

White Lightning

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Extract

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I

I was waiting for my mother to die. I wasn't waiting with eagerness or curiosity or sadness – she was very old – but with a fullness of heart, as though into that tricky organ a lot of history and deception and regret had flooded. My heart was pumped full with this accumulation of feeling. It wasn't a sense of my own mortality, although you are said to feel you have shuffled up the line as your parents die, shuffled up the line towards the payout window. Or the pit. Or nothingness. A French acquaintance of mine had said to me of death, '*C'est la vide*' and I had laughed in an inappropriate manner thinking he had said, '*C'est la vie*', imagining a little Gallic *jeu de mots*, a bitter-sweet Frenchness, dark tobacco and paper tablecloths. No, I wasn't thinking of my own end, although the arum lilies by the bedside breathed the heavy musk of death. Some flowers are too nearly perfect for their own good, and arum lilies are avatars of perfection. They have veins on them like a man's penis, and this is perhaps a warning of their duplicitousness.

And as I sat by the bedside next to the small shape that barely disturbed the covers I was wondering what had happened to my mother. Once she had been a large woman, with a noble head. Now the head, reddened eyes closed, mouth moving fitfully, seemed to be attached to very little. Her body had dwindled; in the six months since I had seen her last, it had been spirited away. She was asleep so much that I wondered if there wasn't simply a semantic distinction between this state – the little sighs, the leaf tremors, the (imagined) exhalations – and the more profound sleep to come.

Earlier in the day she said to me, 'Don't kiss me, I'm

disgusting.' My heart – my volatile heart – had broken. I kissed her forehead anyway, my tears unseen, feeling the skin so dry that it seemed to me that the life-giving cells had already died, leaving her covered in parchment. She believed that her breath smelled of death, I think, but I caught nothing of that, only the rushing scents of all those forces that were accumulating, the scents of regret and deception.

'I'll be back soon,' I said. 'I'm going for a walk.'

My words fell as softly and silently as petals. I wondered, as I walked out of the wide, linoleum-lined corridors, past the clanking implements and the toothless nurses, if I had really uttered them, or merely intended to say them. The business of death makes these distinctions unimportant.

There was a freshness outside the clinic, a pleasing turbulence in the clouds and agitation among the grasses. Even the arum lilies moved stiffly, like pallbearers. A stream ran through the estate, through a dinky golf course, trimmed down for the oldies, and here in the damp hollows arums stood. The mountains above the estate are known as the Helderberg, clear mountains, but today the mountain tops were intermittently hidden by fretful clouds and then suddenly revealed, with all the pointlessness of a magic show. I hate conjurors and magicians and jugglers.

And I find mountains disturbing. I think of myself as a flat-lander, a plains person, a man for the big vista, although I grew up in the shadow of a mountain. I have contradictory ideas. Women have pointed this out to me, which I have come to understand is the role of women: to locate the magnetic pole in any relationship and steer for it.

I walked out of the gates of the estate and down a farm track that seemed to be heading for the mountains. I strode out, hoping in the turbulence of the air to harness the turbulence of feeling within me. It's a hopeless task, this obligation to try to profit from experience, to make some personal capital out of

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adversity. Sometimes I think, like Sartre, that I am superfluous. Sometimes I laugh bitterly at the pretensions we nurse, the idea that our lives have meaning and value. But like Sartre, like everybody else, I am trapped within this conundrum: on the one hand I know it's all meaningless, on the other I cannot avoid the consequences of being alive. Only death will dissolve the contradiction, as it is about to for my mother.

I looked back at the estate: touted to the elderly as an exclusive retirement village, it had been so oversold that from here it was higgledy-piggledy, the houses jostling each other for space around the central greensward of the miniaturised golf course.

Now as I walked down the farm road, I entered the past, without seeing the portals. The vines were nearly bare: some wrinkled-scrutum grapes still clung on among the spectacularly lurid but increasingly isolated leaves. I wondered if these were the same vine leaves that the Greeks ate. My mind, overburdened with the onrushing event, was erratic. Every detail of the landscape was familiar to me, and these details seemed to be calling to me on private frequencies although the gist of their message was unclear. I stopped by the track to look at a small colony of ants, busily fetching dried grass which they took below; other ants were excavating to make room for the grass, so producing a pyramid of sand, and I remembered the hours I had spent in the company of ants.

