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Written by Louise Candlish

Published by Penguin Books Ltd

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The Swimming Pool

LOUISE CANDLISH



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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2016
001

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Set in 12.5/14.75 pt Garamond Mt Std
Typeset by Penguin Books

HARDBACK ISBN: 978–1–405–92732–1
PAPERBACK ISBN: 978–1–405–91987–6
EBOOK ISBN: 978–1–405–91989–0

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Prologue

I am running naked through the streets of Elm Hill.

It is late evening, summer's end, and the streetlamps burn synthetic holes in the darkening sky. Deep in the rack of streets on the east side of the park, the mild air feels hostile, the near-silence thunderous.

I am trembling badly. The arm covering my breasts has begun to spasm and both knees are buckling. Blood leaks from my right foot where gravel has sliced the sole. But none of that distresses me as much as my face, the grimacing, primitive feel of it, as if I've been robbed of all that makes me civilized.

He has done this to me.

A sign for Wilson Road slides into view and I feel a sudden ache of hope: where I started is farther from me now than my front door. Just a left turn here, a quiet stretch of residential road, and the high street will be ahead. This *will* end.

A woman approaches, lifts her eyes, and I see the same startled expression and flash of high colour as in every other face I've encountered, all mobility arrested by the shock of seeing a nude woman loose in leafy Elm Hill. They suspect I'm insane – there is a secure mental health facility at Trinity Hospital a mile or two away – and are afraid to help in case I turn savage.

But there's a flicker in this face that prompts me to

speak for the first time since this nightmare began: 'Please, can you lend me something?'

'What?' She's stunned by my addressing her – and by my accent. It's worse to know that I am educated.

'To cover myself. Please.'

'I don't think I've got anything . . .' She looks down at her cotton dress and gestures helplessness. It's balmy; no one is carrying a scarf or a jacket.

It strikes me that I'm thinking normal thoughts. I'm still rational.

'Oh,' she says, and suddenly she does have something, screwed up in her handbag, a light cardigan of some sort.

'Can I borrow it? I'll return it if you–'

'Keep it.'

With shaking hands, I tie the garment around my lower half, then tighten my arms over my chest.

'Look, hang on.' The woman takes a purposeful step towards me, her gaze lingering on the bruises that bloom on my arms. *His* fingerprints. 'My name's Beverley. You don't have to tell me yours, but something has obviously happened, hasn't it? Come home with me and–'

I interrupt: 'Where do you live?'

'Broadwood Road.'

I know it: no closer than home. 'No thank you, I'm fine.' I sound polite, as if declining the offer of a drink.

The awful thing is she's relieved. She did the right thing and now she can scurry away with a clear conscience and a story to tell.

On the move once more, I slam my left toes into the raised edge of a paving stone and cry out from the pain. Raising my free hand to my face to wipe away tears, I catch

a scent beneath the sweat, a scent that only makes me sob harder: chlorine and sunshine, scrubbed stone and suburban grass. Swimming pool.

I'll never go back.

At last the high street blazes in greeting, the Vineyard bar directly opposite the junction at which I've emerged. I falter. I'd forgotten about the pavement terrace, its crush of smokers; I'll need to pass right by it to reach Kingsley Drive. From a standing start, I sprint across the traffic lanes and meet the shockwave, the universal bewilderment that erupts into laughter.

'Who booked the stripper?' a man's voice calls out and a second round of laughter volleys into my back. 'Bit long in the tooth for that, aren't you, love?'

I sense rather than see the phones in their palms. There will soon be pictures circulating, if not already, attracting likes and shares and retweets, comments that make this man's sound tender.

I'm on my street. The pain in my damaged toes is ferocious, consuming the foot and calf, making me limp. My building is in sight: four featureless storeys, the night sky above. It's nearly over, nearly over.

And then I see him. He stands by the building doors watching, waiting. My knees roll and at last I sink to the ground, powerless. Because I know he'll watch forever, he'll wait forever.

It will never be over.

Chapter 1

31st August 2015, 12.15am

She coughs in her sleep.

I spring to her bedside to check that her chest is rising and falling as it should, that her pulse is steady and her skin warm. In the dimmed light, I can see the vestiges of stickers glued on the headboard in younger years, pictures of kittens and ponies and love hearts: all things nice.

