

The Music Room

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Extract

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THE SCHOOL ASSEMBLY HALL was closed for renovations and on Sundays we walked to a church for our weekly service. We spread rumours along pews and daydreamed through sermons until one visiting preacher secured our attention by hoisting a bag onto the pulpit rim – a scuffed black leather bag with accordion pleats at each end, a bag a doctor might take on night visits – and unpacking metal stands and clamps we recognized from science labs, and various jars and packages he ranged along the shelf in front of him. He was in his fifties, dressed in a grey suit and a black shirt with a white dog collar, and he didn't say anything while preparing his equipment, tightening a clamp on a retort stand, fixing a cardboard tube between the jaws. He struck a match; a fuse caught and sizzled; he shook the match out and stepped back to watch the flame. Then we understood that what he'd clamped to the stand was a firework. The tube flared with a soft, liquid rush, sparks and white embers falling to the stone floor, the preacher's spectacles glinting in the brightness. The fountain died with a last sputter like someone clearing their throat, the after-image burning in our eyes.

'Light,' the preacher said.

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Our house was almost seven hundred years old, a medieval beginning transformed in the sixteenth century into a Tudor stately home, a castle surrounded by a broad moat, with woods, farmland and a landscaped park on the far side, and a gatehouse tower guarding the two-arched stone bridge, the island's only point of access and departure.

The gatehouse doors hung on rusty iron hinges, grids of sun-bleached vertical and cross beams like the gates of an ancient city, a Troy or Jericho, creaking like ships as you manoeuvred them. I pushed my hand deep into the keyhole to feel the lock tumblers, and climbed the waffle pattern of oak beams until my strength gave out; I imagined cauldrons of boiling oil tipped through the trapdoor on intruders; I gazed up at the flagpole turret, a canvas flag of blue and white quadrants, gold lions and black moles and chevrons rippling overhead, jackdaws clacking like snooker balls.

When the gates were closed it was as if the house had picked up a shield, but they were almost always open. My father worried for the strength of the hinges and didn't want to stress them. The gatehouse was a rugged keep with arrow-slit windows and a spiral staircase of cold stone that turned through zones of light and shadow to a leaded roof, the moat far below, a heron stooped like an Anglepoise on the near bank, moorhens legging it across the grass. My mother painted Turtle and Pearce flag bunting on the parquet floor by the upright piano; my father carried the new flag up the gatehouse stairs; I followed him onto the roof, watching as he propped the ladder against turret battlements and began

to climb. He attached the flag by duffel-coat toggles and when he raised it the canvas unfurled with flame-like rip and putter, blue and white quarters flush to the wind.



Richard was the eldest, eleven years older than me, eighteen months older than Martin and Susannah, the twins. My father's parents had died within ten days of each other not long before I was born, and my family had moved from their village house to the estate passed down through my father's ancestors since the fourteenth century.

Beyond the churchyard a path of irregular flagstones joined by seams of moss and grass led past the orchard to the road, a wrought-iron gate hanging off-kilter on the far side. Sometimes I opened the gate and took the gravel path uphill through a scrubby wasteland district of nettles and elder bushes. The country flattened off and you came to a stockade of iron railings tipped with spear-points, a kissing-gate that groaned when you disturbed it. The graveyard backed into farmland, a sea of wheat pressing against the railings, trees busy with wrens and chaffinches on the other three sides, floral tributes slumped against the headstones. My grandparents and great-uncles and aunts were buried here; a newer stone beside them marked the grave of my brother Thomas, too soon for lichens or mosses to have got started.

My father kept a black-and-white photograph of him in a leather frame by his bed, and another next to the lamp on his desk; my mother had the same photograph under the

glass top of her dressing-table: a boy standing on a hillside, not quite three years old, hair teased by wind, hands clasped in front of his chest, looking away into unrevealed distances. He looked like both of my brothers and me, all at once. Sometimes I stood close to the photograph – I was always careful not to touch it – and concentrated on Thomas, looking for small changes in his expression, trying to imagine him in three dimensions, walking into the kitchen or across the lawn. I wanted to hear his voice.

I knew what had happened, though no one had told me directly. I must have pieced it together from different sources, conversations I'd overheard, my mother or father describing the event to others: a horse, a road, a car passing. When people pointed to the photograph and asked me who it was, I said it was my brother, Thomas, and that I never knew him, he died two years before I was born. I didn't understand why they said they were sorry. I knew it was a loss, but I couldn't feel it as one. He was a presence to me, not something taken away.



