone, converse, explain, listen, agree, apologise. Talk is better than silence, the sung word is better than the written, but nothing is better than love.'

'I fully understand the points you are making,' Esme Nussbaum replied in a quiet voice, once she was certain her supervisor had finished speaking, 'and I am saying no more than that we are not healed as effectively as we delude ourselves we are. My concern is that, if we are not forewarned, we will find ourselves repeating the mistakes that led to WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED, in the first place. Only this time it will not be on others that we vent our anger and mistrust.'

Luther Rabinowitz made a pyramid of his fingers. This was to suggest infinite patience. 'You go too far,' he said, 'in describing as "mistakes" actions which our grandparents might or might not have taken. You go too far, as well, in speaking of them venting their "anger" and "mistrust" on "others". It should not be necessary to remind someone in your position that in understanding the past, as in protecting the present, we do not speak of "us" and "them". There was no "we" and there were no "others". It was a time of disorder, that is all we know of it.'

'In which, if we are honest with ourselves,' Esme dared to interject, 'no section of society can claim to have acquitted itself well. I make no accusations. Whether it was done ill, or done well, what was done was done. Then was then. No more needs to be said – on this we agree. And just as there is no blame to be apportioned, so there are no amends to be made, were amends appropriate and were there any way of making them. But what is the past for if not to learn from it—'

‘The past exists in order that we forget it.’

‘If I may add one word to that—’

Luther Rabinowitz collapsed his pyramid. ‘I will consider your report,’ he said, dismissing her.

The next day, turning up for work as usual, she was knocked down by a motorcyclist who had mounted the pavement in what passers-by described as a ‘vicious rage’.

Coincidences happen.

iii

Ailinn, anyway – whatever the state of things in the rest of the country, and others were now openly saying what Esme Nussbaum had said in her long-suppressed report – had sported a bruise under her right eye when Kevern saw her for the first time, standing behind a long trestle table on which were laid out for sale jams, marmalades, little cakes, pickles, hand-thrown pots and paper flowers.

‘Fine-looking girl, that one,’ a person Kevern didn’t know whispered in his ear.

‘Which one?’ asked Kevern, not wanting to be rude, but not particularly wanting to be polite either.

‘Her. With all the hair and the purple eye.’

Had Kevern been in the mood for conversation he might have answered that there was more than one among the women selling preserves and flowers who had a purple eye. But yes, the black hair – thick and seemingly warm enough to be the nest of some fabulous and he liked to think dangerous creature – struck him forcibly. ‘Aha, I see her,’ he said, meaning ‘Leave me alone.’

Impervious, the stranger continued. ‘She’ll say she walked into a door. The usual excuse. Needs looking after, in my humble opinion.’

He was dressed like a country auctioneer – of pigs, Kevern thought. He had a pleated, squeeze-box neck, which rippled over

the collar of his tweed hacking jacket, and the blotched skin of someone who'd spent too much time in the vicinity of mulch, manure and, yes, money.

'Aha,' Kevern said again, looking away. He hoped his unfriendly demeanour would make it clear he didn't welcome confidentiality, but he mustn't have made it clear enough because the man slipped an arm through his and offered to introduce him.

'No, no, that's not necessary,' Kevern said firmly. He started from all strangers instinctively, but this one's insinuating manner frightened and angered him.

The introduction was effected notwithstanding. Kevern was not sure how.

'Ailinn Solomons, Kevern Cohen. Kevern Cohen . . . but you know each other now.'

They shook hands and the go-between vanished.

'A friend of yours?' Kevern asked the girl.

'Never seen him in my life. I can't imagine how he knows my name.'

'I ask myself the same question.'

They exchanged concerned looks.

'But you're from here, aren't you?' the girl said.

'Yes. But I too have never seen him in my life. You obviously are *not* from here.'

'It shows?'

'It shows in that we have never before met. So you're from where . . . ?'

She flung a thumb over her left shoulder, as though telling him to scoot.

'You want me to go?'

