Saturday

Ian McEwan

Chapter 1

Some hours before dawn Henry Perowne, a neurosurgeon, wakes to find himself already in motion, pushing back the covers from a sitting position, and then rising to his feet. It's not clear to him when exactly he became conscious, nor does it seem relevant. He's never done such a thing before, but he isn't alarmed or even faintly surprised, for the movement is easy, and pleasurable in his limbs, and his back and legs feel unusually strong. He stands there, naked by the bed – he always sleeps naked – feeling his full height, aware of his wife's patient breathing and of the wintry bedroom air on his skin. That too is a pleasurable sensation. His bedside clock shows three forty. He has no idea what he's doing out of bed: he has no need to relieve himself, nor is he disturbed by a dream or some element of the day before, or even by the state of the world. It's as if, standing there in the darkness, he's materialised out of nothing, fully formed, unencumbered. He doesn't feel tired, despite the hour or his recent labours, nor is his conscience troubled by any recent case. In fact, he's alert and empty-headed and inexplicably elated. With no decision made, no motivation at all, he begins to move towards the nearest of the three bedroom windows and experiences such ease and lightness in his tread that he suspects at once he's dreaming or sleepwalking. If it is the case, he'll be disappointed. Dreams don't interest him; that this should be real is a richer possibility. And he's entirely himself, he is certain of it, and he knows that sleep is behind him: to know the difference between it and waking, to know the boundaries, is the essence of sanity.

The bedroom is large and uncluttered. As he glides across it with almost comic facility, the prospect of the experience ending saddens him briefly, then the thought is gone. He is by the centre window, pulling back the tall folding wooden shutters with care so as not to wake Rosalind. In this he's selfish as well as solicitous. He doesn't wish to be asked what he's about – what answer could he give, and why relinquish this moment in the attempt? He opens the second shutter, letting it concertina into the casement, and quietly raises the sash window. It is many feet taller than him, but it slides easily upwards, hoisted by its concealed lead counterweight. His skin tightens as the February air pours in around him, but he isn't troubled by the cold. From the second floor he faces the night, the city in its icy white light, the skeletal trees in the square, and thirty feet below, the black arrowhead railings like a row of spears. There's a degree or two of frost and the air is clear. The streetlamp glare hasn't quite obliterated all the stars; above the Regency façade on the other side of the square hang remnants of constellations in the southern sky. That particular façade is a reconstruction, a pastiche – wartime Fitzrovia took some hits from the Luftwaffe – and right behind is the Post Office Tower, municipal and seedy by day, but at night, half-concealed and decently illuminated, a valiant memorial to more optimistic days.

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And now, what days are these? Baffled and fearful, he mostly thinks when he takes time from his weekly round to consider. But he doesn't feel that now. He leans forwards, pressing his weight onto his palms against the sill, exulting in the emptiness and clarity of the scene. His vision – always good – seems to have sharpened. He sees the paving stone mica glistening in the pedestrianised square, pigeon excre- ment hardened by distance and cold into something almost beautiful, like a scattering of snow. He likes the symmetry of black cast-iron posts and their even darker shadows, and the lattice of cobbled gutters. The overfull litter baskets suggest abundance rather than squalor; the vacant benches set around the circular gardens look benignly expectant of their daily traffic – cheerful lunchtime office crowds, the solemn, studious boys from the Indian hostel, lovers in quiet raptures or crisis, the crepuscular drug dealers, the ruined old lady with her wild, haunting calls. Go away! she'll shout for hours at a time, and squawk harshly, sounding like some marsh bird or zoo creature.

Standing here, as immune to the cold as a marble statue, gazing towards Charlotte Street, towards a foreshortened jumble of façades, scaffolding and pitched roofs, Henry thinks the city is a success, a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece – millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries, as though around a coral reef, sleeping, working, entertaining themselves, harmonious for the most part, nearly everyone wanting it to work. And the Perownes' own corner a triumph of congruent proportion; the perfect square laid out by Robert Adam enclosing a perfect circle of garden – an eighteenth-century dream bathed and embraced by modernity, by street light from above, and from below by fibre-optic cables, and cool fresh water coursing down pipes, and sewage borne away in an instant of forgetting.

