

This white lie

Foliage, painted to wreath all round the walls, figuring the dream of another place, and everyone here must be dreaming of a life that would have taken them anywhere but this. I want to be any place but this, and I have to tell myself we're here for our own good, sitting in the line of chairs beneath the jungle painting, quietly. It's little comfort thinking of our own good, just like the mural, the best intentions and all that against the truth of hope, withered like desiccated flesh. The flat green leaves, the childlike figures grinning among them, a fifth rate version of Rousseau who God knows could be bad enough for all the interesting weirdness of his imagination. These are ideas that flicker and then sputter, because the brain won't stop, not yet, even if this feels like words seeping unsought from some unknown fault line, not thought but the dribble of consciousness. You have to wonder what it will be like when the words stop, and then tell yourself it will be like nothing, or nothing itself.

I look down at my hands resting uneasily on the weathered fabric of my jeans, as they have always been before me, though they have taken on the lines and veins of my age, and I think of my father's hands, how as a child I thought mine would grow to be as large as his, but it never came to be. I am taller than him now, but not as tall as he used to be.

I want to tell my father's story, which is part of my story, and a way of saying goodbye. With what feels like an accidental irony (hard to exclude a sense of fate at work when we face our deaths) the last time I saw him was at a funeral, for my uncle David, his brother in law. We've always been close but recently it's been hard to see each other more than three or four times a year. Then for the funeral though we'd come from opposite sides of the country we contrived to arrive at the same time. There is that awkward moment when people greet you at a funeral, always a moment of discomfort, a moment in which you want to acknowledge the solemnity of the occasion and yet be no more or less than your ordinary self. As I stood up from the driving seat I saw my father almost immediately, looking across the dirty roof of my old car to where he was standing by his own more practical Volkswagen trying to shelter a flaming match long enough from the wind to light his pipe. This seemed so intensely typical of him that it made me smile, until the necessary solemnity of the occasion forced my cheeks back to something more, seemly rueful, gathering myself for the greeting. We had not seen each other for five months, because he had been in France where he lived for nearly half the year. And then the occasion being what it was and him not getting any younger I could tell myself not to take the future for granted time running away from us, and all that. But I knew nothing much would change, for him or me. He remained intent on his pipe while my children got out of the car, shutting the doors and then he looked across, raising the hand still cupped

over his pipe in a little wave. He was in his mid 70s, still a handsome and lean man though his hair was white and thinning. In fact his hair had been white almost for as long as I had known him. It was only the turning of his thick black brows to the same white that had begun to age him, and the loss in his height.

My teenage son and daughter had already started to cross the car park towards him, and as I moved around the bonnet my movement was mirrored by the sudden if expected appearance of his wife. She was a small woman, so I had not noticed her above the roofline of their car, and she moved stiffly as she came into sight, squinting against the climbing sun. Her hair was dyed a dark brown and she looked like a proper old woman, not like him, my dad, my youthful old man. We had reached them, and there was the moment of awkwardness, the conflict of the normal and the extraordinary, even when you told yourself there was nothing more normal than death.

So people commonly said, and yet it was hardly true, not in this day and age. It had been twenty years since the little flurry of deaths around the end of my grandparents' lives, their generation. I had lost one friend to a freak illness in the meantime, but funerals had become a rare thing in my life, and this one for my uncle was premature by most expectations. There was cancer in his family but this had never seemed like a death sentence. It seems the obvious can still surprise us.

The awkwardness was quickly swamped by the natural. I hugged him, kissed his cheek, and then I turned to his wife and kissed her cheek too. Her skin was perfumed, fleshy. You had to see the lines when you were that close. My father's skin was lined as well, but I could not look on him as old like her, seeing only my father.

A little cloud slipped from his mouth, spreading into a shape dispersing over his face, a vagueness. He tapped at the top of his pipe, automatic, taking the refuge of distraction. His wife Helen beamed soberly at us and said,

“Well, this is going to be quite the family party.”

Another cloud of smoke, obscuring him and I wondered what she could have meant. I'm not sure my father heard her. Certainly he was ignoring her, turned to my children, and hugging them in turn. Helen seemed a little confused at that moment, and I was trying to think of something sensible I could say.