Children grow and it strikes the parent as both miracle and loss.

The coughing subsides, but I remain on my knees, vigilant. I haven't watched over her like this since the night she was born, when I stayed awake, enchanted and petrified, ready for her cry. At least Ed is with me this time. Thirteen and a half years ago, he wasn't allowed in the maternity ward after visiting hours but was sent home with the other fathers, ready or not.

I don't suppose Lara Channing had to stand for *that*. She would have been in some posh clinic for the births of Georgia and Everett, installed in a private room with Miles by her side, the recipient of privileges she'd assume came as standard. 'You are an angel,' she would tell the staff in her smoky, intimate way, 'I mean it: an *angel*.' And she would say it like she really meant it.

But I mustn't think ill of Lara. Not now.

'Here, this should sober you up.' Ed comes into the room with mugs of black coffee – as if adrenaline has not annihilated the alcohol hours ago, pinned open our eyes and cleansed our ears.

I return to my seat on the little pink sofa by the door, take the coffee in both hands. The smell is instantly comforting. Though there is space next to me, Ed chooses not to take it, perching instead on Molly's desk chair under the window. 'Is she sleeping a bit better, d'you think?'

'Yes. I'm glad we brought her home.'

We speak in whispers. Until the last half hour she'd fought sleep like an infant, her distress slow to fade, and since then we've hardly dared exchange more than a syllable.

'She needed to be in her own bed,' I add.

'You're probably right. It's good you insisted.'

You insisted, this should sober *you* up: it destroys me, the way he speaks. If never again, surely tonight we should be united. 'She was completely hysterical, Ed. We know how to deal with that better than anyone. And it's not like we've snatched her from intensive care and absconded, is it?'

He lifts his glasses from the bridge of his nose, replaces them a second later. He is not quite looking at me. 'No, but the paramedics were pretty clear about wanting to take her in for observation.'

'We'll observe her here,' I say.

He nods, lets it go. To the right of where he sits, Molly's school uniform hangs on the wardrobe door, a scholarly silhouette with regulation tights dangling low. New shoes sit on the carpet below. All ready for the first day of term on Wednesday. I wonder if she'll be well enough to go

back or if we should keep her home for the week to recuperate fully. To think how we used to dither over arrangements when she had a day off sick, debate whose turn it was to cover, like it actually mattered!

All three of us were different people then.

'Ed?'

'Hmm?'

'I wish I'd never . . .' I pause, struggling to subdue the 'what if's, to keep them from massing and charging.

'Wish you'd never what, Nat?' *Now* he looks at me, direct and eager, almost with a sense of daring.

I lose my nerve. 'Nothing.'

And I think how wrong people are when they say you should never regret, I think how unrealistic that is – dangerous, frankly. Personally, I regret almost everything, including and especially these last months. Even the parts when I was so happy I thought I might levitate, when it felt as if I'd never before known what summer was, what pleasure was, what it meant to live life to the full.

Mostly, I regret ever laying eyes on Lara Channing.

Chapter 2

Sunday 21st June – ten weeks earlier

I happen to know that the sun rose at 4.42 the morning I first saw her. It was, in fact, the longest day of the year, with twelve hours and sixteen minutes of daylight.

I'm guessing it was past eleven by the time I logged onto the Elm Hill community website and saw her photograph, possibly even closer to noon. Sunday mornings were sacrosanct in the Steele household: all three of us being in full-time education, we timetabled down time and this was our prized weekly triple period of laziness, the only blank box on the kitchen calendar.

Pleasantly indolent as I sat at the kitchen table, mug of green tea cooling in front of me, all I had in mind was to check if it was the right week for the farmers' market on the high street, but as soon as the homepage appeared I was waylaid. With her blonde tresses falling to her breast and her slender, burnished limbs, with a smile broad enough to post a letter through, she eclipsed quite effortlessly the competing items. Missing moggies and pedestrianization schemes, forget them, look at *me*! Listen to *my* news!

There was a second figure in the photograph, a newer, fawnlike version of the first, a teenager who looked older than Molly by two or three years. A mother and daughter

shot, then, like one of those pictures you see of 'ageing' supermodels and their mini-me progeny on the beach in St Barts, the kind that make you wonder how each party *really* feels about the other's beauty. The caption read:

'Brave locals Lara and Georgia Channing prepare for this morning's Dawn Dip at the new Elm Hill lido.'