'No, sorry, I was showing you where I'm from. If that's north, I'm from up there. Forgive me, I'm nervous. I've been spooked by what's just taken place. I haven't been here long enough for people to know my name.'

She looked around anxiously – Kevern couldn't tell whether

to get a second look at the man or to be certain he had gone for good. In deference to her anxiety he made light of his own. (He too had been spooked by what had just occurred.) ‘You know these village nousey parkers. He’s probably an amateur archivist.’

‘You have archives here?’

‘Well, no, not officially, but we have the occasional crazy who enjoys hoarding rumours and going through people’s rubbish bins. I have one as a neighbour, as it happens.’

‘And you let him go through yours?’

‘Oh, I have no rubbish.’

He enjoyed the sensation of her looking through him. He wanted her to know that any secrets he had, she was welcome to.

‘Well I don’t think our man was an archivist,’ she said. ‘He looked too interested in himself. I’d say he was an auctioneer of pigs.’

Kevern smiled at her.

‘Which doesn’t explain . . . ?’

‘No, it doesn’t . . . ?’

She *was* a fine-looking girl, delicately strung, easy to hurt despite the dangerous thicket of her hair. He thought he detected in himself an instinct to protect her. Absurdly, he imagined rolling her in his rug. Though what good that would have done her, he couldn’t have said.

‘You don’t have an “up there” accent,’ he said.

‘And you don’t have a “down here” one.’

They felt bonded in not sounding as though they were from either place.

Emboldened by this, he pointed to her bruise. ‘Who did that to you?’

She ignored the question, going behind the stall to rearrange the flowers. Then she looked him directly in the eyes and shrugged. It was a gesture he understood. Who’d done that to her? It didn’t matter: they all had.

Years before, he’d been a choirboy at the church and, because

he had a flutey tenor voice ideally suited to Bach's Evangelist, still sang there every Christmas when they performed the expurgated version of the *St Matthew Passion*. He didn't normally attend fetes – he was not a festive man – but several people from the church had urged him to attend. 'Why?' he'd asked. 'Just come along, Kevern,' they'd said, 'it will do you good.' And more flyers publicising the event were popped through his letter box than he could recall receiving for similar events.

On the morning of the fete, the vicar, Golvan Shlagman, even rang to make sure he was coming. Kevern said he was undecided. He had work to do. All work and no play, the Reverend Shlagman quipped. He hoped Kevern would try his best. It wouldn't be the same without his presence. Kevern didn't see why. Why was his presence a matter of significance suddenly? 'We can't do without the Evangelist,' the vicar laughed, though no Mass or Passion was being sung.

Thinking about it later, Kevern thought Shlagman's laughter had been only just the sane side of hysterical.

Had he hysterically laughed Ailinn into coming to the fete, too?

Seeing as they mistrusted strangers equally, didn't speak in the accents of where they resided, and knew a pig auctioneer when they saw one, he asked her out.

She took a minute or two to decide. He, too, was a stranger, she seemed to be reminding him.

He understood. 'A little walk, that's all,' he said. 'Nowhere far.'

On their first date he kissed the bruise under her eye.

He was not a man who raised his arm to women and hadn't been stirred to anger when Ailinn called him thick-headed. He only nodded and smiled lugubriously – it was that dopey-eyed, lugubrious smile that had earned him the nickname Coco, after a once famous clown who sometimes reappeared, accompanied by apologies for the cruelty visited on him, in children's picture books. She was right, when all was said and done. He was a lolling

unfunny clown with a big mouth who didn't deserve her love. And now – she made no attempt to stop him getting up and leaving – he'd lost it.

He reproached himself for being too easily put off. It didn't have anything to do with Ailinn; he lacked the trick of intimacy, that was all. On the other hand, the thickness of her ankles relative to the slenderness of her frame – especially the right one, around which she wore a flowery, child-of-nature anklet – did upset him, and on top of that, like every other village girl, no matter that she came from a village at the other end of the country, she smelt of fish.