I played in a room at the east end of the house, the moat immediately outside. On clear mornings light bounced off the water through the windows, the white ceiling suddenly unstable with ripples and wind-stir, the surface of the moat reproduced in sunlight overhead. Our new freezer had just been delivered, and I'd got the cardboard box to customize into a secret house, a hatch cut into one side. My father was

THE MUSIC ROOM

at work, dog-eared maps and his battered lunch tin on the passenger seat, and my mother was showing a group of history students round the house, so Patsy was here to keep an eye on me and Richard. I liked the threshold moments of crawling into or out of the den, the clement burrow darkness inside the box, the smell of cardboard, the enticing privacy and warmth. Lying on my back I could look through a crack in the roof and watch the ceiling's imitation of water.

Patsy tried to interest Richard in a book but he was restless, brooding, pacing the room. He noticed a pair of moorhens paddling close to the window and shouted at them – ‘Shoo!’ – as if they’d insulted him, and that eruption seemed to nudge the whole morning off its rails, because Rich stood there with both arms held out like a scarecrow’s, his eyes half-closed, lids fluttering, as if there were static electricity in his eyelashes that made them flicker in and out of each other. His arms began to jerk; he turned round on the spot with his arms held out, jolting; the room went sludgy, as if a spell had swung us out of orbit and everything was slowing down – as if Patsy and I existed in our own current of time and were moving past Richard on a raft, keeping our eyes fixed on him. The spell lasted less than twenty seconds, and as he came through it he lowered his arms to his sides and saw both of us looking intently at him.

‘What?’ he said.

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I was four when a local school performed *Twelfth Night* in our garden. A tiered, covered stand went up on the back lawn opposite the yew tree; stagehands rigged up lights and jammed the door on a writhe of power cables. The moat that ran along two sides of the lawn was now the sea around Illyria. Actors emerged from the water and dragged themselves onto dry land after the shipwreck. A spotlight picked out Feste standing on the flat roof above the bathroom on the east stairs. Malvolio's prison was a wooden cage fitted precisely to my square sandpit.

The drawing room's French windows opened onto an iron balcony where my father hung the bird-feeders. The stone that anchored the balcony was crumbling and we all knew better than to trust our weight to it. The play started after my bedtime, but the July nights were hot and my parents had left the windows open: I could hear the actors' voices, the audience laughing at mix-ups and pretensions; I slipped out of bed and crept across the landing, edging on all fours into the windows to watch through the ironwork.

The following summer the Banbury Cross Players performed *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Each night I lay awake listening to the applause as Bottom and his crew approached in the punt and disembarked by the young copper beech in the corner. I couldn't sleep. I crawled across the landing and up the two carpeted steps to take my place at the balcony, a full moon spinning up like a cue-ball as Oberon and Titania summoned spirits from the shadows.

The rustic players reappeared in the punt, Peter Quince holding a lantern at the prow.

I was walking across that lawn with my mother when Dad appeared in the open windows and called out to us, 'Hold on one second.'

'Why?' I said.

'Keep your eyes on the window.'

He vanished. Mum and I watched the dark gap in the wall. Nothing happened, and I didn't understand why my father had made us stop, but then a blackbird shot from the side of the house, Dad appearing behind it, smiling, his arms spread like an impresario's, as if he'd just conjured the bird into existence.

A white china owl sat on a table next to the windows, the first thing I looked for when I pushed through the door from the landing. I came up the spiral staircase calling for my mother and father. I could hear voices. I went straight in, ready for the white owl. Richard was lying on the rug, on his back, his head close to the windows. My mother was kneeling beside him; my father stood next to her, leaning over. I stopped in the doorway. Richard wasn't moving. He lay rigid, his feet pointing up at the ceiling, his arms stretched along his sides, fists clenched.

'It's all right,' Dad said. 'Rich is having a fit. It's all right. It goes very quickly.'

Now he was shaking, his whole body thrumming. His arms bent at the elbows and straightened in stiff jerks, again and again; his knees rose off the floor and slammed down as

his legs bent and extended; his feet kicked and stamped in repeated spasms. Dad had grabbed the cushion from his armchair, and Richard's head thudded into it, his teeth chomping together with a sound like horseshoes on tarmac.

