Coda

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Extract

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Grinner with a Knife

It's coming up to 4 a.m. on a Friday morning, and I've just promised myself, a self loaded with and lightened by a couple of sleeping pills, that I will go on with this tomorrow – just get a first sentence, I told myself, and when you are ready tomorrow look at it, and then continue into another sentence, and if you can another one, and if you're lucky you'll catch up with yourself in what you understand, at 4 a.m. on this Friday morning, will be an account of what you've been told, on good medical authority, is the beginning of your dying.

A demain, therefore.

Demain has arrived, and I'm going on with this, the beginning of my dying – now, is that merely a perverse way of writing the end of my living – the ending of my life? I don't think so – the perverse part of my situation is that, apart from the fact – not yet completely authenticated – that I'm dying, I feel really quite well, physically better than I've felt in a long time, for the last year almost, so really it's not that I'm dying, rather that I'm being killed off by a tumour that so far hasn't announced itself by an overt presence on its host – my body, more

specifically my lung – but has been discovered –

It's like this, at least in my imagination – you come back home one evening, the house is dark, as you expect it to be, you switch on a light, an extra light, one you didn't know you had, and unexpectedly your eye goes to a corner of the room that you've never seen illuminated before, and in it is crouching a grinning man holding a knife – and then the light goes off, normal lighting is resumed, there is no one in the corner as far as you can see, but you know that if the light came on again you would see him again, see him in more detail, the teeth, one particular and prominent tooth, the completely confident intent in the eyes, the compactness, wholeness, distinctive of his intent to murder you – and you can't get out of your house, which was once your protection and the most comforting place in the world – it is now your prison, inhabited by you and the creature in the corner, who might also be slipping into other rooms, to catch you there, or there, or there – in his own good time. You are his good time, in waiting. So I am living in a state of terror and cowardice – I am waiting to be murdered in my house by the grinning murderer with the knife – that is sort of how I feel about the tumour in my lung. Almost I want to give myself over to him – there, there you are, do it, do it now – but

mostly I want to run and run, as if running will carry me away from him, and not carry him along inside me, there for the ride, enjoying it.

A Run in the Churchyard

And indeed an hour or so ago I went to the churchyard at the end of our street, unlocked the gate, and walked around and around for an hour without stopping, a very rapid plod, head lowered so I don't have to meet the look of anyone else strolling along the paths, keeping my eyes off any dogs with affectionate, trouser-pawing tendencies – I felt my body surging along, even if rightly I've called it a plod, I felt a looseness in my legs, an easy swing in my arms, and at one point, having made sure that there was no witness but a bunched-up woman with two corgi-type dogs who was as determined to avoid me as I was to avoid her, I went to the top of the path and set out on a jog. It was as if I'd never run before in my life.

I feel a need to interpolate here a brief history of my athletic career, which entails, I think, a brief history of my mother's career – she was a fine athlete, outstanding in the broad jump, a competition long ago eliminated as an international event – you stood still on a board embedded in the ground, swung your

arms, heaved yourself through the air into a pit of sand – a stationary version of the long jump, which involves a very fast sprint to a board embedded in the ground, from which you take off into a pit of sand – Mummy also did that, the long jump, as well as the high jump, and won some medals at international level – there was a photograph in an album of her receiving a medal from the King of Sweden, not long before the last war, although I can't remember for which event, or whether it was gold, silver or bronze – but anyway there she was in the photograph, a medal-winner and acknowledged as such by Swedish royalty – I have an idea that it was King Gustav, but have no idea whether Sweden ever had a king called Gustav, it's just that the name Gustav has attached itself to the memory of a small man with a beard holding something out to Mummy, who is stooped in a sort of bow – but what was she wearing? I have a memory of her position but not of her clothes – I wonder what happened to the photograph, and how old I was when I saw it – I do remember clearly that it embarrassed us, Nigel, my older brother, and me – we didn't like looking at it, or hearing about her athletic achievements, they seemed inappropriate for a mother, even a long-legged mother who swam and played tennis, and would race after us to deliver a kick or a blow, up and down the stairs or across the garden – I've described elsewhere her com-

bative nature, her readiness to meet perceived impertinence or foolishness with a cuff or a kick, and how, after five years of separation – we were evacuated to Canada during the war when I was three, Nigel four – we relished the excitement and drama she brought into our lives, as well as the reassuring intimacy of casual and only accidentally painful violence – when our reflexes failed, for instance, and we stumbled into rather than away from the swiping hand.

