1

Asleep he sounds like a pig hunting truffles in soot. It isn't snoring, more of a death rattle. But for that it is a quiet morning, the morning of Day Seven Thousand Four Hundred and Eighty-Three, according to the display on the wall.

The peace is punctuated only by the crashing of a crow into the patio door. This almighty clatter doesn't wake Mal, who continues to produce great growls from deep within his chest. They echo in my ears like the sonar conversations between dolphins and submarines.

Mal weighs a hundred stone, they predicted. That's big. That's more than half a ton. Those photographs you see of whales that have beached and exploded, split by the build-up of gases inside, the thick coating of blubber that blankets the sand, that's what Mal looks like. He has grown and swelled across the bed, two king-size and

a single tied together. He has spread out so far from the nucleus of his skeleton, he is an enormous meat duvet.

It has taken him twenty years to become this big. He isn't even the colour of skin any more. Peppered with burst capillaries, a truck-sized block of sausage meat packed into a pair of cheap tights. The fat has claimed his toe- and fingernails, his nipples have stretched to the span of a female hand, and only something with the tenacity of a biscuit crumb could meander through the folds of his tummy. There must be enough for a full packet of biscuits in there by now. In twenty years Mal has become a planet with its own uncharted territories. We are the moons, caught in his orbit, Lou and Mum and Dad and me.

I lie in bed next to him, listening to the great honks his lungs make as they work their hardest to fart a little more air from his mouth. Just the dull, constant drone of it, like having your ears packed with wet bread.

Every rise of his chest triggers a seismic shudder through the room. The ripple of his flab sends waves across the puddle of his body. I ride them, nothing to do but stare out over Mal's fleshy expanse, the enormous blistered coffin that trapped my brother inside it, to the garden where I watch the bird coat the glass. Maybe it saw Mal as it flew by and mistook him for an enormous trifle.

Twenty years in bed. Mal's death is the only thing that can save this family because his life has destroyed it. And here I am, at the end, sharing this room with him. The room we began in. Or at least a fraction of it.

Dad told me once, 'To love someone is to watch them die.'

2

In the tiny front room of a seaside bed and breakfast we were making a scene. The little old lady who had carried our bowls of cornflakes through from the kitchen had thin, yellow skin. She looked as though she were woven from cigarette smoke. Rather than meet Mum's eye, she shuffled cushions she'd already shuffled and pretended to have spilt a drop of ghostly weak tea on the doily that lay across the dresser.

That morning Mal had woken me as he argued with Mum in the doorway of the room that we were sharing. He was naked but not embarrassed by it like other boys his age. Sometimes he wouldn't get dressed for days. Dad would say, 'Jesus Christ, Malcolm, will you put some fucking clothes on?' Mal wouldn't reply but Mum would say it didn't matter. Mum. Killing us with her kindness. On occasion Dad would grip Mal under his

armpit and drag him to his room, our room. He'd hold him on the bed with one hand on his chest and fold Mal's reluctant little legs into tracksuit bottoms. Mal would resist and Dad would sweat, ordering him to stay there until he could stop acting like 'a fucking baby'. Mal would jig back in within minutes, his clothes cast across the floor. He looked like a bald baby chicken, skinny arms and corners.

'You're round the fucking hat rack, you,' Dad would grumble.

'Please, love, leave him be,' Mum would whisper. Mal could do nothing Mum wouldn't forgive. She'd stand between his eccentricities and the world, even as her face pinkened.

'This is why we don't go on bloody holiday, Malcolm!' she yelled. 'This is why we're better off at home. Everything is much, much easier at home. Now put some bloody clothes on, we're going to the beach.'

'I don't want to go to the beach,' was the length of it.

'Then you'll have to have breakfast naked then, won't you?' Mum said.

So we were having breakfast. Not Dad, he'd 'gone to put a bet on', he said, though it was probably a lie. And Mal was naked. And he was flicking cereal about the table. And Mum was staring at the old lady pretending to straighten the curtains. And the family at the table next to ours hadn't said a word over their crumpets and orange juice. I leant over to Mal and I whispered, 'Why?'