An habitual observer of his own moods, he wonders about this sustained, distorting euphoria. Perhaps down at the molecular level there's been a chemical accident while he slept – something like a spiled tray of drinks, prompting dopamine-like receptors to initiate a kindly cascade of intracellular events; or it's the prospect of a Saturday, or the paradoxical consequence of extreme tiredness. It's true, he finished the week in a state of unusual depletion. He came home to an empty house, and lay in the bath with a book, content to be talking to no one. It was his literate, too literate daughter Daisy who sent the biography of Darwin which in turn has something to do with a Conrad novel she wants him to read and which he has yet to start – seafaring, however morally fraught, doesn't much interest him. For some years now she's been addressing what she believes is his astounding ignorance, guiding his literary education, scolding him for poor taste and insensitivity. She has a point – straight from school to medical school to the slavish hours of a junior doctor, then the total absorption of neurosurgery training spliced with committed fatherhood – for fifteen years he barely touched a non-medical book at all. On the other hand, he thinks he's seen enough death, fear, courage and suffering to supply half a dozen literatures. Still, he submits to her reading lists – they're his means of remaining in touch as she grows away from her family into unknowable womanhood in a suburb of Paris; tonight she'll be home for the first time in six months – another cause for euphoria.

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He was behind with his assignments from Daisy. With one toe occasionally controlling a fresh input of hot water, he blearily read an account of Darwin's dash to complete The Origin of Species, and a summary of the concluding pages, amended in later editions. At the same time he was listening to the radio news. The stolid Mr. Blix has been addressing the UN again – there's a general impression that he's rather undermined the case for war. Then, certain he'd taken in nothing at all, Perowne switched the radio off, turned back the pages and read again. At times this biography made him comfortably nostalgic for a verdant, horse-drawn, affectionate England; at others he was faintly depressed by the way a whole life could be contained by a few hundred pages – bottled, like homemade chutney. And by how easily an existence, its ambitions, networks of family and friends, all its cherished stuff, solidly possessed, could so entirely vanish. Afterwards, he stretched out on the bed to consider his supper, and remembered nothing more. Rosalind must have drawn the covers over him when she came in from work. She would have kissed him. Forty-eight years old, profoundly asleep at nine thirty on a Friday night – this is modern professional life. He works hard, everyone around him works hard, and this week he's been pushed harder by a flu outbreak among the hospital staff – his operating list has been twice the usual length.

By means of balancing and doubling, he was able to perform major surgery in one theatre, supervise a senior registrar in another, and perform minor procedures in a third. He has two neurosurgical registrars in his firm at present – Sally Madden who is almost qualified and entirely reliable, and a year-two registrar, Rodney Browne from Guyana, gifted, hardworking, but still unsure of himself. Perowne's consultant anaesthetist, Jay Strauss, has his own registrar, Gita Syal. For three days, keeping Rodney at his side, Perowne moved between the three suites – the sound of his own clogs on the corridor's polished floors and the various squeaks and groans of the theatre swing doors sounded like orchestral accompaniments. Friday's list was typical. While Sally closed up a patient Perowne went next door to relieve an elderly lady of her trigeminal neuralgia, her tic douloureux. These minor operations can still give him pleasure – he likes to be fast and accurate. He slipped a gloved forefinger into the back of her mouth to feel the route, then, with barely a glance at the image intensifier, slid a long needle through the outside of her cheek, all the way up to the trigeminal ganglion. Jay came in from next door to watch Gita bringing the lady to brief consciousness. Electrical stimulation of the needle's tip caused a tingling in her face, and once she'd drowsily confirmed the position was correct – Perowne had it right first time – she was put down again while the nerve was 'cooked' by radiofrequency thermocoagulation. The delicate trick was to eliminate her pain while leaving her an awareness of light touch – all done in fifteen minutes, three years' misery, of sharp, stabbing pain, ended.

He clipped the neck of a middle cerebral artery aneurysm – he's something of a master in the art – and performed a biopsy for a tumour in the thalamus, a region where it's not possible to operate. The patient was a 28 year-old professional tennis player, already suffering acute memory loss. As Perowne drew the needle clear from the depths of the brain he could see at a glance that the tissue was abnormal. He held out little hope for radio-or chemotherapy. Confirmation came in a verbal report from the lab, and that afternoon he broke the news to the young man's elderly parents.

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The next case was a craniotomy for a meningioma in a 53- year-old woman, a primary school headmistress. The tumour sat above the motor strip and was sharply defined, rolling away neatly before the probes of his Rhoton dissector – an entirely curative process. Sally closed that one up while Perowne went next door to carry out a multi-level lumbar laminectomy on an obese 44-year-old man, a gardener who worked in Hyde Park. He cut through four inches of subcutaneous fat before the vertebrae were exposed, and the man wobbled unhelpfully on the table whenever Perowne exerted downwards pressure to clip away at the bone.

