Tomorrow

Graham Swift

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Extract

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1

YOU'RE ASLEEP, my angels, I assume. So, to my amazement and relief, is your father, like a man finding it in him to sleep on the eve of his execution. He'll need all he can muster tomorrow. I'm the only one awake in this house on this night before the day that will change all our lives. Though it's already that day: the little luminous hands on my alarm clock (which I haven't set) show just gone one in the morning. And the nights are short. It's almost midsummer, 1995. It's a week past your sixteenth birthday. By a fluke that's become something of an embarrassment and that some people will say wasn't a fluke at all, you were born in Gemini. I'm not an especially superstitious woman. I married a scientist. But one little thing I'll do tomorrow—today, I mean, but for a little while still I can keep up the illusion—is cross my fingers.

Everything's quiet, the house is still. Mike and I have anticipated this moment, we've talked about it and rehearsed it in our heads so many times that recently it's sometimes seemed like a relief: it's actually come. On the other hand, it's monstrous, it's outrageous—and it's in our power to postpone it. But 'after their sixteenth birthday',

we said, and let's be strict about it. Perhaps you may even appreciate our discipline and tact. Let's be strict, but let's not be cruel. Give them a week. Let them have their birthday, their last birthday of that old life.

You're sleeping the deep sleep of teenagers. I just about remember it. I wonder how you'll sleep tomorrow.

Sixteen was old enough, sixteen was about right. You're not kids any more, you'd be the first to endorse that. And even in the last sixteen years, you could say, sixteen's become older. Sixteen now is like eighteen was, sixteen years ago. There's an acceleration, an upgrading to things that scares me, but seems hardly to touch you. 1995—already. I'll be fifty in August, I'll have done my annual catching up with your father. What a year of big numbers. Fifty, of course, is nothing now, it's last season's forty. Life's getting longer, more elastic. But that doesn't stop the years getting quicker, this feeling that the world is hurtling.

Perhaps you don't feel it, in your becalmed teenage sleep. Perhaps you *want* the world to hurtle. Come on, can't it go any *faster*? Perhaps what all parents want from their children is to feel again that deep, long, almost stationary slowness of time. Another sweet taste of it, please.

But sixteen years have passed and sixteen's like eighteen once was, maybe. But that doesn't matter. To me, tonight, you're still little kids, you're tiny babies, as if you might be sleeping now, not in your separate dens of rooms, but together as you once did in a single cot at Davenport Road. Our Nick and Kate. And what I'm feeling now is simply the most awful thing: that we might

be wrenching you for ever from your childhood, in the same way as if you might have been wrenched once prematurely and dangerously from my womb. But you were right on time: the tenth of June 1979. And at two, as it happens, in the morning.

Mike will do the talking. He knows, he accepts that it's up to him. On a Saturday, knowing you both, the morning will be half gone before you even appear for breakfast, and you'll need your breakfast. Then Mike will say that we need to talk to you. He'll say it in an odd, uncasual way, and you'll think twice about answering back. No, right now, please. Whatever other plans you had, drop them. There'll be something in his voice. He'll ask you to sit in the living room. I'll make some fresh coffee. You'll wonder what the hell is going on. You'll think your father's looking rather strange. But then you might have noticed that already, you might have noticed it all this week. What's up with Dad? What's up with the *pair* of them?

As he asks you to sit, side by side, on the sofa (we've even discussed such minor details), you'll do a quick run-through in your minds of all those stories that friends at school have shared with you: inside stories, little bulletins on domestic crisis. It's your turn now, perhaps. It has the feeling of catastrophe. He's about to tell you (despite, I hope, your strongest suppositions) that he and I are *splitting up*. Something's been going on now for a little while. He's been having an affair with one of those (young and picked by him) women at his office. An Emma or a Charlotte. God forbid. Or I've been having an affair (God forbid indeed) with Simon at Walker's, or with one of our

esteemed but importunate clients. Married life here in Rutherford Road is not all it seems. Success and money, they do funny things. So does being fifty.

You're in tune with such under-the-surface stuff from your between-lessons gossip. It's part of your education: the hidden life of Putney.

But then—you're sixteen. Do you notice, these days, that much about *us* at all? Do you pick up on *our* moods and secrecies? We've had a few rows in recent weeks, have you actually noticed? And we don't often row. But then, so have you. You're at a stage—don't think *I* haven't noticed—when that cord, that invisible rope that runs between you has been stretched to its limit. It's been yanked and tugged this way and that. You have your own worlds to deal with.