Over by the door to the church a queue had formed, while people stepped somberly across the tarmac from their cars to join the line, holding themselves there in dark clothes, the cold sun glinting from the metal of their glasses, white hair and pale skin, powdered like my stepmother, the black holes of their shaded eyes. I wondered why they should queue, why they could not move straight into their places in the pews, wondering if this was some unsuspected part of the ceremony. I suppose, I know I was uneasy about the order of things. The last time

I had been in this church was for one of my cousins' weddings, when I was still a practising Catholic, when I could feel fully part of what was going on, and different from the onlookers who had come to bear a different kind of witness, a simple friendship. Nor did I recognise any of the people in the line, guessing that they must be local friends, the fellow parishioners of a man whose life was dominated by his faith and its practice. My faith had failed with my marriage, though I would say it was the last step in a slow estrangement. This fall left me nervous of the ceremony, of how I would feel about it, and what I would do. My father's voice came from the edge of my vision.

"It feels like I've been going to too many of these lately."

I looked back at him, standing with my children, my family. My children looked mostly like my ex-wife, though you could see the resemblances in the little group. I too looked like my mother, but I wondered from time to time whether with age I was getting more like him, my hair turning grey. It was not such a bad prospect, a handsome old age. I said

"I read once, a remark by Alec Guinness, that he'd reached the stage where memorial services had become like the cocktail parties of his youth."

My father nodded.

"And he's dead himself now."

"I don't know any of these people," said Helen.

Although she and my father had only been together for a few years she had been friends with my aunt from childhood. For my father marrying her was somehow like going back to his youth, a return to a past self. She was less than family to me, but to my cousins, this social life around my aunt and uncle, she was a familiar figure.

"He was a busy man, well known in the community," my father suggested, taking a last and just audible drag on the dwindling embers of his pipe. "He did all these good things in his retirement, prison visiting, the Samaritans. It wasn't just golf and gin and tonic. Lots of people would want to pay their respects."

"He was a good man," Helen declared.

"Should we get in the queue?" my daughter asked.

"What are they queuing for?" my son added.

No surprise that he should echo my thoughts: I had brought them both up as Catholics, but like me they had abandoned the faith with the divorce. I understood that well enough. I was eighteen when my father left, finally driven away by my mother's indifference, and barely hidden adultery. The Church had seemed to offer no credible way to make sense of it.

So it seemed like me the children were uneasy about the ritual before them, their bearings already confused by the queue for the church door. And I wondered why I should feel unhappy at the loss of their faith, when my own was gone. I supposed it was like the way you could

more easily accept your own death than the death of your children, as if it was always coming to you but never them. I wondered whether my father felt that way, and whether this would be any comfort if he died before me, as if he was supposed to die before me.

“They’ll be signing the book,” said Helen. “You know, the book of condolence.”

“Do we all have to sign it?” my son asked.

“It won’t hurt to put your name,” I told him. “That kind of thing, it can be a comfort for the family afterwards, seeing the names of everyone who cared enough to come.”

We took our places in the queue, moving slowly forward.

There’s a smell about Catholic churches, a common thing. It’s not the mustiness you get in old Anglican churches, but something somehow both clean and stale, the mingling of the polish on the modern pews and the lingering incense from the weekday Benediction, or perhaps even the Mass where they still go in for all those high Roman things. The smell reached into my nose as soon as I stepped towards the body of the church from the book of condolence, drawing me in with the wrap of my own uneventful story, the week in and week out bowing and kneeling among pews like this, the light through the tall and narrow coloured windows, filtered air from the outside alien world. We had been told to sit towards the front, family before friends. My father seemed sure of his way and we all followed him there.

In the name of the Father ... so it began, it begins. Five priests and a gang of servers, all dressed in white vestments as my uncle had directed; he wanted no sadness here as we celebrated his passage towards his beloved God, (easier to accept your own death than the sadness of others). My hand moved automatically as they intoned the words, to my forehead, stomach, each shoulder in turn and then the familiar embarrassment when they were supposed to come together in a clasp of prayer, amen, in supplication fingers pressed against each other, held up and bound by your crossed thumbs. I had never been comfortable with showing such piety, even when I felt pious, embarrassed at the display of my feelings. The gesture brought me up against my old faith, even as I was swept up with its motions, these small things becoming impossible things. I let my hands come together just below my waist, as I had always done, only now I meant less than I had ever done. For my father it seemed much the same, his hands unlocated, though I knew he would be making the prayers with an open heart. I had a flash of memory, my old primary headmaster (a good man I always thought and on reflection at the time he could have been no older than I am) after his wife died kneeling in a pew at the front of the church with his hands clasped properly in prayer like the statue of a bishop on a tomb. Perhaps he found some comfort, imagining the contact with God. I had felt that comfort myself at the funerals of my grandparents, the texts promising some kind of reunion with our loved ones, but even when my own faith was strong I had struggled to accept it. Such comfort seemed necessary and yet so obviously self-serving. Even when my faith was

strong it had seemed better not to dwell too much on the Church's ideas of life after death, hoping for the best and counting on nothing.