He popped one of those little cartons of milk into his mouth and burst it with his teeth so that it dripped

down his chest, and then he shivered because it was as cold as snowman-building fingers.

When Dad arrived back he was still an angry purple, the shade of a kick to the shins. He took one look at Mal, who was busy stirring his tea with a flower from the vase in the centre of the table, caught him by the elbow and carried his limp, naked body outside to the car.

Mal went to sleep almost immediately. He slept more than anyone else I knew but then I didn't know many people. I didn't even know Mal very well. I listened to Mum and Dad have an argument in which both were fighting for the same thing but neither realised it. Apparently we had to pay for that bed and breakfast for the full week even though we'd been there for just two days.

Mal didn't put any clothes on for a fortnight. We never did go to the beach. I didn't mind, it was November.

3

Dad didn't work, he toiled. That's what he said. Toiling seemed a bit like work except far harder and much less enjoyable. Even the sound was unpleasant. Toil.

He was big, like a robot, like a monster, but he was quiet like neither. His hands were whitened with hardened skin that had buckled and cracked, gloves of used tin foil, and so when he'd take us fishing I wouldn't hold them except for when we crossed the road. When I did they had the power in them to crush mine like you'd grip and smash the head of a frozen rose.

Mal, on the other side, would embed his hand in Dad's rough palm and be guided down the path by it, chirping and fidgeting, a Mexican jumping bean boy.

Dad would shout 'hurry up' and I'd follow their meshed shadow all the way to the canal. He'd slip a

maggot into his mouth, loll it under his tongue and grin, the one trick of an old dog, and amaze Mal over and over again. I'd seen it once, it was enough. Then they would talk, Dad filling Mal's head with infinite possibilities. Suggestions, things to make and do. He'd tell us all about the world, promote it and intrigue us. The controller and the fantasist, harmonious fact and fiction on the slippery bank. I hated fishing, it was just waiting in mud. I couldn't wait to go home to Mum. None of us could, really.

4

Mal liked to be the first person to do things. Not just the first person in the house, or the first person in his class, but the first person in the entire world. There is a limit to the things you can be first to do when you are a child. He used to ask, 'Has anyone ever . . . ?' Mum would say yes, if only to stop him trying to walk across the bottom of the sea. She learned this lesson on a rare occasion when she chose not to listen to him. Five hours after she had palmed him off with an absent-minded 'no', the policeman that came to placate her worst fears spotted Mal naked on the roof, clinging to the television aerial. It was the middle of the summer. The fire brigade came and carried him down, much against his will. I'd hoped they'd have to shoot him with a tranquiliser dart like a bear that needed urgent medical attention, and that he might roll all the way off and land in a dustbin.

Soon, to limit the chances of him presenting himself to danger, Mum hit upon the idea of speech. She told Mal that there were almost infinite combinations of words that, if you were to string them together, you would almost certainly be the first person to have uttered in that order. For six months Mal would bark endlessly unintelligible chains of words just to be the first that ever had. Most came from a dictionary, he didn't need to know what they meant.

'Disbelieving diagnosis ferocious atrocious hegemony telephony gripe, never never never, eat fruit until it's ripe.'

'Pinecone overthrown on the throne phone home moan drone blown bone time lime zone, oh my haven't you grown.'

It pleased her. Mal always gave, but in his own way.

Her devotion was a blanket that smothered but was warm nonetheless. Her life had been sacrificed for the bettering of those around her. In another time, with a candle, a billowing blue dress and a ferocious war fought on a smoky field, she would have been the most popular nurse with every doomed soldier that passed through her charge. But instead she was born to us: her mum, who I could barely remember; Dad; Mal. She'd swung between them on vines, tending them, loving them, leaving with nothing for herself. And now that her mother was dead, and Dad had begun to retreat, to Mal she had devoted herself fully. She knew how to do nothing else.

5

We were at school when Lou came into our lives. On those days when it rained for so long that the drains disappeared under puddles, the children were beckoned inside by the teachers. It was with some reluctance that they abandoned the precious fixes that would see them through double maths. But this was the protocol when it was wet: a break time spent watching the louder children carving abuse about the quieter ones in the condensation on the windows.