And you've only just finished your exams. Ordeal enough. This should have been a weekend of recuperation. And if you'd still had more exams to go we'd have stretched our timetable to accommodate them. Let's not ruin their chances, let's not spoil their concentration. Bad enough that your birthday, last weekend, should have been subject to your last bouts of revision. As it is, we've been tempted. Let's wait—till after the results perhaps, till after one more precious summer. But we came back to our firm ruling: one week's cushion only. And since your birthday fell this year, handily, on a Saturday . . . Forgive us, there's more revision. Exams can affect your life. So can this.

Mike will do the talking. I'll add my bits. And, of course, when he's finished he'll make himself open to questions, as many as you wish. To cross-examination, might be the better expression. It all just might, conceivably, go to plan, though I'm not sure what the 'plan' really

is, apart from our rigorous timing. It might all be like some meeting that smoothly and efficiently accomplishes its purpose, but it can hardly be like one of your dad's board meetings or one of our cursory get-togethers at Walker's: 'That was all dealt with at the meeting . . .'

I think, anyway, you'll want to know everything, the full, complete and intricate story. And you deserve it, as a matter of record.

Your father is gently snoring.

I remember once you said to me, Kate: 'Tell me about before I was born.' Such simply uttered and innocent words: they sent a shiver through me. I should have been delighted, charmed, even a little flattered. You actually had a concept of a time before you were around, a dawning interest in it. You saw it had some magic connection with you, if you still thought of it, maybe, like life on another planet.

How old were you then—eight? We were on the beach in Cornwall, at Carrack Cove, we had those three summers there, this must have been the second. I'd wrapped you in the big faded-blue beach towel and was rubbing you gently dry, and I remember thinking that the towel was no longer like something inside which you could get lost and smothered, you were so much bigger now. And a whole year had passed since the time when, off that same beach, you both quite suddenly learnt to swim. First you, then Nick almost immediately afterwards, like clockwork. One of those first-time and once-only moments of life. But I'd suddenly called you 'a pair of shrimps'. Why not 'fish'? Or 'heroes'? I suppose it was the pinkness and littleness. I suppose it was the way you just jerked and scudded around furiously but ecstatically in the shallows, hardly fish-like at

all. I didn't want to think of you yet swimming out to sea. Shrimps.

Did you notice the odd look in my eye? A perfectly innocent question, but there was something strange about it. You said, 'Before I was born', not 'we'. Nick was still down at the water's edge with Mike. He came up so much higher against Mike now, and Mike's always been a good, lean height. Did you notice my little teeter? But I would have quickly smiled, I hope. I would have quickly got all wistful and girl-to-girl, if still motherly. I kept on rubbing you and I told you, you'll remember, about another beach, far away in Scotland, where, I said, your daddy 'proposed' to me. In a sand dune, in fact.

That was eight years ago. Half your life. I could still dare to wear a bikini. It was one of those many panicky but smoothed-over moments—you'll understand soon what I mean—which have sometimes brought Mike and me to a sort of brink. Why not *now*? Oh, we've had our jitters. But we've kept to our schedule. It will be up to you, tomorrow, to judge, to tell us if, in the circumstances, you'd have done the same. But what a stupid idea: if *you*'d have done the same!

You said you'd like to propose to Nick—to practise proposing to Nick. I said it didn't tend to work that way round, and it was a thing, anyway, that belonged to 'those old days'. And suppose, I said, Nick should say no? My bikini was dark brown, your little costume was tangerine. It's men, I said, if it happens at all now, who do the proposing.

And sometimes the explaining. But I think you both deserve the full story from me, your mother. Mike will give you his story, his version. I mean, it won't be a story,

it will be the facts, a story is what you've had so far. All the same, it will be a sort of version of something real. One thing we've learnt in these sixteen years is how hard it can be to tell what's true and what's false, what's real and what's pretend. It's one thing you'll have to decide, unfortunately. Which version is it to be?

At two o'clock in the morning. Of course, we let you know that. A charming little gloss on those facts of life that were bound to get raised sooner or later and can sometimes be (or they could be in those 'old days') a cause of awkward Saturday mornings. Though hardly when you were barely three and first put the innocent question and were both completely enchanted, it seemed, to learn that you both came out of my tummy, that you'd both once been there together. And that seemed to be the bit—do you even remember?—that really tickled you pink, that you'd been there *together*. So much so that though you'd moved by then to your first little separate beds, it seemed to reinforce your obstinate habit of ending up nonetheless in the same one.