Although I was aware of their diligent, steady natures I sometimes threw them into the pits made by the ant-lion, a creature which operated with loathsome guile. The ants could not escape from these pits and down, just below the sand, the ant-lion waited to seize them with its outsize claws. After a brief struggle, the ant was dragged below. Goodbye ant, steady little fellow with social instincts. The science of studying ants is known as myrmecology, and the father of this science is René-Antoine Ferchault de Réaumur. And as I looked at the ants – old chums – I remembered that Eugène

Marais – a local boy – asked of ants, *What purpose have they served?* And answered himself: *What purpose do you think we have served? None.* We are ants. As a boy I read Sartre and I saw that Sartre and Eugène Marais experienced the same vibe. (Ambivalent word, *vibe*: post-modern in some mouths, embarrassing in others.)

Down this track I saw some whitewashed cottages, with outside ovens built on to the sturdy chimneys, and children – anonymous children – playing with tyres and bits of wire. A clump of canna lilies blazed orange, like a fire in an amateur dramatic production, and turtle doves burred in their liquid, foolish-virgin, fashion. The children laughed – they jeered – the guinea fowl screamed and the crickets joined in. This pastorate was as familiar to me as the turbine sounds of London where I have lived for so long; where I have expended my essence. Standing at night in my small garden in the great city, I listened to the rumbling, the moaning, the sighing, cut by the sharp notes of police sirens and the vibrato of trains not far away, imagining myself at the centre of the great human enterprise. I saw the city as an accumulation of folly and wisdom and striving and failure; I saw it as art and squalor and nobility and venality. These noises which reached me in my garden were a hymn produced by machinery standing in for humanity. The instruments of human endeavour. I hummed along with the *Fanfare for the Common Man*. I applauded those who placed every weeping brick in place to make the city, and I extended my arms in communion like the early Christian praying figures, the Orantes, in the British Museum.

But now I realised that while I was away, the ants had been busy. This should have come as no surprise. Ants have been at it for aeons. But they have not evolved. They are found trapped in two-million-year-old Baltic amber, exactly the same ants as scuttle the earth today. Ants have a peculiar, purposeful way of walking, something like traditional Japanese women, humble and conscious of their pressing duty. My thoughts

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were disordered. But on that particular day I made allowances for myself because death was creating advance eddies.

I remembered as a child laying my head on the ground to hear warning of enemies approaching, as Aborigines were able to do. Then I heard nothing, although I tried to tune up my senses so that I could detect footfalls, even from a mile or so away, and in a related exercise I tried to speak to horses. There was no manual to learn either talent, and willing it did not make it happen. But now I heard clearly the not-so-stealthy approach of death. It sounded to my over-receptive ear like the beating wings of a flock of birds – approaching, naturally.

At the end of the farm track was a gate flanked by white pillars. On one of the pillars was inscribed 'Nooitgedacht' which in my excited state I took to be more than a coincidence because it means 'unexpected' in Dutch. Old Dutch.

A smaller sign, painted on a piece of hardboard and attached to a post, read 'Children's playground and tea'. I walked up the track towards the house which was mostly hidden behind oak trees and an overgrown hedge, except for a glimpse of a tin roof and a modest gable. On the left was the children's playground, some painted seesaws and swings, and a thick knotted rope attached to a huge oak. Some ducks were confined around a small pond, which was crudely made of cement. A peacock, with a grey, colourless tail, stood listlessly near a model locomotive, made of breeze blocks. The mountains behind were suddenly clear, their slopes a green and grey and silver needlepoint, and the crags above were summery, looking like Cézanne's 'Mont Sainte-Victoire', although higher. I have been to Cézanne's house, Le Jas de Bouffan in Aix, and swum in his *bassin*, which is just as it was when he painted it. The painting hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. When I saw it – I wasn't looking for it – it was so recognisable that I expected to see myself in the middle of the *bassin*, striking boldly for the far end, where a romanesque lion stood, guarding a fountain. Beside me, swimming with a sort

of frantic small-boy eagerness, would have been my son Matt, seven. He was swimming like an insect, with jerky movements, aware that he was only marginally buoyant. In fact he would have sunk without my occasionally outstretched hand holding his small biceps.