'It's all right,' Mum said. 'We'll just wait for it to pass.'

I didn't move from the doorway. I watched my brother, the different parts of his body pounding the floor. The boards shook beneath him; vases and bowls vibrated on the tabletops; the French windows trembled in their frames.



Quartets, singers, harpsichordists and other musicians came to give charity concerts in the Great Hall. We pulled a dirty blue-grey cover across the carpet and used old rugs to dress the makeshift plank stage that lived in the garage. There were stacks of chairs in the stables loft and I watched teams of strangers deploy them in concentric arcs across the Great Hall, enthralled by event logistics and the anticipation that built through the afternoon. The room was new and strange with two hundred people in it and performers elegant in evening dress beneath suits of Spanish armour posed like sentries in the west wall niches; Mum led me in my dressing gown along the Groined Passage and we stood at the back through suites and sonatas.

I grew used to such invasions. I recognized the hubbub pitch of concert audiences and the python-thick cables of film-set lights. Film and TV crews moved in like desert caravans, grey production trucks inching through the gate-

THE MUSIC ROOM

house, the car park a camp of Winnebagos, Portakabins, catering vans and double-decker buses furnished with dining tables. Brawny carpenters and electricians smoked on the front lawn, bellies hanging over utility belts stocked with enviable commando inventories of tools, walkie-talkies and gaffer-tape reels; sparks fixed massive lights outside the windows and flooded interiors with unearthly platinum glare. I spent whole days wandering once-familiar rooms that set-dressers had skewed to their own purposes; I snapped the clapperboard and perched by the camera on the counter-weighted dolly crane; my mother apologized to assistant directors in navy Puffa jackets and we looked on quietly from the sidelines. We opened the gift shop in the stables and I sold Ian McKellen a postcard; I ran through the arch into the walled Ladies' Garden and saw Jane Seymour in a white Regency gown bend to sniff a rose; I was five when Morecambe and Wise came to shoot their Christmas show and I'd been in bed with flu all week, but my mother carried me downstairs so I could see the Great Hall garbed in vaudeville finery, Eric Morecambe walking over to greet me, adjusting his spectacles and barking, 'Hello! Are you married?'

Women in beauty spots and creamy pompadour wigs glide across the stone floor; Richard Chamberlain as Prince Charming kneels to fit the twinkling slipper; a stuntman in plumed tricorne hat and breeches leaps off the gatehouse onto a crashpad of cardboard boxes and foam. The rooms smell of dry ice and Elnett hairspray; extras dressed as

monks eat corn flakes at the Dining Room table; Oliver Cromwell's warts are Rice Krispies painted brown and glued to his cheek and nose; the moat's deemed too placid to pass for the Thames so big pipes gush out of shot to ruffle the surface as Henry VIII's royal barge steers into view. One morning I found twenty human skeletons gathered on the lawn, each hanging by the skull from a slender metal stand so it appeared to be standing upright, the skeletons clustered in small groups as if I'd come across them at a garden party. Then actual men arrived and picked up the skeletons one by one, carrying them under their arms into the Great Hall like their own inner structures. These invasions brought the allure of make-believe and fired a boy's delight in gadgets and hardware, as if the camera tracks, cranes and trolleys, the hydraulic platforms that slid up and down the backs of prop vans, the walkie-talkies and grey-sleeved sound booms were versions of Scalextric, Meccano and Action Man equipment I'd yet to have the pleasure of. I climbed onto the deep window ledges in the Great Hall and crouched behind eighteenth-century leather fire buckets to watch swordfights from *Joseph Andrews* and *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, the actors in loose white shirts and gold-buckled shoes surging back and forth like dancers across the bare stone floor. They spent hours on the same sequence and I learned all the moves of the routine, the feints, parries, lunges, narrow escapes and exchanges of advantage, each time willing the less-gifted swordsman to buck his fate and fight back with a rage the choreographer had never

sanctioned. Sometimes my attention drifted, the swordplay a backdrop of percussive cutlass sounds until the blades struck sparks off each other and I was gripped again.

