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Opening Extract from...

The Sacred Combe

Written by Thomas Maloney

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This is the story of the seventeen weeks I spent in a strange and beautiful place, after I lost my wife and resigned from my job.

Don't misunderstand me: my wife — Sarah, the decisive woman who was my wife, I mean — is in good health. I lost her that summer almost as suddenly and unexpectedly as if she had indeed met with some fatal accident, but it was all quite deliberate. Sarah deliberated, and it was I, not she, who was destined for the thunderbolt.

But this is not her story, and, if I could get away with it, that is the only paragraph I would give her. She chose to be the Woman of Action, and I choose to be the Man of Words. Did you notice those five unremarkable words in my first sentence, 'a strange and beautiful place'? Look for yourself — they are still there. Sarah, whom I loved, has not touched them; she has never seen the sacred combe.

The day after I discovered the letter on the bed, I took my tent to the Yorkshire Dales — a dependable refuge — and stayed for three days. I spoke to no one, sought answers in my own memories, and found none. The nadir was stepping onto the southbound train at Garsdale Head on a warm, smug, gnat-filled August morning. For the first time in my calm and careful life, I felt panic.

It was very different from grief, or from what I vividly imagine grief to be, since I have never been bereaved — at its centre was a mockery, rather than an ennoblement, of that supernatural entity that I had called our love. But neither was it like that commonplace thunderbolt, the discovery of infidelity — there was none. Sarah's Actions were irreproachable. Her extraordinary disregard for the tawdry conventions of estrangement — the ceasing to communicate, the petty disputes, the first lies, the doomed reconciliations — was, I admitted, nothing less than admirable. I was almost proud of her.

But what I felt instead, as I stepped onto that southbound train, was the panic of a man whose betrayer, in a final act of pity, reveals that the Great Cause is empty, rests on a fallacy, is corrupted, has already failed — and he is the only one who didn't know. I might also write (since I am new to this art of writing an account of oneself, and uncertain in my approach) that what I felt was an urgent, physical sickness for which I could see no cure or treatment. Both statements are true, or at least as true as each other.

This feeling of panic, or of sickness, returns to me sometimes, even now, and in those moments retains all its original intensity. But as the steady months overtake me, lifting and lowering me like waves while they practise their slow sculpture of erosion, I have discovered new and greater causes to serve. This is the story of my discoveries.

I returned to work, hoping for diversion, but a sterile office is an unseemly stage for a panic of the soul. I sat at the focus of my curved bank of computer screens while the prices of the world's goods flashed green and red, ceaseless ruminations of that mighty hive-mind, the market. But for all its supposed wisdom the market offered no advice on the subjects of decisive wives and ruined hopes — the bedraggled

Dales sheep, incoherent but magnificently impervious to suffering, had been more helpful.

On the wall over my desk, an air conditioning unit ticked gently at the prompting of a thermostat. An expensive jacket hanging on the back of the nearest chair stirred, swinging a few millimetres to and fro in the flow of odourless air. The time, displayed a hundred times on my screens, once next to each price, advanced another minute. Who had I been, I asked myself, that I could have been satisfied with this? For I had been satisfied — or as satisfied as anyone who tries to make the best of what his time and place seem to offer. Who had I been, and who was I now?

The idea struck me later that week, as I walked from the office to the tube station. In order to fill the horrid vacuum beaten out by the air conditioning and the flashing prices, and at the same time to divert my attention from what I was by now used to calling my panic of the soul, I would simply read a book. For me, a good book would be, not like a window in the cell wall — that was the wrong image: there was no cell, for there were no walls — but like a standard, perhaps, fluttering over a field of battle. And the more stupid and farcical the battle, I told myself, the nobler must be the standard. Finally, since I feared that turning the last page would feel something like stepping onto that southbound train at Garsdale Head, I decided that it must be a very long book.

I enjoy reading stories, or novels, as we adults are supposed to call them, and so it was to fiction, to all those stories that I should have read but had not, that I first turned. *Ulysses*? *Don Quixote*? *War and Peace*? To each of these I considered pledging my allegiance but the colours of their nobility did not suit my obscure purpose — besides, none was long enough.

Proust. The word flashed up in my mind like a cartoon light bulb. Yes, Proust's shelf-buckling novel was long enough. But — the light bulb flickered — perhaps Proust, too, was inappropriate. I had once listened to a discussion about him on Radio Four. *Le temps perdu*. Lost time. Love, loss, memory, despair. *The sweet cheat gone*. I shuddered, and the lightbulb went out. Perhaps one day I would find succour and solace in the words of Proust, or some other high priest at the altar of love, but not yet. I wanted diversion from the sickness, not treatment.

My degree had been in Physics and Philosophy, neither of which subjects I felt inclined to explore further (hence my passage, my descent, into a career in finance). As for the many other provinces of the wide realm of recorded thought, I knew so little about them that I determined to go to a bookshop and choose by appearance, just as any sensible person chooses a bottle of wine.

Accordingly, during an illicit lunchbreak on the following day, I made my way to the Charing Cross Road. In those damp and labyrinthine basements, rich with the mingling smells of ancient drains and mouldering paper, I found several promising candidates. I weighed Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* against Butler's *Lives of the Saints*, flirted with Boswell and Pepys, and almost fell for Kinglake's *Invasion of the Crimea* in nine volumes (but I counted only eight).

At last, with my return to the office long overdue, and as I was about to settle for a tattered set of Churchill's *History of the English-speaking Peoples*, I glanced upward and my gaze lighted on a long, dark mass of uniform volumes on the top shelf of the history section. They were of substantial size and thickness (*demy octavo*, as I now know), occupying at least a foot of shelf space. A timeworn gilt tracery glimmered faintly on their broad spines. I stretched to reach the first volume, which slid out smoothly from its snug abode

and tipped its weight into my hand. The cover was a rich, raisin brown textured by fine, diagonal grooves that formed a lattice of tiny squares, like, perhaps, a field that has been ploughed twice by a pair of infinitesimal farmers engaged in a mad quarrel of ownership. The dusty page-ends bore a marbled pattern of dark, bluish strands of ink, which flourished into a mass of vivid colour on the endpapers. A rectangle of pale grazes showed where an *ex libris* had been removed.

I turned to the title page. '*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon. A new edition, 1825. Printed for Thos. McLean, Jas. Goodwin, W. Sharpe & sons, G. & J. Robinson, also R. Griffin & Co., Glasgow & J. Cumming, Dublin.'

Now I had heard of this Gibbon, author of the pre-eminent masterpiece of English historical writing. I knew nothing about the subject, except for a puerile idea that the Romans had spread themselves out too thinly, like not enough butter on a slice of toast, but this was my chance to learn (I will return to the subject of my own ignorance later). In the margin of every page were the author's prompts to guide his readers through the massive river of prose. One page held a large folded map of the empire. A neat pencil inscription on the flyleaf stated: *12 vols complete. £200.* Even the fat, round figure of the price, and its grand excess over what I had expected to spend, appealed to me. I placed the book on a chair and began to take down the remaining volumes — three at a time, for I have large hands.