But the idea of her running about and jumping in public was strange and distasteful, her winning medals somehow made it worse, it seemed much more respectable and normal that she'd been a gym teacher and coached lacrosse and hockey at a girls' school until she met and married my father, a Canadian doctor, a locum at her father's practice – actually he was engaged to her sister until Mummy returned from her school in Shropshire and took him for herself – but why am I going back into all this history? I've already written about it elsewhere – I think to establish that being good at running and jumping, football and cricket was in my genes, and that the memory of being good seemed to be lingering in my body like a taunt, as if my legs themselves had a memory of a time when they could lift and stretch, and I could fly along the top of the ground with no need of muscles or bones or lungs, all those

parts of me that have become more and more noticeable as they've served me less and less well, like bad waiters – a ridiculous analogy, it would make my body into a restaurant, but it gets me back to the sentence that I interrupted about being in the churchyard just a few hours ago feeling that I could walk, was in fact walking, with power and authority, so how could I be terminally ill? and deciding to test myself further with a little run – and I tried, and – I wrote – 'It was as if I'd never run before' and really the sentence should have gone on 'which is probably why I couldn't do it', because the fact is that I couldn't, not even for three steps, for all my legs' memory of once having sped and flown etc., they'd forgotten – I've forgotten – how to run.

I tried to work it out, the mechanics of it, and after a bit of lifting my legs and pumping my arms while stationary, I tottered forward and managed a jerky little passage of about fifteen steps of something that was more complicated and more urgent than a walk, but also made me feel ill with exhaustion and shame, as if I'd been struggling uphill with a great weight, which was I suppose the weight of my self, accumulated over seven decades – I thought I must get home and lie down, and headed towards the gate, which the two-corgis woman seemed to be holding open for me but wasn't, she was holding it open for her

dogs, just as I got to it she let it swing closed behind her, and hurried off with her head down, the dogs scampering playfully around her, and I had to fumble for my key, locate the lock, heave it open – and here I am, having rested on the bed for a while, writing it all down and thinking as I do so that this is not the way a man should confront the fact that he's dying, how can writing of his failure to run about in the local churchyard possibly help him, and what if I'd succeeded? What if I'd sped and flown up and down the paths as once I could have done, once, once upon a time I could have done?

A Short History of Failure

I keep sitting down to go on with this, again and again and again, night after night after night, but it's no good. I suppose that I'm the writing equivalent of dumb-struck.

It's been weeks now – a month even, the whole of July, and I still can't do it.

That's August gone, the summer almost over. I haven't the will is the truth of the matter. Perhaps it's been zapped by the radiotherapy. Every time I pick

up my pen I write into my yellow pad either a squiggle or that I can't write, and put the pen down again.

We've planned to go to Crete. In fact we should have been there on Friday, and then again yesterday, but I wasn't well enough – washed out and frail, the effect of the radiotherapy. We're now booked on a flight tomorrow afternoon. If we get there perhaps I'll be able to put something down.

OK, here we are, and I'll try. The thing is, it's all so haphazard in memory that I can't do it chronologically, or in any sort of order, probably, I'll just have to let it happen as it happens. If it happens.

Well now.

Take it easy.
Go from where you're sitting, why not?
Yes, but not today.
Tomorrow. I'll start tomorrow.

As it happens, then.

It's tomorrow again.

So tomorrow I'll start. Tomorrow I'll let it happen as it happens.