One morning I found you like that, trying to form a positive little *single* ball of clinging, squirming, not to say giggling flesh. And you said you were practising 'not being born yet'. And making, if it's possible to say so, a pretty good fist of it.

I should have said that it had tickled me pink once that you'd been there together inside me.

As to that other, critical question: how did you get there?—it never came up then. A stage *before* the stage of not being born yet, that was beyond your reckoning. But you should know that it was our first, unsteady, provisional position: that when it did come up it should be our guide,

our testing of the way ahead for the other thing we had to tell you. It should even be, perhaps, the one and the same occasion. Except that when it did come up it was all at my rushing instigation, and you, Kate—this you'll surely remember—took the wind clean out of my sails.

Another girl-to-girl moment like that one about 'proposing', and it can't have been so long after. I was the one, not your dad, who suddenly pushed myself to the fore of doing all the explaining. Though I would have started with the standard biology lesson. 'Kate, there are some things you need to know . . . about how babies are really born . . .'

God knows what prompted it. Some little look in your eye, which I took as a challenge? Just that speed at which you were growing? What had we been talking about? And you might have let me just stumble on, even topple, still clutching you, over a precipice you were entirely unaware of. And if the truth be known, a sort of gong was banging in my head: Come on, get it over with! But you took the wind from my sails.

'You mean *periods* and stuff, Mum? You mean what boys have to do with their willies? It's all right, I already know all about that stuff. And don't worry, I've told Nick all about it as well.'

How old were you? You seemed so blithely, safely sure of your ground that I no longer wanted to risk mine. And I'm not sure, to this day, if I ever want to intrude on those early biology lessons *you* would have given Nick. Your eyes met mine perfectly sunnily. Well, that takes care of that, I thought, that takes care of the facts of life and, until further notice, of the other facts that go with them.

It should all, perhaps, have worked the other way

round. That happy well-informedness, apparently, of both of you, should only have let Mike and me press on with our full—agenda. But the fact is it was really then that we fell back on our default position: when they are sixteen. You were surely *too* young, then, for the full agenda. And, on the other hand, if those facts of life really were taken care of and weren't any more like some flashpoint still in store, did we need to hurry towards trouble?

Okay, you'll grasp this, I'm sure: it was to protect us, as well as you, to extend our sweet lease as much as yours. Will you be able to sympathise? Will you blame us—a minor issue, perhaps—for leaving it so long? Or will you understand, at a ripe sixteen, that the timing could never have been perfect and is perhaps academic anyway? At least we'll have kept faithfully and truly to the date we set ourselves.

Outside I can hear rain just starting, softly plopping on leaves. For some idiotic reason, I checked the weather forecast before we came to bed, as if we had some major journey planned. We won't be going anywhere, the last thing that matters is the weather. But they promised rain, steady, persistent rain from dawn till late afternoon. Well, it's started early. Pattering summer rain. I can't say I'm sorry. Good weather for staying indoors. I can't say I'm sorry that tomorrow this house will be curtained and cordoned off by a veil of rain.

What can I do but tell you how it was? What can I do but give you your mother's version of that time before you were born? You're sixteen and the night's not young, but here's a bedtime story.

2

I MET YOUR FATHER when I was twenty and he was twenty-one, in Brighton, in 1966, when we were both at Sussex University. When I say 'met' I really mean 'went to bed with', 'slept with', if there wasn't, that night, that much sleeping. I should be as frank at the start as I mean to carry on. I'd met him, *merely* met him already, and when I met him in the full sense, he'd already met in the full or nearly full sense my two flat-mates, Linda Page and Judy Morrison.

This is your dad, this man fast asleep beside me now, I'm talking about. And that was how things could be in 1966. They couldn't have been like it in 1956, but they could ten years later, particularly at a new university like Sussex. They weren't like it all the time, maybe, but for your dad and me, in the early months of 1966, they were. Whenever we mention 'the Sixties' both of you yawn or glaze over as if things are so much more nonchalantly free-for-all and uninhibited now. But I'm not so sure they really are. What are you actually up to, my darlings, at the advanced age of sixteen? You tell me. At least we had the excitement of the new—the 'liberated' as we sometimes

called it. And it wasn't so amateurish, or so aimless. Your father slept around. He slept with Linda and (possibly) Judy in fairly quick succession, then he slept with me. Then he never slept with anyone else. He's sleeping with me now. These are the simple and basic facts which I've never doubted and I hope, so far as the last part goes, nor have you. And they add up to something that I hope will count for a lot when he speaks to you tomorrow.