For an old friend, a specialist in Ear, Nose and Throat, Perowne opened up an acoustic in a seventeen-year-old boy – it's odd how these ENT people shy away from making their own difficult routes in. Perowne made a large, rectangular bone flap above the ear, which took well over an hour, irritating Jay Strauss who was wanting to get on with the firm's own list. Finally the tumour lay exposed to the operating microscope – a small vestibular schwannoma lying barely three millimetres from the cochlea. Leaving his specialist friend to perform the excision, Perowne hurried out to a second minor procedure which in turn caused him some irritation – a loud young woman with an habitually aggrieved manner wanted her spinal stimulator moved from back to front. Only the month before he had shifted it round after she complained that it was uncomfortable to sit down. Now she was saying the stimulator made it impossible to lie in bed. He made a long incision across her abdomen and wasted valuable time, up to his elbows inside her, searching for the battery wire. He was sure she'd be back before long.

For lunch he had a factory-wrapped tuna and cucumber sandwich with a bottle of mineral water. In the cramped coffee room whose toast and microwaved pasta always remind him of the odours of major surgery, he sat next to Heather, the much-loved Cockney lady who helps clean the theatres between procedures. She gave him an account of her son-inlaw's arrest for armed robbery after being mistakenly picked out of a police line-up. But his alibi was perfect – at the time of the crime he was at the dentist's having a wisdom tooth removed. Elsewhere in the room, the talk was of the flu epidemic – one of the scrub nurses and a trainee Operating Department Practitioner working for Jay Strauss were sent home that morning. After fifteen minutes Perowne took his firm back to work. While Sally was next door drilling a hole in the skull of an old man, a retired traffic warden, to relieve the pressure of his internal bleeding – a chronic subdural haemotoma, Perowne used the theatre's latest piece of equipment, a computerised image- guidance system, to help him with a craniotomy for a resection of a right posterior frontal glioma. Then he let Rodney take the lead in another burr hole for a chronic subdural.

The culmination of today's list was the removal of a pilocytic astrocytoma from a fourteen-year-old Nigerian girl who lives in Brixton with her aunt and uncle, a Church of England vicar. The tumour was best reached through the back of the head, by an infratentorial supracerebellar route, with the anaesthetised patient in a sitting position. This in turn created special problems for Jay Strauss, for there was a possibility of air entering a vein and causing an embolism. Andrea Chapman was a problem patient, a problem niece. She arrived in England at the age of twelve – the dismayed vicar and his wife showed Perowne the photograph – a scrubbed girl in a frock and tight ribbons with a shy smile. Something in her that village life in rural

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north Nigeria kept buttoned down was released once she started at her local Brixton comprehensive. She took to the music, the clothes, the talk, the values – the street. She had attitude, the vicar confided while his wife was trying to settle Andrea on the ward. His niece took drugs, got drunk, shoplifted, bunked off school, hated authority, and "swore like a merchant seaman". Could it be the tumour was pressing down on some part of her brain?

Perowne could offer no such comfort. The tumour was remote from the frontal lobes. It was deep in the superior cerebellar vermis. She'd already suffered early-morning headaches, blind spots and ataxia – unsteadiness. These symptoms have failed to dispel her suspicion that her condition is part of a plot – the hospital, in league with her guardians, the school, the police – to curb her nights in the clubs. Within hours of being admitted she was in conflict with the nurses, the ward sister and an elderly patient who said she wouldn't tolerate the obscene language. Perowne had his own difficulties talking her through the ordeals that lay ahead. Even when Andrea wasn't aroused, she affected to talk like a rapper on MTV, swaying her upper body as she sat up in bed, making circular movements with her palms downwards, soothing the air in front of her, in preparation for one of her own storms. But he admired her spirit, and the fierce dark eyes, the perfect teeth, and the clean pink tongue lashing itself round the words it formed. She smiled joyously, even when she was shouting in apparent fury, as though she was tickled by just how much she could get away with. It took Jay Strauss, an American with the warmth and directness that no one else in this English hospital can muster, to bring her into line.