The teacher will be old now, perhaps dead himself. I think of my father away from here, the night after night easing himself to sleep with however many bottles of beer it would take, in England always Newcastle Brown (it was cheap and strong) or in his Auvergne home with small French lagers. He would have whatever came to hand. I'd stay up with him, when his wife had gone to bed, and we'd talk rubbish about art or politics until tiredness intervened. I found myself thinking of his living room in France, how it had been the last time I'd seen him there, furnished and painted with his restrained good taste, and some objects I recognised from my childhood, transplanted from that old life so this place could feel vaguely home-like.

I could look around me, the warmly recognisable details, my broken family, re-invented in the fracturing of my own marriage. We cope, consuming the occasionally bitter soup of emotion, in bitterness floundering through our lives, having to wonder what damage we might have inflicted on those we love, all the time just trying to keep our heads above the bitter surface, a mode of survival. I had reached this seemingly calm point with my father, sitting in his house in France, far from my home.

He had eased himself back in his armchair, not an opulent and ugly thing; he had cared about good design all his life. Once he had dreamt of being an artist, but his parents had persuaded him that he needed to make a living, and so he had settled for architecture. Perhaps they were right about him. If he had really wanted to paint he would have done it anyway, instead of letting himself be distracted by dreams of cars or boats, or the pressure of making ends meet for his family. He had a line of small lager bottles by the chair, and was pouring the second of them into a pint glass. I had already been given a brandy, which I was holding against the top of my thigh. He stayed with the beer he did not particularly like, as if he did not trust himself with the temptation of harder liquor. The alcohol helped him sleep, he said, and he told himself there could be no harm in a few beers.

"The thing is," he was saying to me, "that so much of the dogma spouted by the church is rubbish, and with these recent popes, it's just been getting worse. I can't deny that."

I'm not sure how we had got around to this conversation, but it seemed that something was bothering him. He went on.

"It's happened before of course. It's like the Church goes in cycles on these things."

He flung his fingers outwards while he said this, flicking his wrists to accentuate the motion, a gesture he often made when he was drinking, the times he tried to explain himself, wanting to emphasise the words. It was not because he was drunk, but because he was only concerned to make himself understood when he was drunk. I've noticed it in him, because I've noticed it myself, that way of showing the back of your hand in the course of a conversation.

“... and I suppose you have to put it to one side, to tell yourself that it doesn’t diminish the deeper truths of the church. That’s why you stay with it.”

I couldn’t let this go.

“You mean, that’s why you stay with it. I stopped going to church because I got to the point where I felt that whatever the deeper truths, they have nothing to do with that shower up there at the altar in their silly robes, pretending they held the key to the deep mysteries of our lives, while all the time fussing around the least important things we do, the sex and love, you know, the places we mess up.”

“Those don’t seem the least important things, when we struggle with them all the time.”

“I’m not so sure they are important to our salvation.”

He grunted.

“There are some fine and intelligent people standing around those altars.”

“I know that, and I’m sure they have their reasons, but it doesn’t change the fact, they’re just clinging to the wreckage.”

“That’s a harsh view.”

“Maybe, but you’ve been here yourself Dad, and you know what I mean.”

He sat back in his chair, holding his glass in both hands. It was like he was drawing breath.

“Yes, I have been there, and it has to make you wonder, as your circumstances change, these fundamental truths can look very different. I know that, but all the same, you’d have to admit. I mean, I can see it in you too, that you don’t feel easy with yourself right now. I can see that much.”

I know I frowned.

“But if you think it’s all so changeable, so volatile, why did you go back?”

“It’s because it’s who I am.”

“Not always.”

“Yes always – you just lose sight of it from time to time.”

I remembered that time well enough, when he must have been a little younger than I am, around the period he was leaving my mother, all of us, though I know now it was hardly his fault.

It was the end of an era for him, but he had to pretend it was not. For twenty years he drove once a week from his office to his parents’ bungalow in Sussex, where his mother would cook him dinner in much the same way she had cooked for him when he called their home his home.

Their relationship was not always easy. His parents could be difficult because they were so gentle and he loved them so much. When he was sixteen he had come home from a night out

with his friends, smelling of beer. His mother said nothing but went upstairs. A little later he could hear her sobbing from beyond the closed door of her bedroom. He left home shortly afterwards, telling his parents it would be more practical if he lived in digs in the next town where he was enrolled in the art college. They accepted this, though I wonder whether or not they were deceived.