It was usually about Mal. His refusal to involve himself in the transient social systems of school meant that many a rainy day could be spent watching the words 'Mal Ede is a weirdo' run down the glass.

He never even noticed. He didn't care what they thought and they envied that in him. But just as they failed to understand it, Lou understood it completely.

I saw it on her face that day, a look like her heart would float upwards through her throat, topple from her mouth, clip her front teeth on the way out and drift into the sky. It wasn't love, nor lust, she was too young. But it was something, a seed of a seed that would become something one day.

That day she sat inside the classroom and squeaked her hand across the window to clear a looking-glass. The rain drummed down with such ferocity that the droplets smashing into the ground made the tarmac of the playground look like it was boiling. She cupped her hands into the shape of binoculars and pressed them to the pane. Through the dark and wet she saw the shadow of a solitary figure.

Mal. His head tipped back, his mouth wide open and welling up with rainwater that cascaded down the sides of his face, up his nose and filled his eyes. Saturated, his hair made locks of thick dripping slugs, his crisp white school shirt transparent. As Mal regularly refused to reply to his own name when the register was read out, not a single figure of authority had noticed his absence. In fact, the only person in the world thinking about Mal at that one moment in time was Lou.

She watched as the wind propelled the rain against his back. She banged her tiny porcelain hands upon the glass but he couldn't hear her. She rushed back to her chair whenever a teacher or one of those louder boys came by so that Mal would not be noticed by anyone else. And eventually, after more than half an hour, she crept out from the classroom into the hall. Ducking behind a stacked wall of plastic chairs, she meandered through their web of black legs until she reached the

far end. There she crouched until the last of the teachers turned quickly into the staff room before tiptoeing quietly across the slippery tiled floors and into the girls' changing rooms. Lou hid behind the door of the lost-property closet until it was safe to emerge, opened the one window that would lead out onto the playground and gently slipped her legs out of it. Unseen she dangled there, half in the rain with her skirt pulled up over her shoulders and her buttocks grazing against the rough edges of the brick wall before struggling free and landing on her bottom in a puddle.

She rubbed her eyes and licked her lips. Tasted like mud.

Picking herself up with a shiver as those first few drops of icy rainwater chased each other down the length of her spine, she walked slowly towards him. She slid her fingers around his and stood there, the two of them side by side, as the beating sheets of rain threatened to dissolve them completely. Mal remained with his face to the sky, clasping her hand in his for fifteen minutes until, as quickly as it had begun, the downpour finished. He released her from his grip and without speaking a word walked quickly back into the building, where he marched straight to the office of the headmaster and demanded to have a lesson on the subject of rain, before passing out on the carpet.

'Excuse me, you're Malcolm Ede's brother?' Lou asked me later that day as I walked home. Her voice and her words hung together in the air like the music of a freshly tickled wind chime.

'Yes, I am,' I said. She looked soft.

'My name is Lou,' she said.

She touched my arm and she gave me a letter to give to Mal, in a sealed yellow envelope tackily furnished with a single pressing of bright red lipstick. They were not her lips, for they were not pretty enough, I was almost sure of that. A friend had done it for her. She'd touched my arm.

I pushed the letter into the depths of my tatty hand-me-down schoolbag and ran home at speed; the brief experience of something new, something good, licked lovingly but briefly at my soul.

6

The pneumonia that resulted cast Mal into the colourful purgatory of the children's ward. Antibiotics and cartoons. The drip feeding him with moisture through the vein that joined the two thin strips of arm either side of a knobbly elbow saw the disease off soon enough. Pneumonia had torn through him and departed, a viral freight train. Mum was furious.

Visiting hours were six to eight p.m. but on the one occasion I was allowed to come along we arrived half an hour early. I followed Mum and Dad slowly through beige halls with shiny floors. Porters wheeled the oldest people I'd ever seen into elevators on trolleys in much the same manner they loaded silver-boxed meals into massive ovens in the kitchens downstairs.