But then there *were* other girls in the village, and although they had always treated him with that degree of watchfulness they reserved for people to whom they weren't related, their availability took the edge off his desolation. He was alone, but on any evening he could drop by the Friendly Fisherman and fall into conversation with one or other of them. And at least at the bar the smell of beer took away the smell of fish.

He sat on his bench absent-mindedly, watching the seals flop, enjoying the spray on his face, thinking about everything and nothing, exclaiming 'Jesus Christ!' to himself from time to time, until the sun sank beneath its own watery weight into the sea. It became immediately chilly. Feeling the cold, he rose from the bench and decided to try his luck. Company was company. He called by the cottage first and peered in through the letter box. All was almost well. He was still in, still reading his mail in his carpet slippers, still watching television. And his rug was still rumpled. But his utility phone was flashing vermilion, which meant somebody had rung him. Perhaps Ailinn saying she was sorry, though she had done nothing to say sorry for.

After the falling-out, the saying sorry. That was the way. They had all been taught it at school. Always say sorry.

If it was she who had rung him, should he ring her back? He didn't know.

In agitation, because the knowledge that he'd been rung – no matter by whom – distressed him, he let himself in, discovered the caller had left no message – though he thought he detected the breath of someone as agitated as himself – and locked up again. Fifteen minutes later he was in the Friendly Fisherman, ordering a sweet cider.

iv

The inn was more than usually noisy and querulous. That fractiousness which was being reported as on the increase throughout the country was no less on the increase here. There'd been an incident earlier in the village hall and some of the bad feeling had spilled out into the inn from that. It was Thursday, Weight Watchers day, and one of the village women, Tryfena Heilbron, had refused to accept that she'd put on a pound since the last time she'd been weighed. Words had been exchanged and Tryfena had lifted the scales and dashed them to the ground. 'Next time bring scales that work,' she'd shouted at the weigher who shouted back that it was no surprise to her that Tryfena's husband preferred the company of sweeter-tempered, not to say more sylphlike, women.

By the time news of the altercation reached the Friendly Fisherman the men were involved. Breoc Heilbron the haulier, a dangerous brute of a man even when sober, was drunkenly defending the honour of a wife he didn't scruple at other times to abuse. It struck Kevern Cohen as a sign of the times that men who would once have steered clear of Breoc Heilbron's temper were prepared tonight to needle him, not only man to man, by impugning his capacity to hold his drink, but by referring to his wife's notorious temper and even to her weight. Was he imagining it or did he actually hear someone describe her as a heifer? That heifer, Tryfena Heilbron.

That was how people had begun to talk of one another. That

heifer, Tryfena Heilbron. That lump of lard, Morvoren Steinberg.

Followed by an apology to Morvoren's husband.

And no doubt, that idiot Kevern Cohen.

Kevern tried to remember whether the village had ever in reality been the placid haven pictured in its brochures by New Heritage, that body to which every taxpayer in the country was expected to contribute in return for an annual weekend away from the growing turmoil of the towns. Had it? He didn't think so. Most of the teachers at the village school he had attended had been free with the cane or the slipper before saying sorry. The boys had brawled viciously in the playground. So had the girls. Tourists on their annual weekend breaks were laughed at behind their backs and made to feel unwelcome in the inns, for all that their custom was indispensable to the local economy. But he thought there had been some days when everything was quiet and everyone rubbed along. Whereas now it was never quiet, and no one rubbed along.

He joined in an ill-tempered game of darts with a group of sullenly drunken men, including Densdell Kroplik, failing to hit a single number he was required to hit and having to buy a round of drinks for his team as a consequence.

'Up yerz,' Kroplik said, raising his glass. Kevern laughed, not finding it funny. He wondered again what possessed him ever to let the barber near his throat with a razor.

The other men apologised.

'Not necessary,' Kevern told them.

Densdell Kroplik didn't think it was necessary either. 'Don't yez go apologising for me,' he said, spitting on the floor. 'I do my own, when the time'z right, and thiz isn't.'

Kevern walked away. He wanted to leave, but didn't. His cottage was quiet and he needed noise. A little later, he accepted a challenge to play pool from a handsome, broad-shouldered woman who ran the mug and tea-towel shop in which he sold his love-spoons. Hedra Deitch.