I approached the house through the overgrown hedge. Just as suddenly as they had cleared, the mountains were now disappearing again behind a foaming torrent of cloud, which poured over from the far side, but vanished at a certain altitude, just below the level of the brown cliffs which moments before had set me thinking of Aix-en-Provence. The house was probably once completely thatched; now it had a makeshift tin roof flecked and faded red, the precise colour and texture of certain sea anemones. Only one slope of the roof of an outbuilding was still of thatch, wet and rotten. The steps up were cement, painted red and polished, gleaming in contrast to the mottled roof. The café was in the front room, the *voorkamer*, and two young women stood ready, wearing aprons. The cakes were laid out on a table and each cake was covered with cling film. The tea was poured from a large brown enamel pot into a green cup. Invited to choose a cake – *Wanna naas hoemade kek?* – I pointed at a coffee-coloured cake covered with hundreds and thousands – which, for all I knew, had ceased to exist about the time of the Cuban missile crisis – tiny, multi-coloured balls of something – perhaps sugar or marzipan – which were scattered on the icing.

As I picked up the teacup I dropped it and it broke, neatly into three pieces. I insisted on paying for it as they brought me some more tea, smiling, and wiped the pale, sherry-cask floorboards. They retreated behind the trestle table that held the cakes and a large urn, and whispered. The hundreds and thousands crunched alarmingly under my cosseted but fragile teeth. I wondered if the noise of minute fragmentation was reaching them. They were young, but farm girls still bearing the imprint of the lost peoples. It was a watermark, in their

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cheeks and eyes, as though their ancestors were giving me a timely lesson in immortality: look, nothing dies for ever.

The room was long, with two huge, floor-length windows, each with thirty-six panes. Apart from the tables and the kitchen chairs there was no furniture, but I knew that in this room there had once been a *riemepiebank*, a sort of settee made of yellow-wood with strips of untreated leather to sit on, and perhaps a large bridal chest and over there a fireplace for the chilly nights of winter, when – like today – the clouds were low and the air was turbulent. I sat there for a while, drinking my tea, crunching the little, lurid pellets, and listening to the whispers, which reached me only as a susurrations without words. Above the mountains there was thunder. One of the girls giggled.

I walked back down the track away from the house. I adopted a half run and half walk in the hopes of beating the oncoming rain, but it caught me, icy cold as though it had come from far-off and indifferent regions. The clouds darkened and there was lightning above the mountains, sheet lightning, like the flash of artillery in war movies. The track, which had been so dry, was now awash. The children were huddled in the doorway of a cottage. They waved and jeered as I passed. *Whitey is wet*. I wondered if the ants had a way of stopping their nests against the water.

I showered in my mother's cottage and hurried to the clinic. She lay there, diminished in the hour or so I had been away.

'I'm here, Ma,' I said.

I held her hand which was as light as a leaf. The back of her hand and her arm which lay exposed were covered in brown and purple patches because of the Warfarin.

'I'm here.'

I felt or imagined a faint response in her hand. It was no more than a tremor. Perhaps the advancing Aborigines would have given themselves away in this fashion, with a

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barely perceptible vibration. It would be difficult, I could see, for the untrained ear to catch it.

Some moments later she sighed. I can't say it was a sigh of contentment. In fact it was fetched up from the void, a bucket thrown down to unknown depths and filled with an unknown substance, a portion of what was to come. She had had a preview of it, and it filled her with terror. I guessed that what she glimpsed was unknowable and utterly blank, bearing no meaning at all, and that was the horror.

I am working on a corporate film. I have aspired to make serious films about love and pain, films washed with an awareness of the humour and poignancy of existence, but my career has not worked out in the way I had hoped. So now I am listening to the marketing director of a new resort, soon to be built in the Turks and Caicos Islands. He illustrates his briefing with large cards. The first card is blue and written on it is *YOU DESERVE IT*. The marketing director is Dutch and he speaks English with a slangy, metallic, but only partly justified, confidence: 'We started from a very basic concept, reward. Which leads to empowerment. Take power. You have worked for it, you deserve it. Treat yourself. You are entitled to it. Don't stunt yourself.'

I wonder if he means 'stint'.

'Don't stunt yourself. Go for it. It's yours by rights.'

I smile encouragement. I would like to say 'by right', but of course I don't. Prepositions and other niceties have had to be sacrificed to global English. I don't want to look like a pedant.