Soon we came to the wards, doors open. Old men in pyjamas, four to a room, too ill for camaraderie,

done-for. An old lady crying, a massive pot of sweets untouched but for visiting nieces. The smell of clean hands.

I was wondering what wearing an oxygen mask tastes like when I walked straight into the back of Dad's leg, his thigh a carthorse knocking me to the ground. He lifted me by the neck, bitch to a puppy. He had serious eyes and a finger jab because here the building has authority. No speaking, he warned me, no staring, I knew. Like library rules. Like swimming pool rules. I'd never learned to swim.

We found Mal propped up in bed reading a brightly coloured comic and laughing, spliced with a dogged cough. Pleasantries first. How are you today? What did they give you for dinner? Have you made friends with any of the other boys?

'What were you doing out in the rain?' I whispered.

'Seeing how wet I could get,' he said.

Mum unloaded a small bag full of toys onto the bedside table and around his feet and we talked about getting well and bravery while he wrestled them free from tight plastic cases. He whined when I touched them. I clung to the arm of a plastic fighting man, just gently between two fingers and a thumb, just to hold it, and he snatched it from me, knocking the table with his elbow and scattering a precarious Lego wall across the sparkly tiles.

A woman who had shut her own son's hand in the kitchen door that morning and watched as he had two fingers removed that afternoon sucked air through her teeth in disgust. I saw Dad rise, inside and out. He gripped me by the forearm and pulled me towards the

door. My jumper stuck to me. My sudden temperature made the wet wool around the neck of it mash the tears colder against my cheeks. Dad slapped the back of my legs and swore and spat.

'Go and wait in the car.'

So I did. I was a rolled-up wire ball.

By the time we were on our way home it was too late to make anything to eat. For my birthday meal we had fish and chips in silence.

Lou's love letter, or Malcolm Ede's first-ever piece of fan mail, was pushed into the bottom of the bin when I got in. It was purposely pressed into the rotting meat and bones at the bottom, soaking up the unloved juices of that evening's meal. But not before I pressed it to my own cod-tinged lips just in case.

7

With Mal still in hospital the house stagnated. The colours grew duller, the time would grind, and right from Wednesday onwards I dreaded Sunday afternoon. Sundays were merciless. The sofa would hold me down and let the dark get in, and we'd sit in the living room together. On Sundays it felt as though the whole family was breathing in unison, slowly, slower and slower until the evening when we'd fester around the television and fight sleep until it won. The minute I awoke that morning I prayed the day would be over at double speed.

Through the wall was the smell of breakfast and a muffled argument. Mum and Dad, another waste of time. The plaster it passed through shaved the edges off the sounds until they were rendered underwater mumbles. As they raised their voices higher they grew

clearer still but I wanted to listen less and less and I tried to stop my brain from translating the sounds as they arrived to me by caking my ears in the soft parcel of my pillow.

'Akeimithoo,' said Mum.

'Eedussnikeit,' said Dad.

And the day and the context and the worst possible outcome filled my head until it tuned itself in like a radio and I could hear them perfectly.

'Take him with you,' says Mum.

'He doesn't like it,' says Dad.

Fishing. We were going fishing. I would only hold his hand to cross the road. Mum made me a packed lunch. There were cheese sandwiches and a chocolate bar, a carton of orange juice that needed piercing with a straw and piece of birthday cake, nothing special, just sponge. I ate it in the car on the way and it soaked up the boredom temporarily.

Once we'd arrived, Dad unpacked the boot in silence while I held the rods. Men who might be friends of his passed and grunted. I worried that I had nothing to talk to him about.

We pitched up on the bank. The thick slops of mud foamed through the gaps in the soles of my Wellington boots. With our lines troubling the flat, brown surface of the canal we picked midges off our lips and flapped them from our eyes. The need for him to speak filled the silence. It made me ache. Litter floated past.

And then he told me a story. It was the most I'd ever heard him say, and it was because Mal wasn't there. It was just me and Dad, and the gap between us where the bridge should be. He didn't know how to build it,

but he wanted to try, and the aching stopped for a time. The story was about work. About toil. It had grown inside him so much I was surprised it hadn't torn through his skin and clothes.