Andrea's operation lasted five hours and went well. She was placed in a sitting position, with her head-clamp bolted to a frame in front of her. Opening up the back of the head needed great care because of the vessels and major nerves running close under the bone. Rodney leaned in at Perowne's side to irrigate the drilling and cauterise the bleeding with the bipolar. Fortunately, with this approach, there's never much blood. Finally it lay exposed, the tentorium – the tent – a pale delicate structure of beauty, like the little whirl of a veiled dancer, where the dura is gathered and parted again. Below it lay the cerebellum. By cutting away carefully, Perowne allowed gravity itself to draw the cerebellum down – no need for retractors – and it was possible to see deep into the region where the pineal lay, with the tumour extending in a vast red mass right in front of it. The astrocytoma was well defined and had only partially infiltrated surrounding tissue. Perowne was able to excise almost all of it without damaging any eloquent region.

He allowed Rodney several minutes with the microscope and the sucker, and let him do the closing up. Perowne did the head dressing himself, and when he finally came away from the theatres, he wasn't feeling tired at all. Operating never wearies him – once busy within the enclosed world of his firm, the theatre and its ordered procedures, and absorbed by the vivid foreshortening of the operating microscope as he follows a corridor to a desired site, he experiences a superhuman capacity, more like a craving, for work.

As for the rest of the week, the two morning clinics made no more demand than usual. He's too experienced to be touched by the varieties of distress he encounters – his obligation is to be useful. Nor did the ward rounds or the various weekly

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committees tire him. It was the paperwork on Friday afternoon that brought him down, the backlog of referrals, and responses to referrals, abstracts for two conferences, letters to colleagues and editors, an unfinished peer review, contributions to management initiatives, and government changes to the structure of the Trust, and yet more revisions to teaching practices. There's to be a new look – there's always a new look – at the hospital's Emergency Plan. Simple train crashes are no longer all that are envisaged, and words like 'catastrophe' and 'mass fatalities', 'chemical and biological warfare' and 'major attack' have recently become bland through repetition. In the past year he's become aware of new committees and subcommittees spawning, and lines of command that stretch up and out of the hospital, beyond the medical hierarchies, up through the distant reaches of the Civil Service to the Home Secretary's office.

Perowne dictated monotonously, and long after his secretary went home he typed in his overheated box of an office on the hospital's third floor. What dragged him back was an unfamiliar lack of fluency. He prides himself on speed and a sleek, wry style. It never needs much forethought – typing and composing are one. Now he was stumbling. And though the professional jargon didn't desert him – it's second nature – his prose accumulated awkwardly. Individual words brought to mind unwieldy objects – bicycles, deckchairs, coat hangers – strewn across his path. He composed a sentence in his head, then lost it on the page, or typed himself into a grammatical cul-de-sac and had to sweat his way out. Whether this debility was the cause or the consequence of fatigue he didn't pause to consider. He's stubborn and he pushed himself to the end. At eight in the evening he concluded the last in a series of e-mails, and stood up from his desk where he had been hunched since four. On his way out he looked in at his patients in the ICU. There were no problems, and Andrea was doing fine – she was sleeping and all her signs were good. Less than an hour and a half later he was back home and he too was asleep.

Two figures in dark overcoats are crossing the square diagonally, walking away from him towards Cleveland Street, their high heels ticking in awkward counterpoint – nurses surely, heading home, though this is a strange time to be coming off shift. They aren't speaking, and though their steps don't match, they walk close, shoulders almost touching in an intimate, sisterly way. They pass right beneath him, and make a quarter-circular route around the gardens before striking off. There's something touching about the way their breath rises behind them in single clouds of vapour as they go, as though they're playing a children's game, imitating steam trains. They cross towards the far corner of the square, and with his advantage of height and in his curious mood, he not only watches them, but watches over them, supervising their progress with the remote possessiveness of a god. In the lifeless cold, they pass through the night, hot little biological engines with bipedal skills suited to any terrain, endowed with innumerable branching neural networks sunk deep in a knob of bone casing, buried fibres, warm filaments with their invisible glow of consciousness – these engines devise their own tracks.

He's been at the window several minutes, the elation is passing, and he's beginning to shiver. In the gardens, which are enclosed within a circle of high railings, a light frost lies on the landscaped hollows and rises of the lawn beyond the border of plane trees. He watches an ambulance, siren off, blue lights flashing, turn into Charlotte

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Street and accelerate hard southwards, heading perhaps for Soho. He turns from the window to reach behind him for a thick woollen dressing gown where it lies draped over a chair. Even as he turns, he's aware of some new element outside, in the square or in the trees, bright but colourless, smeared across his peripheral vision by the movement of his head. But he doesn't look back immediately. He's cold and he wants the dressing gown. He picks it up, threads one arm through a sleeve, and only steps back towards the window as he's finding the second sleeve and looping the belt around his waist.