Thirty years later he was still calling them Mummy and Daddy. They had always seemed old to me, like you expected grandparents to look, and if I go back to the pictures of them I know that it was true enough, not just my lack of perspective. They really did look old from middle age. Sometimes in the week I or my older brother would go with him, if we could get ourselves across to his office in the next town. I liked it because it gave me a chance to talk to him in the car, and I liked my grandmother's simple cooking too, a stew with a thick gravy, or her special banana trifle. The bungalow in which they lived had a warm and close feeling, something of the smell of my grandfather's pipe (my father smoked cigarettes then), their big worn furniture, the clock which chimed with increasing elaboration every quarter hour, and in the spare bedroom where my brother and I sometimes slept (we would catch the train alone to go to visit them) the large framed picture of the Sacred Heart, Jesus with his long brown hair and beard, pointing with a bent arm at the livid lump of red flesh on his chest, standing out from his white robes, and though the pointing finger was still, the dull eyes would follow you as you moved around the room. Most of all though I remember his tenderness to them, a care in the way he would lean down to kiss them as if this contact could bruise them, and he was the strongest man I knew. We would kiss them with less attention, when we said hello or goodbye, and for a few years in our childhoods our grandparents were the only people I would kiss. My parents were always loving to us, but once we were old enough to remember it seems there were no more cuddles, and I don't think I kissed my mother till my mid-teens. But I can still remember the touch of my grandfather's stubbled cheek on my lips, the faint smell of shaving soap on his skin.

He always seemed a good humoured, quiet man. He had all the predictable features of his age, his bald head, the mysterious cotton wool in his ears and the wispy hair at the back of them, the slowness with which he moved. But he would tease us too and his eyes would twinkle. He had a PhD in geography but I cannot remember him talking much about his work (he had been a schools inspector) or what he knew, though he would tell us stories of his time as a soldier in Africa during the first world war, the tricks they would play on each other (he never fired a shot). There was a mysterious picture of ruins in the desert above the fireplace, and I had an undefined sense of something African that had stayed with him (and not just the malaria which until he was in his fifties would flare up as a fever). Or he and my father would

reminisce about my father's childhood in Maidstone in the second world war, their extraordinary times.

It was not just their children who called them Mummy and Daddy. In our presence they used these names for each other. We called them Nana and Bompá, and I could hardly imagine them having real names. I never thought much about their marriage. Their being together seemed as solid as the bungalow, as fixed. Theirs was literally a quiet life, listening to the "wireless" in their kitchen, and when they talked of the television it seemed it was something they also "listened" to. There was no recorded music in the house, and I think there probably never had been. In a corner of the living room there was a glass fronted cabinet with half a dozen shelves of my grandfather's books; his Shakespeare (I have it now, with its plate inside the front cover declaring the book was a school prize). There was AV Morton's book on Rome and Leonard Cheshire's autobiography *No Passing Glory*, which I was told featured the story of his presence in one of the bombers that went to Hiroshima, and the effect of that journey on his Catholic faith. Most of all there was a large illustrated two volume book called *The Wonders of the World*, which could be the pretext for my grandfather talking about exotic distant places and ancient cultures. Perhaps he did not know what else he could say to us, our experience of the world already so different from the way things had been for so much of his life. My grandmother was also a gentle spirit, but she made no jokes and would chide him affectionately from time to time for being so daft. As she grew older the Irish accent which was barely noticeable when we were small children began to get stronger and more insistent.

Their faith was as firm as their marriage, and there were signs of it all over the house, from the picture of the Sacred Heart to the recent copies of the *Universe* newspaper, lying to one side in the living room. When my father married a Catholic perhaps they were relieved, or perhaps it had never occurred to them that he might do anything else. I can see that they shaped my own ideas of what it was to be sincere and devout in your faith. They were never evangelical, and never mentioned the church unless there was a natural reason to do so, and yet it seemed to inform their every thought, their judgements, everything they did. For as long as I could remember they had taken their annual holiday at the shrine of Our Lady in Lourdes. Often we would go to Gatwick to meet them on their return, when flying was something so far beyond my experience, and we'd eagerly pore over the in-flight magazines they brought back with them, the maps of the British Caledonian routes around the world, and the dream of journeys we might take in the limitless future.

I was sitting next to my father in his car when he told me he was leaving my mother, that their marriage was over. It was not on the journey to his parents. We were just going home one early evening when he had picked me up from somewhere. You could say it was the beginning of the end of my first home, but that's not how I was thinking at the time. I was

giddy with the shock of it, wanting to reassure him I would be fine, trying to understand quickly what this would mean. I know how hard it must have been for him, how much he must have dreaded having to speak, imagining the moment again and again, putting it off. I know this because I had to go through it myself. Nothing makes us face the truth like having to tell it.