At Sussex there was a university doctor who had the happy name, in the circumstances, of Doctor Pope. Every so often, along with a regular queue of other girls, I'd go along to get my dispensation. I remember another, less eager queue when I was small, to get a polio vaccination. What made that age so new, so different from previous ages, was a little pill: once a day for twenty-one days, then a week off. A bit of science, a bit of social sorcery. It was called the permissive age, but was it the pill that produced the age or the age the pill? Sex must always have been around, our parents must have known how to get it. But had there ever been such a rush of it, a glut of it—as if it had just been discovered specially for us, like gold in the Klondike, in the South Downs? Of course, it hadn't just been discovered. But we were children of our time, as you are of yours. Though we only understand afterwards, perhaps, what time it is we're children of.

Doctor Pope was one of those young, fresh doctors, not so long out of medical school, who was only too happy, I think, to have this flow of largely healthy patients, not so much younger than himself and predominantly female, passing through his door. I still see his unpapal, even mock-priestly face. Dark hair, dark eyes, a taste in brightly coloured, unphysicianly ties. Half the girls who

went along to him fancied him just a little. He's one of those minor and incidental figures from the past—one day you'll find this too—who suddenly float into your head, so that you wonder, where are they now, what are they doing right now? Do they still have that dark hair? Though this same thing can happen, this same sudden looming out of nowhere, with people who can't be called incidental at all.

Your father slept around and so, thanks to Doctor Pope, did I. Let's not be exact about who did the most, but let's give the edge to your father. I was the younger, if only by six months. And, just for the candid record, your father, before he met me and even in those pill-blessed times, always carried a traditional stand-by: the packet of three. You may think this is information that doesn't particularly concern you. I said to him, 'You won't be needing these.' But your dad had always been—careful.

How it is for you I don't know. In these mid-1990s, when sixteen is eighteen and when, from all I can tell, what once went on at university now sometimes goes on at school, you'd think you might already be beginners at least. What with all that early knowledge you seemed so glad once to advertise. The facts of life? They've simply been in the air you've breathed, the common small talk (apparently) of infants, they don't need special elucidation.

But on the other hand, for all the all-around-you of it these days, schoolgirl pregnancies by the dozen (yes, Kate, I worry), I think there's sometimes too a weirdly opposite reaction. Why rush into something so patently available? A sort of sex-fatigue before it's even started, a sort of purity or just stubborn sensibleness. Abstention is the new liberation: is that the way the tide is turning? Sometimes

when we refer to those oh-so-wonderful, oh-so-yawn-making 1960s, it's not just that you make a show of boredom. Sometimes in your eyes there's the faint hint of a tut-tut. As if you might be about to say to us, a little too late in the day, perhaps: 'Oh, grow up.'

There's a gap of quite a few years between us, as you may have noticed. You're sixteen, your father's fifty. But that's another shift that's become unremarkable these days. Thirty, thirty-five: that's no longer a cliff-edge for a woman. Mike says—you're familiar with his ironical and slightly professorial mode, though it's not, I'm sure, how he'll address you tomorrow—that the whole thing is changing, there's no longer the pressure of brevity, we'll all reach a hundred, one day, and procreate when we're fifty. Well. 'All other things being equal,' he adds. If there isn't by then anyway, he says, 'some completely new system'. The slightly prophetical mode as well. Once anyway, as we all know, people were lucky to get to forty and there were brides of fourteen. (If not, Kate, of eight.)

I don't know. The world doesn't feel to me more relaxed and better adjusted, it has this way of suddenly racing. I don't know how it feels to you. But what I do know is that at sixteen you're both virgins. I don't have the proof and I don't have your direct confirmations, just intuition. And I don't think this has anything to do with the world around you and how there's more time at your disposal and how you can just be cool and calm about everything. It has to do with you, with what you are: Nick and Kate, with that invisible rope straining, and sometimes catching painfully, between you. Little upsets and outbursts, not helped by recent symptoms of parental tension. Now and then a door gets slammed.

I don't know how tomorrow will affect it. A big snapping of all our ropes? You're sixteen, you're eighteen, you're grown-up and able to handle anything? We'll find out. Right now it seems to me that you're as changeable, as suddenly mature then as suddenly childish, as suddenly moody and tetchy then as suddenly brimming with verve and sparkle, as any teenagers. And you're virgins. It's a sweet thing, from the outside. Like the sweetness, from the outside, of your inescapable togetherness. And thank God, for the time being, you have each other. You're virgins, you could say, in another way too.