He doesn't immediately understand what he sees, though he thinks he does. In this first moment, in his eagerness and curiosity, he assumes proportions on a planetary scale: it's a meteor burning out in the London sky, traversing left to right, low on the horizon, though well clear of the taller buildings. But surely meteors have a darting, needle-like quality. You see them in a flash before their heat consumes them. This is moving slowly, majestically even. In an instant, he revises his perspective outward to the scale of the solar system: this object is not hundreds but millions of miles distant, far out in space swinging in timeless orbit around the sun. It's a comet, tinged with yellow, with the familiar bright core trailing its fiery envelope. He watched Hale-Bopp with Rosalind and the children from a grassy hillock in the Lake District and he feels again the same leap of gratitude for a glimpse, beyond the earthly frame, of the truly impersonal. And this is better, brighter, faster, all the more impressive for being unexpected. They must have missed the media coverage. Working too hard. He's about to wake Rosalind – he knows she'll be thrilled by the sight – but he wonders if she'd get to the window before the comet disappears. Then he'll miss it too. But it's too extraordinary not to share.

He's moving towards the bed when he hears a low rumbling sound, gentle thunder gathering in volume, and stops to listen. It tells him everything. He looks back over his shoulder to the window for confirmation. Of course, a comet is so distant it's bound to appear stationary. Horrified, he returns to his position by the window. The sound holds at a steady volume while he revises the scale again, zooming inwards this time, from solar dust and ice back to the local. Only three or four seconds have passed since he saw this fire in the sky and changed his mind about it twice. It's travelling along a route that he himself has taken many times in his life, and along which he's gone through the routines, adjusting his seat-back and his watch, putting away his papers, always curious to see if he can locate his own house down among the immense almost beautiful orange-grey sprawl; east to west, along the southern banks of the Thames, two thousand feet up, in the final approaches to Heathrow.

It's directly south of him now, barely a mile away, soon to pass into the topmost lattice of the bare plane trees, and then behind the Post Office Tower, at the level of the lowest microwave dishes. Despite the city lights, the contours of the plane aren't visible in the early-morning darkness. The fire must be on the nearside wing where it joins the fuselage, or perhaps in one of the engines slung below. The leading edge of the fire is a flattened white sphere which trails away in a cone of yellow and red, less like a meteor or comet than an artist's lurid impression of one. As though in a pretence of normality, the landing lights are flashing. But the engine note gives it all away. Above the usual deep and airy roar, is a straining, choking, banshee sound growing in volume – both a scream and a sustained shout, an impure, dirty noise

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that suggests unsustainable mechanical effort beyond the capacity of hardened steel, spiralling upwards to an end point, irresponsibly rising and rising like the accompaniment to a terrible fairground ride. Something is about to give.

He no longer thinks of waking Rosalind. Why wake her into this nightmare? In fact, the spectacle has the familiarity of a recurrent dream. Like most passengers, outwardly subdued by the monotony of air travel, he often lets his thoughts range across the possibilities while sitting, strapped down and docile, in front of a packaged meal. Outside, beyond a wall of thin steel and cheerful creaking plastic, it's minus sixty degrees and forty thousand feet to the ground. Flung across the Atlantic at five hundred feet a second, you submit to the folly because everyone else does. Your fellow passengers are reassured because you and the others around you appear calm. Looked at a certain way – deaths per passenger mile – the statistics are consoling. And how else attend a conference in southern California? Air travel is a stock market, a trick of mirrored perceptions, a fragile alliance of pooled belief; so long as nerves hold steady and no bombs or wreckers are on board, everybody prospers. When there's failure, there will be no half measures. Seen another way – deaths per journey – the figures aren't so good. The market could plunge.

Plastic fork in hand, he often wonders how it might go – the screaming in the cabin partly muffled by that deadening acoustic, the fumbling in bags for phones and last words, the airline staff in their terror clinging to remembered fragments of procedure, the levelling smell of shit. But the scene construed from the outside, from afar like this, is also familiar. It's already almost eighteen months since half the planet watched, and watched again the unseen captives driven through the sky to the slaughter, at which time there gathered round the innocent silhouette of any jet plane a novel association. Everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed.