And honesty is a comfort we give ourselves, sometimes the easier choice. My father is a kind man, a good man. He would not have chosen to hurt anyone, least of all the people he loved, his family. He was leaving because he felt he had no choice, because he had reached the end of the possible with my mother. He had no choice but to hurt us, and possibly even damage us, because he could not keep most of the truth from of us.

It was different with his parents. I don't think he feared their bad opinion, because he knew they would love him however much they struggled to understand him. But they would have worried that he was condemning himself to eternal damnation, and though even at their age and with the solidity of their faith the disproportionate awfulness of this punishment might have forced them to question their tightly-held certainties, that question would have caused them a pain he felt he could spare them.

All of this seemed so self-evident that the whole family, his brother and sister, their children, all went along with it. For most of them it was easy, since there would be little reason for them to discuss my parents' relationship with my grandparents. It did not come up in ordinary conversation. For us though we had to make sure that they never had reason to ask.

So once a week my father continued to drive from his office to see his parents, and we, my brothers and sister would try to make sure that we went with him from time to time. It became important to us children, a way of spending some extra hours with him, to gauge better how he was than in the fleeting visits he made to our house, or the weekend meals we occasional had with him in his Spartan flat in Rochester, where he lived on his own for the greater part of each week, visited by his girlfriend when she could, and by us when we could. For my grandparents though the conversation had to be all about school and college hopes, what our cousins might be doing. It seemed like natural conversation.

Their annual trip to Lourdes apart, they had reached a stage where they rarely went further than their garden. They had nursing help and my aunt would bring them food every week. That made the lie all the easier to sustain, but it also meant that three or four times every year my mother had to join us for a "family" trip to see them. I can reflect that this should have been a difficult and embittering experience, but I don't remember feeling that way at all. It was just what we had to do, without any illusion that it could bring about our parents' reconciliation. As time passed and we adjusted to their separation we would not have

wanted them back together. My mother was happy to go along with it because she was concerned to limit the knowledge other people held of what she had done; before he left and for a while afterwards she had wanted my father to stay with her while she enjoyed her other relationship, telling him he could do the same and then they could continue to live together with their family, keeping the truth from the world and above all from us, though her unexplained absences had already left us wondering what might be going on (occasionally we shared our fears with each other, but none of us could feel we had certain knowledge). In the car when he told me he was leaving and I asked him why he banged the steering wheel with his palm and said angrily

“Because your mother has made it clear she doesn’t want me, and though she doesn’t actually want me to leave the house I can’t stand it anymore. I have a chance to do something else, to get something of my life back, and I have to take it.”

The “chance” did not work out, but that would be another story. My mother did not want him to go, because it put a pressure on her to explain herself, but then she refused to do so when we pressed her, saying only that she could not help her feelings, and that there was more than one side to the story (we wanted to hear it, but to this day she has never said another word about it, to any of her children). All this meant that our collective deceit of my grandparents suited her very well. The family was in any case beginning to break up, my older brother off to art college and within a couple of years my sister and I had gone to our respective university or college places. My father’s Spartan flat proved intolerable for him, and after a few months he came “home”, though to a separate bedroom. He moved out again sometime later, and for a while vacillated between our family house and his girlfriend’s rented cottage. In all this time the deceit went on, and while his children moved away, we would still fit in trips with him to his parents whenever we were back from college, when we could. His parents were both in their late 80s by then and increasingly frail. My grandfather died just before his 90th birthday, and it was like the shutters came down on my grandmother’s life. Though she survived for another four years, she no longer seemed to know what was going on around her.

And so my father got away with it, his act of kindness. For the six years between his leaving home and my grandfather’s death he managed to keep the fact of his separation (and later divorce) from his own parents. He had stopped going to church himself when he left us (that would have been too much like hypocrisy) and he managed to keep this from them too. We had all stopped going to church. We all said nothing.

I married my girlfriend before I graduated. We had been together since school and were living together in Cambridge in the small house she’d bought. Though we were still both very young her father angrily urged us to legitimise our union (as he saw it). At first we were

married in the college chapel in an Anglican rite, but I found myself uncomfortable with my lapsed state. All my doubts remained intact, but I felt the Church was bigger and more important than my doubts, and so we sought a Catholic blessing. My wife became a convert and when a few years later we started to have children, there was never any question about how they should be raised, or at least about the faith we would hope to instil in them. That was before I found myself in a dark place, knowing I could not stand her company any more. After years of agonising over this and what it would mean for me I reached the point where I was so desperate I felt I had no more choice. I left my marriage, and with it the Catholic church.