Ah, of course. Now I noticed the band of cyan water at their feet, the festive triangles of bunting above their heads, the blurred rainbow in the background that must be the row of changing huts I'd heard about, each door painted a different shade of art deco pastel. In tribute to the 1930s origins of the site, mother and daughter had attired themselves in swimwear from the period: high-necked, low-legged, this was a style that flattered few. Luckily for all concerned, these two *were* the few.

The mother was quoted in the accompanying report: 'To have this beautiful pool on our doorstep is such a gift. This is going to be the best summer Elm Hill has ever had!'

And, against my better judgment, this stranger's words stirred excitement in me, causing me to turn to the kitchen window and check the sky above the plane trees: yesterday it had glowered the grey-black of a mussel shell, but today it shone blue and unblemished, a perfect June day. If I opened the window I'd be able – almost – to smell summer. Teachers exist in a perpetual mode of countdown and I didn't need the calendar to tell me there were less than three weeks till school broke up (four for Ed and Molly, an inequality that neither had any intention of letting me forget); maybe it *was* going to be the best summer we'd ever had. Maybe, after all our careful avoidance of

the new neighbourhood facility, it was going to be possible to enjoy it.

Then again, I thought, sensing resistance in the seat next to me, history suggested otherwise.

'Four forty-two, good Lord!' I swivelled the laptop to show Molly, who glanced up from her DS.

'Four forty-two what?' Her face was expressionless as she registered the image. With her straight brows and small mouth, she did impassivity well – even when wearing a Dalmatian-print onesie.

'That's what time these two crazies went swimming this morning, and a whole lot of other people as well. It's mid-summer. The new pool has opened.'

Molly made no comment, which was not unusual even when the subject was to her taste. I loved her reflectiveness, a quality I believed to be deepened, if not outright caused, by her being an only child. Not that I wasn't sometimes tempted to project my own thoughts onto her, of course.

'Maybe next year that will be us,' I said, keeping the mood casual. *Never judge, never blame*, the last therapist but one had said, a little mantra for us. In the end, he brought nothing new to the table, but I didn't judge or blame him for that.

Molly glanced again at the photo, raised her eyebrows. 'To be brutally honest, Mum . . .' That's what the girls her age were saying at the moment: *to be brutally honest*. 'I don't think that kind of swimsuit is, uh, your style.'

I narrowed my eyes at the screen, failing to diminish the backlit glamour, the pull of the Channing woman's energy. 'You're probably right. Maybe I'm better sticking to the one I've got. Bland, conservative, modest . . .'

'I'm not even kidding,' Molly said, another current teen favourite (what did it 'even' mean?). Infants modelled their turns of phrase on their parents', but at this age they could come from anyone.

Not only do you have to let them go, my friend Gayle said, but you get no say in who influences them instead. On matters to do with parenting Gayle was my touchstone. The day I dismissed her advice was the day I lost faith in common sense.

I closed the laptop and returned to my tea feeling – and I know it sounds trite – different. Inspired. So the lido had opened at last – re-opened, to be precise, following a closure that had lasted nearly two decades and at least three fund-raising campaigns that had bitten the dust before this last successful one. Each delay had been met with disappointment by the local community; only Ed and I had wished it would never happen, that the funding would fall through once and for all or some stalemate develop between builders and conservationists. That it would be left for the skateboarders or graffiti artists or clubbers or whoever else had been making use of the derelict site during the dark, dry years.

But secret wishes were dandelion clocks to the force of nature that was Lara Channing, for, as I would soon learn, it was she who had driven the project. From the very day she had moved into her parkside house and eyed the abandoned beauty from her terrace, she had made its resurrection her mission. She'd personally overseen the procurement process, the bid to the Lottery Commission, the final restoration; she'd even interviewed the lifeguards.

'People don't turn Lara down,' Miles Channing told me

once, and his eye lingered on me long after he'd made his point.