Crete

As It Happens at Last

As it happens, I am sitting at a long blue table with my back cushioned against the wall of a small white chapel. I think this table is actually a part of a restaurant and not the chapel, because just beyond it are small, square tables with canvas chairs, some of them under a makeshift roof, and then there is a kitchen and a section enclosed to make a dining room, and an outside grill and bar arrangement – so really, while all the currently highly sensitive and emotional part of me clings to the notion that I've attached myself physically to a chapel, the truth is likely to be that I'm sitting in an empty restaurant. I've been pretending I don't know it's a restaurant, that really it's a complicated extension of the chapel, serving a religious function for the feasts of the saints' name days, for example, and that all the people of the neighbourhood attend it and then eat appropriate dishes, or eat appropriate dishes before attending it, served by assigned parishioners or members of a holy order, but it's no good, the fact is that I ate here myself, last night, with Victoria of course. The food was delicious, at least Victoria says it was, and actually I did manage to eat a little of it

– eating is a bit tricky at the moment as a) I'm a bit short of an appetite since the radiotherapy and b) I seem to have lost my sense of taste since the radiotherapy and c) I have trouble fitting my dentures into my mouth since the radiotherapy – it's as if my lower and upper jaw have been realigned by the rays to give me a differently shaped mouth from the one my dentist worked from. On the other hand I could see that the food was at least popular, because everybody at the surrounding tables ate it with real enthusiasm, and made appreciative if charmless noises – grunting and going 'mmmm'. There was a French couple at the table next to ours, neat and low-voiced, young middle-aged and gravely happy – he looked a bit smooth and film-starry until he suddenly addressed the waiter on the subject of the pieces of cheese fried in batter they'd just consumed – his clear, tight little film-starry face became vulpine, you could see all his teeth – such was his grinning enthusiasm for the pieces of fried cheese in batter, a Crete speciality, apparently, and offered as a pudding because the batter is soaked in honey. His wife or mistress was a charming though not very pretty mess of a woman, farouche might be the word, short black hair tangled, and the sleeves of her wind-breaker down over her wrists. She was, like him, a hearty and appreciative eater. They were

both heavy smokers. It was what I noticed first about them. During the course of the meal she had five, he had four, cigarettes, but the odd thing was that they shared the pack – no, she was the keeper of the pack, kept it just above her plate, and he would reach over, take the pack, shake out a cigarette, light it with the lighter she kept on top of the pack, then put both back in front of her. In my experience, heavy smokers like to have their own pack and lighter, so there was probably something symbolic in their arrangement. He liked the sense of her being in charge, she liked the sense of being his handmaiden. I don't think it was simply that he'd forgotten his cigarettes and lighter, it looked habitual, a relaxed and intimate ritual that might one day, when recollected by one or other of them, be charged with pathos, even grief.

It was very pleasant and peaceful sitting under the Cretan night sky, the sound of the waves lapping at the beach below, the murmur of voices and quiet laughter, well, that is until a trio of elderly northerners, Yorkshire from their accents, suddenly appeared and sat down at a table near us – two women and a man with a finely structured, noble face, with crinkly eyes and a furrowed brow who looked unnervingly like Sean Connery – the impersonation helped by the grey spade beard, heavy eyebrows and balding

head, but in his speech, in the level of his conversation – it's not simply that he was boastful and loud but he appeared to be retarded in some way. I don't believe he was drunk, but he shouted and bellowed out laughter as if he were in a crowded pub. At one point he told a joke that involved imitating a hen, so he 'did' the hen with flappings of his arms and squawks and bouncings up and down in his chair – the two women, one of whom could be mistaken for an academic – cropped grey hair, serious spectacles, a blinking, murmuring manner, short and squat of figure, but with a piercing laugh that, once started, went on and on – the other was fat, slovenly, coarse-haired, hoarse-voiced – the three of them, especially when they were simultaneously in full flow, the two women screaming out their laughter, he raising his voice to be heard above it, seemed to have come from a mid-twentieth century that only existed in the cinema and in novels – *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *Room at the Top* and so forth, and yet here they were last night at a table a few yards away from the little chapel, against the wall of which I'm resting my back as I write this –

My tendency is to go on writing this, and this sort of stuff – about the hotel, its restaurants, the sea, Crete, to which we've come in late September – as a