By then my father had married the girlfriend, and been abandoned by her. His third marriage, to Helen, followed some difficult years for him. Though she was a friend from childhood he had hardly seen her in the intervening time. All the same they had much they could talk about from those early days together, and because she was an unhappily divorced Catholic too it seemed this common ground would be enough to bind them. Their divorced status meant they could not receive communion, but this barrier was less important than their desire to embrace the faith once more, to acknowledge it in their lives.

I wonder if it felt like the loving shadow of his parents reaching out to him. I could guess at much of this, and I wanted to understand him properly, knowing myself what it was to feel the undertow of Catholicism in my now agnostic life. I imagine that's why it would have come up on that night, sitting with him in France. I shook my head when he said his return to the faith was about being true to yourself.

"That's just sentimental, as if the way you were as a child is somehow truer to who you are than whatever you've become, as if there was something essential about it, instead of just undeveloped."

My father mirrored the shaking of my head.

"Some things happen, usually at several different points in your life, I mean the things that define you, and which the whole thing ..." he waved his hands again, "you can't ignore except at a price."

I thought about this for a moment, and there was silence between us.

"That's fair enough, as far as it goes, but then you have to draw another line, with the Church I mean, between the things you think are true and what just seems ... rubbish. That's why I think it's not about being true to yourself. I mean, if that's what it was about, you could have lots of different reasons, nothing to do with religion, for clinging to something, just because it made you feel warm and comfortable, but your real obligation, if you take religion at all seriously, is to seek the truth about how we are as creatures, not individuals, and not

who we are. I'm not sure that who we are matters very much, or at least, I think it gets in the way of faith."

"And it could also be true that circumstances, as you said earlier, determine how you feel about the real tenets of the faith, the things you are supposed to believe if you're going to say you have faith. Even if those things have different levels of importance, some more disposable than others, that would still not diminish the value of the deeper truths. I think it could be one of those deeper truths that accepting the rubbish, or the random, the contingent truths, even when they seem like nonsense, that might be a way of building your faith, a necessary part of what it is to have faith."

And here I was in my real life, kneeling in the pew, and watching him go through the motions of his faith, dreaming up this conversation which I had so long wanted to have with him, though we had never got round to it, and as I realised it was like arguing with myself it felt pointless. It was best to let it go. Circumstances beyond his control had pushing him into the sin of omitted truth around his parents. It was not his fault, no place for judgement, and it did not make him a hypocrite. This was the saving grace of Catholicism, its recognition that we would surely fail to will ourselves into virtue, its insistence that we recognise our failings and then find comfort in the continuing embrace of its community.

But we were listening to a reading from the Book of Wisdom, ancient stuff supposed to comfort us here, and it spoke of how the virtuous man would be so assailed by the sinfulness and miseries of this world that he would be glad to pass into a better state, and we should be glad for him. I felt my anger rise again, thinking how Christianity and perhaps most religion always seemed to want it both ways, wanting us to glorify God's creation, and yet to decry our attachment to the things of this world. I thought there was no comfort in the stories men told about a better life after death, and that for all the misery and suffering around us it seemed these people here and me with them, we had been lucky enough to have lives outside that suffering, and in those lives there seemed so much around us to love, so much to regret when we had to let it go, and it was only human to have a sense of loss at that thought.

Dies irae, that grim idea; I thought of Mozart and Verdi, their vital imaginings of that last day surging like adrenalin through the music and here in this Surrey suburb, glad for our comfort we eased ourselves towards the end of the service with a clutch of platitudinous modern hymns. I was silent because I barely knew the melodies, and my father stood silent too, but then all through our childhood in church I could not remember him singing. He would sing around the house, a few snatches of the not especially memorable songs he seemed to know, and he had a good voice, but in church it was as though he wanted to make no show, to be there but quiet and rapt in himself.

As we came towards the end of the requiem they formed long queues for communion. My father and Helen went up with the other non-practising members of David's family, bowing their heads with their arms folded across their chests to tell the priests they could only have a blessing, something short of communion. With my children I stayed in the pew, uneasy and a little angry.

And still when we really did come to the end, as we walked from the church I crossed myself like the rest of them. Perhaps it was because I wanted to show I knew how, and that I was like them but different, and partly I think it was a reflex, or nostalgia, and I don't believe anyone was looking at me anyway.