Saturday 27th June

Well, we were only human and, intrigued, Ed and I strolled down to have a look at the new pool the following Saturday morning when Molly was at her tennis lesson. Of course I'd passed the abandoned building countless times over the years, but such was its design – squat brown brick walls with enclosing curved corners, a horizontal strip of windows too high to see into, entrances and exits that had been boarded up more securely with each trespasser's breach – that prior to its reopening it had been impossible to get so much as a glimpse inside. Now the plywood frontage had been replaced by a stark glass entrance, the reception area beyond a temple of flawless pale stone and polished wood. Signs in art deco font directed arrivals one way to the changing rooms, the other, through a long skylit corridor, to the renovated poolside café.

There was already a queue for tables when we arrived, but fortunately the manager, Liam, was the partner of a colleague of Ed's and he offered to squeeze us in on the sundeck. 'We'll need the table back at twelve,' he warned. He had the look of a man whose brakes had failed and we stepped quickly out of his way, seating ourselves before minds could be changed.

'Table back?' we grumbled, 'What is this, the Ivy?'

But at the first turn of my eyes I felt my cynicism vanish. It was as if a large nut had been cracked open to display its fruit – and the fruit was liquid blue, shivering

with its own freshness. I had to shield my gaze from the sheer dazzling beauty of it, from the transforming sun-spangled glamour of it: with that photogenic length of multi-coloured huts and the candy-striped deckchairs on the upper terrace, it might have been Miami Beach or the Cote d'Azur. Only the smell was English, not of swimming pool yet, but of the park beyond, of sap-drenched leaves and cut grass; green and lusty and alive.

'It's so huge,' I said to Ed slightly idiotically. The shallow end, to the left of the café terrace and a riot of flailing limbs and shrieking mouths, seemed a field's length away. 'I can't take my eyes off the water, can you?'

'Humans have an inbuilt attraction to it,' he replied, his words scarcely audible above the raised voices of a group of children setting up camp on the other side of the railing. 'They've done a nice job, haven't they?'

'Nice? It's *glorious*.'

Ed registered the word – not one either of us had used in years, if ever – before shaking straight his newspaper. That Saturday *Guardian* symbolized many things for him, it spoke of who he was: a left-leaning man who still took the time to read the news in print and in full, at least once a week. Others may have downgraded their engagement with current affairs to a quick scroll on their phones as they jostled on train platforms or jay-walked their kids across perilous roads, but *he* was still willing to give it the time and attention it deserved.

After we'd ordered I scanned the other tables for familiar faces; as a teacher at one local school and a parent at another, I was confident there'd be several. There was Molly's chaotic chum Rosie and her family – we exchanged

waves – and Gayle's neighbour Ian, dressed for once in jeans and a shirt and not his customary Lycra (a keen cyclist, he was one of those hovering spidery types who you suspected had only themselves to blame when caught in a skirmish with a motorist); and Annabel from the kindergarten at Elm Hill Prep, in my opinion not so much teaching assistant as holy being.

As a member of staff at the largest senior school in the postcode, Ed, were he to look, would recognize more Elm Hillians still (recent incomers had led a movement to call us Elm Hillbillies but the old guard had squarely rejected *that*). Though not, I guessed, the woman my gaze fell on next.

She was at the table closest to the water and the best on the deck, glamour radiating from her and rendering the rest of us mere extras in her scene. Her clothes were exotic (to my eye, anyhow; doubtless they were workaday to her): a pink silk shirt-dress with a woven silver belt; flat snake print sandals, the kind you might wear on a luxury safari or for a stroll through a hilltop village in Umbria. Oversized sunglasses with amber-coloured frames covered much of her face, leading the eye down a small kittenish nose to an insolent Bardot mouth.

Irrationally, my brain ordered my pulse to leap.

'There's that woman,' I said to Ed in an undertone.

He didn't look up. 'What woman?'

'The one I told you about, with the matching daughter. I can't remember her name.'

That was a lie: I didn't want to utter it for fear of being overheard by its subject. It was only six days since the sunrise photo shoot, but already Lara Channing had become

the de facto face of the place, her photo gracing the leaflets posted through doors and even appearing on the features pages of the *Standard* to illustrate a piece about the new heyday of London's lidos.