She scattered the balls with an alarming vehemence, called Kevern ‘my lover’, and made derogatory remarks to him about her husband who was slumped at the bar like a shot animal, coughing out the last of his blood into a pint pot of brown ale.

‘That’s how he looks when he finishes himself over me,’ she said, in a voice loud enough for him to hear.

Kevern wasn’t sure what to say.

‘Eat shit!’ her husband called across to her.

‘Eat shit yerself!’

Kevern thought about leaving, but stayed.

‘You think he’d be only too glad to give me a divorce,’ Hedra Deitch went on. ‘But oh, no. We must stay together for the children, he says. That’s a laugh. He doesn’t give a flyin’ fuck for the children and suspects they’re not his anyway.’

‘And are they?’ Kevern asked.

‘What do you think, my lover?’

‘I can’t imagine you passing off another man’s children as his,’ Kevern said.

She choked on her laughter. ‘You can’t imagine that, can’t you? Then you doesn’t have a very vivid imagination.’

Kevern tried imagining, then thought better of it. He went home alone, after submitting briefly to one of Hedra Deitch’s muscular snogs. Forcing brutish kisses on people you neither knew well nor cared much for wasn’t confined to men. Both sexes broke skin when they could.

A sharp-edged moon lit his way. Once upon a time he’d have been able to hear the sea on a night such as this, the great roar of the ocean sucking at the rocks, breathing in and then breathing out, but the din of voices raised in brawling throughout the village drowned out all other sounds. A quarter of a mile up the road to his cottage he passed the Deitches kissing passionately in a doorway. To Kevern they resembled a single beast, maddened by the need to bite its own mouth. Great fumes of beer and fish rose from its pelt. If Kevern’s ears didn’t deceive him, Hedra Deitch was alter-

nately telling her weasel husband to eat shit and apologising to him.

The unseasonably warm wind of earlier in the day – smelling of seals and porpoises, Kevern thought – had turned cold and bitter. Something far out to sea was rotting.

He could have done with company, but he knew it was his own fault he had none. ‘Company is always trouble,’ his father used to say, laughing his demented solitary laugh. But he didn’t have to listen to his father. Taking after your father was optional, wasn’t it?

He knelt on one knee and peered in through the letter box of his cottage. Shocked by what he saw, he staggered backwards. The cottage had been ransacked. There was blood on the carpet. In the two or three seconds it took him to recover himself, he wondered why he was surprised. This was no more than he’d been expecting. And now the knife between his shoulder blades . . .

He looked again, not afraid of what he’d see. Relieved, he thought.

At last.

But everything was, after all, exactly as he’d left it – the disrespected rug, the teacup, the slippers. There was a blue glow from the television. All was well. He was in. Alone.

It was his utility phone that was flashing the colour of blood.

It sounded like singing. Not a choir, something more random and impatient, a hubbub set to music. He could smell burning but saw no fire, only smoke. Then an enormous rose of flame opened briefly as though, with one supreme effort, it meant to enfold the charred sky in its petals. Against the flame he was able to make out the silhouette of a figure, a slight boy, falling from a high wall. Even before the boy reached the ground the singing grew ecstatic, as though the singers believed their chanting was responsible. 'Down with the enemies of—!' they cried. He couldn't make out the word in the frenzy of its delivery. Life, was it? *Down with the enemies of Life?* Or mice? *Down with the enemies of Mice?* Down with them, anyway. He thought he recognised the keep from whose tower the boy, like a doll with no weight, continued to float and lightly fall to earth. Yes, he knew it. Inside those walls, inside that fire, he had knelt by the body of a mother – he couldn't say, after all this time, if she were his. Her eyes were open but unseeing. Her clothes had been torn from her body. Where her throat was cut a scarlet rose flowered, smaller than the one that had briefly illuminated the sky, but no less remarkable. Its loveliness flowed from it in a stream, running down her breast. He dipped his finger in it, as though it were wine, and put it to his lips. Down with me, he thought.