My uncle had asked to be buried, maybe feeling a security in the old ways, the illusion of resting, a last glimpse of comfort instead of those consuming flames. Maybe the fear of death drove Catholics to resist cremation, another doomed resistance. We had to find our way by car up to the cemetery, which sat just out of sight but in hearing distance of Epsom racecourse. My uncle was always full of vitality and would probably have liked to think of so much unreflecting life going on near where he lay, his notional resting place. My father followed us in his car and we parked near the entrance, walking up through the dead field, the modest monuments, till we found the open hole of the grave, the pile of covered earth waiting the end of the ceremony in the shadow of a hedge and small overhanging yew tree. The rest of the family moved in around us, David's children and their families standing closest to the open hole, while the men in their professional black clothes bore the bright coffin from the black car, shining in the sunshine, the hole ready to have him, and we watched while they shuffled him into position, the priests re-gathered and intoning while they lowered him down, watching him go down, my aunt holding her composure, surrounded by her children, just blowing her nose from time to time as if she was crying, but she was not crying. The leading priest encouraged everyone to throw earth on the coffin, a personal gesture of farewell, and I watched my father step down to the box of earth, and then straighten stiffly. Perhaps he was thinking of his own death, how it would be, or perhaps he was thinking of the times they had had together, never really imagining they could come to this moment. He lifted his hand forward, opening his fingers, and the earth went out of them, a pattering on the coffin lid. I held back, standing with my children, waiting for it to end. There was some warmth in the sun now.

We drove back to their home, my aunt's home, my uncle's old home. As I tried to find a place to park in the leafy side roads, I could see other mourners from the church, regrouping along the pavements for the social part of the day. I led my children to the gate. They had not been here more than once or twice, though it had always been part of my life. My uncle and aunt had been here for most of their marriage, raising their children in the house and garden.

When we were children too we would visit a few times every year, as we would visit my grandparents. My older brother and I were close to our similarly aged cousins Mary and Anne, and we had played a lot together in the house and especially the garden.

I saw Anne almost immediately as I came through the patio doors at the back of the house from the living room. It was the first chance I had had to speak to her, and I thought how strange it was that her hair should be greying like mine, when our older siblings were dark still. It was good to think of normal things again.

And I looked along the length of the garden, full of people in their suits and formal clothes, not a way I was used to seeing it. When we were children it was a treat to come here, to run from the formal half of the garden nearest the house, through a little path between the dividing line of conifers, to the cultivated wilderness at the rear. Here my prosperous cousins had a climbing frame bigger than anything I'd seen outside a municipal park, a cube of intersecting wooden struts and platforms. It was our play mansion, our pirate castle, the home of multiple adventures. Standing on the patio I leaned forward to kiss Anne.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded, smiling ruefully.

“It’s as good as it could have been.”

Eternal rest, grant unto them oh lord, beset by sinners, the evil of the world. The earth was drying in the warmth beneath our feet, and the sunlight glowed on the moving leaves and blooms, moved by the warm breeze. This mature abundance had grown with me, and felt like it could envelop us, pulling us into the warm earth. There was my cousin Anne’s face, the sun in her grey hair. I thought, these were the wonders of the world. We talked for a while about her mother, about how she would cope. My children had moved off into the other spaces of the garden. I imagined the climbing frame was still there through the gap in the trees, preserved for the grandchildren, but I could not see the gap through the trees, the lawn full of people. I drank a cold beer, and ate some of the finger food being handed round by middle aged women, the caterers in their dark uniform clothes. It would be time to go soon.

I found my father, fiddling with his pipe. Helen was somewhere else, talking to some other friends. My father was with a pair of Irish cousins and a husband, who I’d met but hardly knew, but I kissed Marion and her daughter on the cheek in greeting, the familiarity of kinship. I said to my father

“It’s funny being back in this garden. It’s like I’ve changed more than the garden, the plants.”

He was looking down at his fingers in the bowl of his pipe.

“I don’t know how much longer it will last,” he said. “Developers have been after it for years. Marie might just sell it off now. It’s too big for her to keep going and she’d be looking at some useful money.”

“That would be such a shame,” said Marion. My father looked past her, and I could see his eyes moving over the white painted render behind me. “It’s just a house,” he shrugged. “In the end you have to leave these things behind, you have to move on.”

He sucked on his pipe and then the smoke went around his face.

We have to move on. That was literally true in the garden, because I wanted to be home, but sitting in this place, among the painted blooms of the oncology ward, that seems the grimmest statement of the obvious. You could say equally we are condemned to come back on ourselves, hooked out of the daily drift by some trace of what we were or hoped for, the truths of who we were, these not quite disposable truths.

We can be no more than all we have been, and will mostly fall some way short of that, fall to a place like this, the line of ill faces, and their carers with them, equally solemn, silently fraught in their different way, wondering how much longer they will have with their loved relation or companion. Having walked away from my wife, I don’t have that support, my decisions all bearing me to this one place sitting alone, looking on the dismal painted walls, feeling as alive as I have ever felt.