She was not with her daughter this morning but with a man I assumed to be her husband given their idle tapping of iPhones and sporadic, inattentive conversation (at least he had not, as Ed had, placed a partition of newsprint between the two of them and kept it there even after their orders had arrived). I couldn't see his face, only the back of his head, the still-dark hair fastidiously cropped, the strip of neck between hairline and box-fresh cotton shirt expensively bronzed. On the table, alongside the phones, were a black coffee (his) and a green smoothie (hers), the antioxidant one with kale and kiwi that I'd not ordered myself because I thought £4.99 was scandalous for a soft drink and even if I didn't Ed would.

'They're locals, apparently,' I said, prodding his newspaper. 'Though I've never seen them before, have you?'

'Hmm.' He lowered the paper to reveal a chewing jaw, his plate of sourdough toast almost finished. He was famously hard to engage in gossip even when he wasn't trying to read. Careless talk costs lives: he would have led by example quite beautifully in wartime. 'The daughter's not at All Saints, is she?'

'I'd be amazed if she was,' I said. With or without the staff's dedication, All Saints (staff nickname: All Sinners) was not the school of choice for any known elite, and if I took anything from this first in-the-flesh impression of Lara Channing it was that she belonged to an elite. With those enticing looks and that media-magnetism, she was a

breed apart from the mothers of Elm Hill Prep, BMW-driving, gem-set-watch-wearing creatures of privilege though they were. Even the way she looked out at the water suggested a satisfaction more personal, more nuanced, than mere inbuilt human response.

Giving up on Ed, I spooned my granola, enjoying the erogenous touch of the sun as I continued to watch. But it was a risk to scrutinize someone in sunglasses when you were bare-faced yourself and, sure enough, she soon sensed my attention and returned it, even lifting her sunglasses in a playful peekaboo gesture. I blushed. Never in my life had I so regretted not making an effort with my appearance. My skin was makeup-free – caked in foundation during the working week, I tended to let it air at weekends, hardly noticing after all these years the looks that strayed to the birthmark above my right eyebrow; my hair was limp and in need of a wash, with a rather Tudor centre parting I didn't normally wear; my clothes were shapeless and unflattering. Not at all the right look for Miami Beach, for the eye of Ms Channing.

There was worse to come. I now became aware of her husband/companion twisting in his seat to stare across to our table – at exactly the moment Ed happened to glance behind him with a frown. As I squirmed, mortified, there was a sudden heightening of energy at the other table, an exchange of urgent mutters before, in a fortuitous lull, Lara's laughter sprayed the air, musical and delighted and, it seemed to me, a little contrived. I adjusted my seat so that Ed blocked my view of them and theirs of me, my heart stuttering as if something significant had just occurred.

'What?' Ed said, seeing my face. His expression softened. 'Thinking about Molls? You're allowed to like it, you know.'

'Like what?'

'This. The pool. There's nothing to stop *you* from coming here.'

'I know.' I didn't say that I hadn't been thinking of Molly at all.

We'd hardly finished eating when the bill came, unbidden. 'I think Liam wants the table back,' I said. 'Look, the queue's out the door. Shall we go?'

Ed sighed. 'If this is what it's going to be like, I don't think I want to come here again.'

But we both knew it was a moot point for soon his Saturdays would not be his own. Change was afoot in the Steele household: this summer, he would be offering himself as a private maths tutor, to continue at weekends during the autumn term and until the entrance exam season in January. If it went well, it was possible he might be able to do it full time from the 2016/17 school year, and as a family we would prioritize this mission. All Saints, like any conflict zone, was no place for middle-aged men.

In any case, once Molly's term-time Saturday morning tennis finished and she was free to join us on such outings – well, this was the last place *she'd* want to come.

I remember exactly how I felt as we strolled home from the lido that day, a restless blend of exhilaration and frustration that struck me as overdue, even inevitable. I remember thinking how effortlessly I could predict the unfolding of the day and how it might be more interesting if, for once, I could not. Molly would arrive back from

tennis and hole up in her room – she had the larger of the two bedrooms for we'd recently swapped after she'd accused us of never using the superior square footage while conscious, which was more or less true – or at the kitchen table where the laptop and other electronic devices lived. (None was allowed in her bedroom, a child internet safety rule and school recommendation we obeyed religiously.) Later, she'd hang out with a local friend, probably at the friend's since that was more likely to be a house with a garden and siblings and pets, amenities that we could not offer.