Usually there were Civil War pikes, halberds and spon-
toons in here; a black cast-iron doorstep shaped like an
elephant; huge logs heaped in the fireplace with bellows,
andirons and Victorian copper bedpans leaning on either
side; and a gamut of swords – Mameluke short swords,
Pappenheimer rapiers, plain and basket-hilt broadswords –
fixed to the bare stone walls. In January 1938, the Trustees
of the Natural History Museum in London had directed the
keepers of departments to consider how to protect their
collections in the event of aerial attack. The keepers drew
up lists of specimens and documents to be evacuated in case
of war, and by the beginning of the bombing of London
in August 1940 the Great Hall had become a warehouse
for fifty-four green and white super-cabinets of mammals,
thirty-eight boxes of mollusca and six hundred and sixty-
two bundles of books and papers (arranged in pressmark
order, so they could be referred to if necessary) stacked one
on top of the other, among them the stuffed or mounted
skins of lion, snow leopard, spotted hyena, polar bear, wolf,
sea lion, bushpig, Weddell seal, wallaby and pygmy hog.

So I walked across the room imagining crates stacked to
the ceiling, animals coming alive at night and forcing the
lids. I learned to ride a bicycle in the Great Hall. My mother
wiped down the wheels on the carpet's behalf and I rode
circles round refectory tables and crimson plush sofas, off

the wool kerb onto smooth flagstones, while Mum used WD40 to condition suits of armour and visored helmets called burgonets, and rubbed beeswax polish into the oak shoulders of blunderbusses and muskets displayed among the swords.

For my parents those film-crew days were a mixed blessing. The house needed the money but they watched anxiously as strangers lugged sharp-cornered gear through medieval doorways and leaned spiky lighting rigs against Tudor panelling. Dad haunts the sets like the house's guardian spirit, vigilant for carelessness. It's as if his nervous system spreads through the whole building, so that a slammed door or a pewter bowl set down too briskly hurts him as keenly as a cut on the arm. He's up at dawn to turn the alarm off and slide the bolts on the oak outer door (the slide and rich bass clonk of the bolts roll round the acoustic chamber of the porch); ducks waddle behind him across the front lawn and loiter by the stables while he scoops a wooden dish through the grain bin; he scatters grain for ducks like a man in an old Dutch painting. At night he or my mother go round the house checking doors and windows, turning lights off. They call it 'shutting the house up' – a daily task with its own ceremonial rhythm, an established itinerary followed from one room to another. The remote, formal spaces of the house are eerie in the dark. The grandfather clock ticks implacably down the Long Gallery; floorboards creak like ships' hulls under pressure from the swell; there's a sudden breath of cold wind from stone spiral

THE MUSIC ROOM

stairs; the men and women in portraits have occult power in the moonlight through high windows. I'm used to the ten or fifteen minutes each evening when either my mother or father disappears into the other end. They open the door in the music room and step into historical dark. We're all still in the same house, but for that short interval they're away, the plain door a portal or time machine by which you passed into a different world. The minutes stretch out in our lamp-lit domestic realm while my father goes off into that elsewhere. At last the door by the piano clicks open and he joins us again in the kitchen, the cold in his clothes a trace of that other region like moondust on an astronaut.

Sometimes I went with them. I followed them through the Great Hall, down the Long Gallery, into the Kings' Chamber, Council Chamber, Queen Anne's Room, Great Parlour and Chapel. Wooden shutters unfold from the walls; the Great Parlour's huge blue blinds pull down like square-rigged sails on the west windows; you have to reach behind an iron breastplate to switch off the light in the Groined Passage. I hardly ever went there alone after dark. The eyes in portraits followed me down the gallery; white busts of Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones began to shoulder off their plinths; oak chests were dark blocks the size of tombs and the pendants in the Great Hall's plaster ceiling were ready to detach and plummet just as you walked beneath them. But it's in the dark that you register most vividly each room's distinctive climate and smell: the Dining Room and Groined Passage and the stairs up to the Chapel have bare

stone floors and vaulted ceilings and there's a cave-like chill and clean, mineral air to these unadorned medieval spaces; the Oak Room feels warmer by several degrees and smells of wood and wool; the rush matting of the Kings' Chamber (which my mother waters like a lawn, swinging the can from side to side) turns the room into a humid, semi-tropical biome in which the twining plants, butterflies and birds on the eighteenth-century Chinese wallpaper are entirely at home.