He holds up another card; on it is written *LIVE THE DREAM*, against a blue sky with fluffy clouds, clouds that are there to off-set the dazzling cerulean of the sky. Very blue, cloudless skies are abnormal and threatening. White clouds, like sheep in a green field, add domestic scale and induce confidence.

'Live the dream. We are all dreamers.'

'Dreamers' comes out as 'treemiss' – *vee are oll treemiss* – which sounds like Middle English.

'Live the dream, because dreams can become reality. We

understand that everyone dreams of escape. Apart from sex, it is the number one dream. It would be a house in the country or a tropical island of your own. We say, you can live the dream. We empower you to live the dream.'

Now he holds up a card which reads SHARE THE DREAM.

'The way to make your dreams live, your dreams of a paradise that the ancients called Arcadia, way back when, is to share the dream. Only the super-rich can afford their own paradise, so our concept is paradise shared.'

It sounds to me like 'parrots' eyes sheared'. I think - I would - of the razor blade in *Le Chien Andalou*.

'I like that,' I say. 'Parrots' eyes sheared.'

He's pleased that I like it. Through everything, I have the ability - in the short term, anyway - to make people want to please me. I don't know why that is or what imagined qualities they see in me. He is wearing a light grey Italian suit of gossamer-thin material. But as I look at him I see one of Breughel's peasant faces, eyes red-rimmed, slightly puffy, his skin sensitive and his light hair slightly thinning, and not at all suited to the urgent, upstanding, haircut it has been given in some big city. This north European hair was designed to flop limply.

'Parrots' eyes sheared means a slize of parrots' eyes. You buy into the parrots' eyes cloob concept.'

Now he holds up the logo of the proposed development: PARADISE CLUB. I have been prescient, because each letter is formed by a brightly coloured macaw, beak-to-tail, tail-to-beak, against a background of deep-green palm trees.

'That's great. Great.'

I am not being ironic. It's damned clever. And anyway I believe that you adopt the appropriate demeanour for whatever form of human enterprise you engage in. When I worked at Harrods as a student there was a man in charge of the toilets who dressed in a brown suit and a brown bowler hat.

'Paradise Club. I like that,' I add.

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'But before anyone will be saying "time share", we present the next stage, like so.'

Now he has abandoned the formal presentation and taken me into his confidence.

'We show them our club concept and explain what a club means and what lifestyle value a club attributes.'

He shows me a card which reads **UNIQUE CLUB CONCEPT.**

'We say: You own this club. It is your club. You are the part owner of this resort and you can be elected to the membership committee. Your membership entitles you automatically to four weeks a year, but you can negotiate with your fellow members. Oh wait.'

In his excitement he has got ahead of the cards.

'Wait. First we show them great clobbs. We show them the New York Racquets, the Royal Yacht Clobb, your royal yacht, famous Polo Clobbs, and such like.'

He shows me, briefly, the crests of various clubs, armorial shields and beasts interspersed with pictures of slim men and models sipping drinks. This is the international club life.

'It's aspirational. Every member who signs up for our presentation automatically gets an alligator wallet and a gold key, made in the shape of a parrot, and one thousand air miles. There are free trips to the site if you put down a refundable deposit.'

He shows me another card which reads **MY PRIVATE PARADISE.**

'What does this say to you?'

'Don't worry, I get it. Ownership.'

'You are right. It says ownership. The problem with time-share is you own ferry little. As my colleague Sergi in Miami says, you own diddly squat.'

I now have no idea what he is talking about, but I laugh merrily.

'That's a ferry big problem with time-share you knaauw.'

'I can see that.'

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'But the cloob concept means that you own one twelfth of each block of condos – we call them ateliers – and because there are ten ateliers in each block and there are five blocks you own exactly one three-hundredth part of the whole cloob, including the cloob house and all the shared amenities.'

'Brilliant. So, let me see, you sell the three hundred shares at two hundred thousand pounds each.'

'Dollars.'

'Dollars, and that's six hundred million dollars.'

'Sixty million. And then there's a small yearly management fee on top and restaurants where you can order in or go out to eat and a golf cloob, where the cloob members have priority bookings and access to the lunch buffet.'

'Sounds good.'

I need this job. I am oppressed by money.