Just along from me is a teenage boy and his father. I imagine the boy must have the cancer, though they both look well enough. He sits very still, his hands between his knees, staring down at the floor in front of his feet, while his father (I think it must be his father) is restless, standing up and walking around for a few moments, looking through the several doors opening out into the waiting area, then returning uneasily to his chair. We take it as routinely tragic when a child dies, and it seems an unbearable thought to imagine losing one of your own children, as if nature had been violated, and yet it is common enough and in the eyes of the Church might even be seen as a blessed thing, to die before your life becomes so compromised by circumstance or concupiscence. I doubt anyone would dare to give such comfort to the father now. I wonder what might be in the boy’s mind, the prospect of the treatment or perhaps the darkness, or perhaps nothing so grim. His father sits by him again, putting a hand on his arm. The boy does not move. He has thin dark hair falling over his face, wearing a sweatshirt and jeans, an unremarkable boy. Perhaps the father held him as a new born baby, thinking how his life was now changed forever, full of love and tenderness. That tenderness might be in the touch of his hand on the boy’s arm, but he has no adequate means to express his anguish here, bound to seem strong for the sake of his child, and in any case what gestures or cries could do such anguish justice? The hand falls away, and the man is on his feet again, pacing on the old carpet.

Most of the people here are old, facing an ordinary end even if it does not feel that way to them. I wonder if they are looking at me, wondering what could be wrong, a man in his prime. It's a fair question. I should have known better perhaps, but this is not what I expected.

For out of nothing, when I was feeling fit and well, as good as I have ever done, I have been told that I have an inoperable cancer, and I will be dead within a few months. It's not enough time to do the things I would have done, but then it would never have been enough time.

I am not sure I can say I'm afraid of death. I know I don't want to die, but that's not the same as fear, and more like anger. The Church would talk of God taking me back to him. I wish he'd fucking asked me first, but then one thing I've learnt for sure is that God never speaks to us, and we can only pray that he listens. I know that for all her faith, when my grandmother was seriously ill in her eighties she showed some fear. Perhaps this is what it is to be true to the faith, to the possibility of everlasting damnation, or the unpredictable years in the shadowlands of purgatory, a fate promised to most of us Catholics, the dire place where we finally have a chance to make up for our failings in this life. Spare me that faith then, even if now I face the ultimate test of my disbelief.

If only it was that easy, if mine was a real disbelief. In our imagined conversation my father was right: the faith catches at me still, making disbelief seem irrational, leaving me hoping for the best in my death. Truth is rarely simple and that's why it matters so much, so how can I be true to my doubtful faith?

Being who I am, no more or less than an ordinary man, I cannot let anything go. I cannot abandon my care for those I love, my worry about how they will be without me. I dread the moment but very soon I will have to tell my parents, my children. I would rather spare them this pain, and I know it will only become part of their lives, something they can talk about as important until like me they can talk no more, but that kind of perspective is only meaningful sitting here alone in the silence of this green ward. In the business of our lives together there will be only grief and their clinging to me, and me wanting them to hold on to me.

I'd like to think I could go out without the blessing of the priests, without the predictable ritual being read over my corpse, my family weeping around me. I'd like to think this was being honest, but how can such honesty matter against the needs of my family, my loved ones with all their different beliefs, their need to take what comfort they can from these rituals, or the conventions of my supposed continuing existence in an afterlife? I want it both ways, and I want them to know that I wanted it both ways, and perhaps that's the only means I have to tell the truth. So maybe amid all the prayers and the incense, this could be my oration, my testament to a compromised faith, which may be spoken when I can no longer speak for myself, the telling of someone else's story the most honest I can be.

I look up and catch the eye of the pacing father. He pauses in his stride, looking embarrassed, and I realise he must feel the guilt of the healthy intruding on the private horrors of the sick. I nod at him and smile at him, trying to reassure him. He would not know that I feel it's better to take these things into yourself than deal with the unhappiness of others. He nods back and then says,

“This is a pretty cheerless place isn't it?” He gestures at the walls around us.

I smile again.

“They've done their best, but it seems to make it worse.”

The man looks over at the boy.

“It's not so bad for us. We're only here for a check up. My son had a cancer scare, but he's all clear now. They're just being cautious, but the future looks fine ...”

“That's good to hear,” I tell him.

He hesitates, as if he would say some more, but changes his mind, and walks back to his son, to his seat, settling back there stiffly. The boy is also leaning back, suddenly seeming more alert to the life around him. His father smiles at him.

A nurse comes out from one of the doors and calls my name. I get up to follow her into the consulting area. I think of the father's smile, then my father leaning down to kiss my grandparents. This is my story, the most honest I can be. This is the end of my story.

And still I hope that's not true.