For a long time it was assumed that seizures were incited by supernatural forces. They were sent by gods, or caused by demons entering the patient. The violent attacks were thought to be punishments for sins committed by the sufferer or by his parents against gods, particularly against Selene, goddess of the moon. The ancient Greeks called epilepsy 'the sacred disease'. A seizure was a bad omen, and a person with epilepsy was an object of horror and disgust: anyone who touched him might themselves be possessed; by spitting, you could keep the demon at bay and avoid infection.

Since the disease was understood to be an infliction or possession by a god, demon or ghost, its cure was also assumed to be supernatural. An iron nail hammered where the sufferer had first laid his head would pin the evil spirit to the spot. Magicians forbade patients from taking baths, from wearing black garments or goat skins, from crossing

their feet or hands, and from eating red mullet, eel, goat, deer, mint, garlic and onions. Recommended treatments included seal genitals, tortoise blood and hippopotamus testicles, and peony root worn round the neck on an amulet. Pliny records the sight of people with epilepsy drinking the blood of wounded gladiators in the arena.

The word 'epilepsy' comes from the Greek verb *epilambanein*, which means 'to seize'. So epilepsy is the illness of being seized: a condition characterized by recurrent seizures. The author of *On the Sacred Disease*, part of the Hippocratic collection of medical texts from around 400 BC, rejected the orthodox view that epilepsy was incited by supernatural agencies. 'It has a natural cause just as other diseases have,' he wrote. 'Men think it is divine merely because they do not understand it.' Seizures, he argued, were not caused by higher powers, but by an abnormality in the brain; they were triggered by 'change of winds and of temperature, and, in children, fright and fear,' and should be treated with drugs and diet, not magic.

Richard had had an ear infection when he was two and a half. At night, provoked by high fever, he'd started to convulse. Doctors told my parents these febrile convulsions weren't uncommon among children, and that in most cases they passed without further complications. But Richard began to have other kinds of seizures. His head dropped as if a hinge in his neck had suddenly loosened, his arms lifting at full stretch in front of him, these salaam attacks coming so frequently that a bump developed on his

forehead where he'd slammed into the edges of tables and basins: at breakfast, Mum sat beside him with her arm stretched out, her hand on the table edge to cushion the blow. Atonic or drop attacks felled him without warning, as if all his bone-strength had deserted him on a whim. Absence seizures stole his awareness for a few seconds, Rich staring blankly, eyelids fluttering, his head dropping before he looked up and carried on eating or talking as if nothing had happened. Sometimes his arm flew up as if he'd touched a red-hot coal: he was holding a glass when one of these myoclonic jerks raced through him; the glass shot from his hand and smashed on the ceiling in a squall of crystals and water. At three, he'd begun to have tonic-clonic seizures in which he lost consciousness and fell, his whole body stiffening in the tonic phase before the clonic phase of uncontrolled, spasmodic jerking. Antiepileptic drugs like phenobarbitone left him sluggish, his speech drawn out and laboured, as if all the machinery of his intelligence had slowed down.

The seizures often came at night. Martin or Susannah walked through the dressing room in the half-dark to tell our parents Rich was having a fit. My mother and father went up and down the narrow stone stairs to his bedroom to check on him in the aftermath. He'd fall into deep sleep, as if each attack had been a test of physical and mental endurance. These full-blown night seizures left him shaken, his speech low and slurred, one word dissolving into another, and the next day he'd move cautiously, as if

he'd just returned to the world after long absence and couldn't trust the fundamental laws. When we sat down for lunch, he stared blankly at the table. Mum looked at him, wondering if he was having an absence seizure. Rich straightened suddenly, as if emerging from a trance.

'Sorry?' he asked.

No one had said anything.

It was as if he were passing in and out of some other realm none of us had any picture of.

A teacher rang to say he'd had a bad attack, different from the others. It had started like a typical tonic-clonic, his body stiffening before the violent, jerking spasms began, his arms, legs and head beating on the floor. She'd slipped a cushion below his head and knelt beside him, waiting for the seizure to pass. Usually, after the clonic phase, Richard's muscles would relax, his body would settle back into itself, unconscious, his chest rising and falling with deep, noisy breaths. But this time when the spasms dwindled his body stiffened again, and then his limbs started to jerk once more, as if he'd passed from one seizure into another without any period of recovery in between. The seizures weren't stopping. An ambulance had taken him to hospital. He was in Intensive Care. Doctors used a term none of us had heard before: *Status epilepticus*.



Sometimes I looked out in the morning to find ten or twelve men sitting on folding stools beneath broad green