Henry knows that it's a trick of vision that makes him think he can see an outline now, a deeper black shape against the dark. The howl of the burning engine continues to rise in pitch. It wouldn't surprise him to see lights coming on across the city, or the square fill with residents in dressing gowns. Behind him Rosalind, well practised at excluding the city's night troubles from her sleep, turns on her side. The noise is probably no more intrusive than a passing siren on the Euston Road. The fiery white core and its coloured tail have grown larger – no passengers sitting in that central section of the plane could survive. That is the other familiar element – the horror of what he can't see. Catastrophe observed from a safe distance. Watching death on a large scale, but seeing no one die. No blood, no screams, no human figures at all, and into this emptiness, the obliging imagination set free. The fight to the death in the cockpit, a posse of brave passengers assembling before a last-hope charge against the fanatics. To escape the heat of that fire which part of the plane might you run to? The pilot's end might seem less lonely somehow. Is it pathetic folly to reach into the overhead locker for your bag, or necessary optimism? Will the thickly madeup lady who politely served you croissant and jam now be trying to stop you?

The plane is passing behind the tops of the trees. Briefly, the fire twinkles festively among the branches and twigs. It occurs to Perowne that there's something he

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should be doing. By the time the emergency services have noted and passed on his call, whatever is to happen will be in the past. If he's alive, the pilot will have radioed ahead. Perhaps they're already covering the runway in foam. Pointless at this stage to go down and make himself available to the hospital. Heathrow isn't in its area under the Emergency Plan. Elsewhere, further west, in darkened bedrooms, medics will be pulling on their clothes with no idea of what they face. Still fifteen miles of descent. If the fuel tanks explode there will be nothing for them to do.

The plane emerges from the trees, crosses a gap and disappears behind the Post Office Tower. If Perowne were inclined to religious feeling, to supernatural explanations, he could play with the idea that he's been summoned; that having woken in an unusual state of mind, and gone to the window for no reason, he should acknowledge a hidden order, an external intelligence which wants to show or tell him something of significance. But a city of its nature cultivates insomniacs; it is itself a sleepless entity whose wires never stop singing; among so many millions there are bound to be people staring out of windows when normally they would be asleep. And not the same people every night. That it should be him and not someone else is an arbitrary matter. A simple anthropic principle is involved. The primitive thinking of the supernaturally inclined amounts to what his psychiatric colleagues call a problem or an idea of reference. An excess of the subjective, the ordering of the world in line with your needs, an inability to contemplate your own unimportance. In Henry's view such reasoning belongs on a spectrum at whose far end, rearing like an abandoned temple, lies psychosis.

And such reasoning may have caused the fire on the plane. A man of sound faith with a bomb in the heel of his shoe. Among the terrified passengers many might be praying (another problem of reference) to their own god for intercession. And if there are to be deaths, the very god who ordained them will soon be funereally petitioned for comfort. Perowne regards this is a matter for wonder, a human complication beyond the reach of morals. From it there spring, alongside the unreason and slaughter, decent people and good deeds, beautiful cathedrals, mosques, cantatas, poetry. Even the denial of God, he was once amazed and indignant to hear a priest argue, is a spiritual exercise, a form of prayer – it's not easy to escape from the clutches of the believers. The best hope for the plane is that it's suffered simple, secular mechanical failure.

It passes beyond the Tower and begins to recede across an open patch of western sky, angling a little towards the north. The fire appears to diminish with the slowly changing perspective. His view now is mostly of the tail and its flashing light. The noise of the engine's distress is fading. Is the undercarriage down? As he wonders, he also wishes it, or wills it. A kind of praying? He's asking no one any favours. Even when the landing lights have shrunk to nothing, he continues to watch the sky in the west, fearing the sight of an explosion, unable to look away. Still cold, despite the dressing gown, he wipes the pane clear of the condensation from his breath, and thinks how remote it now seems, that unprompted, exalted mood that brought him from his bed. Finally he straightens and quietly unfolds the shutters to mask the sky.

As he comes away, he remembers the famous thought experiment he learned about long ago on a physics course. Acat, Schrödinger's Cat, hidden from view in a covered

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box, is either still alive, or has just been killed by a randomly activated hammer hitting a vial of poison. Until the observer lifts the cover from the box, both possibilities, alive cat and dead cat, exist side by side, in parallel universes, equally real. At the point at which the lid is lifted from the box and the cat is examined, a quantum wave of probability collapses. None of this has never made any sense to him at all. No human sense. Surely another example of a problem of reference. He's heard that even the physicists are abandoning it. To Henry it seems beyond the requirements of proof: a result, a consequence, exists separately in the world, independent of himself, known to others, awaiting his discovery. What then collapses will be his own ignorance. Whatever the score, it is already chalked up. And whatever the passengers' destination, whether they are frightened and safe, or dead, they will have arrived by now.

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