Meanwhile, Ed had Year Ten exam papers to mark and I, having risen early to take care of next week's lessons preparation, thought I might steal a march on the laundry (racy stuff). Later, I would pay a call on our upstairs neighbour Sarah, whose recovery from hip replacement surgery was proving slower than hoped. Ed and I often ran errands for her or popped in for a cup of tea. Homework and chores being duly completed, we would then slide pizzas in the oven (nutritionally supplemented with broccoli spears or sliced peppers) and gather as a three to watch TV or a film. Ed and I would share a bottle of red and Molly would have a fizzy drink of her choice. It was that kind of life: casual on the surface but orderly, strictly managed. Rules were in force, standards upheld.

'Is it me or does it feel very small in here today?' I said as I plucked back the curtains to expose the very edges of the windowpanes. Our flat, on the first floor of a 1980s block in a quiet lane off the high street, was north-facing and though it was bright outside the light in the living room was indirect and dreary. Even our furniture felt

wintry: the indestructible Indonesian wood that had been in vogue twenty years ago and never replaced (a victim of its own success); the brown leather sofa that had looked so stylish in the store but leached the light like a plug hole sucked bathwater; the glass vases that held fresh flowers far less frequently than was originally intended.

'It *is* small,' Ed said, 'but there are plenty of migrants who'd consider it palatial.'

I'd noticed before that this was a difference between us – he always compared down, I up – but today it felt defining. It felt problematic.

The flat had been ours long enough for us to feel as if we owned it, though it was in fact a housing association sub-let, the reason we could continue to afford to live in a suburb like Elm Hill since the overland line had been improved and both house prices and private rents had rocketed. These days, when people remarked on how the place must have tripled in value since we'd bought it, I simply nodded, weary of explaining again our tragic missteps in the London property dance. At the beginning, we'd saved and sacrificed like normal couples, had been mere months from having the deposit for the modest terrace of our ambitions, when all at once prices had begun to race out of reach. It was no more than a fever, we told each other: best to keep our cool and wait it out. By now, of course, the deposit that might once have bought that terrace was barely sufficient for a one-bed. We'd still look at the property websites sometimes, watch the numbers rise and rise. It was like hyperinflation in the Weimar Republic, we would say.

But we were not the only ones in this situation and if

you were in the mood to count your blessings you could find plenty of them. There was that relatively modest rent, of course, which had saved us thousands of pounds over the years; the park was a ten-minute stroll away; Molly took the bus to her school, while Ed and I walked or cycled in separate directions to ours. I had nothing to complain about.

Why then, on that Saturday afternoon, as Ed frowned at his malfunctioning All Saints software and I lugged the laundry hamper from bathroom to kitchen, was I suddenly feeling so discontented with my lot?

'I bet they live in one of those big houses on The Rise,' I told Ed.

'Who?'

'The Channings.'

'Who are the Channings?'

I sighed. 'It doesn't matter. I'll ask Gayle, she'll know.' Indeed Gayle kept herself so thoroughly abreast of local gossip I had to confess that when we'd worked together at Honeybrook Primary I'd sometimes had to tune out of her bulletins to keep myself from spontaneous combustion.

Definitely The Rise, I thought, closing the washing machine door with a mildly resentful thump. Overlooking the higher southern edge of the park and with views of the city, The Rise was hands-down the best street in Elm Hill and the new lido would only raise its status higher. I had visions of snakeskin sandals kicked off in a huge central hall, a softly lit mirror for the adjustment of blonde loveliness on departure. There would not be, as there was in our entrance nook, a noticeboard pinned with calendar,

timetables and a chore schedule, set dead-centre above a shoe storage unit checked daily for disorderliness. (About as welcoming as an army barracks, my mother said the last time she visited, adding, 'I don't know who's worse, you or Ed.')

'I think our focus needs to be our pensions,' Ed had concluded eventually on the matter of our prospects for home ownership.

Imagine being (relatively) young and your husband saying that! And imagine being able to suggest yourself no better idea for a shared *raison d'etre*, not when you were as busy as you were pairing shoes and separating colours from whites and generally bringing control to bear on systems that woud have thrived perfectly well on their own. It was pitiful, truly.

All of this is, I think, important background.