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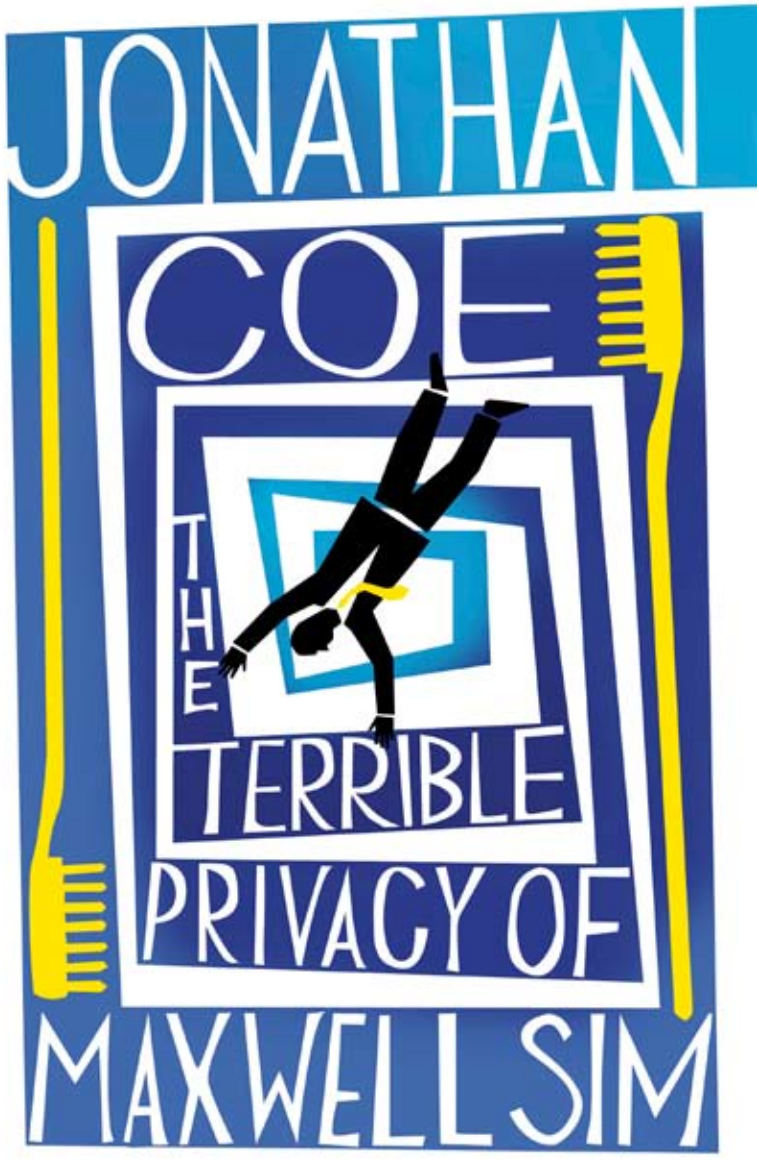
The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim

Written by Jonathan Coe

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The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim
by
Jonathan Coe

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The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim

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Salesman found naked in car

Grampian Police patrolling the snowbound stretch of the A93 between Braemar and Spittal of Glenshee on Thursday night spotted a car apparently abandoned at the side of the road just below the Glenshee Ski Centre.

On closer inspection it became clear that the unconscious driver was still inside the car. Clothes belonging to the middle-aged man, who was almost naked, were found scattered throughout the vehicle. On the passenger seat beside him were two empty whisky bottles.

The mystery deepened as the policemen inspected the boot of the car and found two cardboard boxes containing more than 400 toothbrushes, as well as a large black bin liner filled with picture postcards of the Far East.

The man was suffering from severe hypothermia and was flown to Aberdeen Royal Infirmary by air ambulance. He was later identified as Mr Maxwell Sim, aged 48, of Watford, England.

Mr Sim was a salesman employed on a freelance basis by Guest Toothbrushes of Reading, a company specializing in ecologically friendly oral hygiene products. The company had gone into liquidation that morning.

Mr Sim has made a full recovery and is believed to have returned to his home in Watford. Police have not yet confirmed whether they will press charges for drink driving.

Aberdeenshire Press and Journal,
Monday, 9 March 2009

Sydney–Watford

I

When I saw the Chinese woman and her daughter playing cards together at their restaurant table, the water and the lights of Sydney harbour shimmering behind them, it set me thinking about Stuart, and the reason he had to give up driving his car.

I was going to say 'my friend Stuart', but I suppose he's not a friend any more. I seem to have lost a number of friends in the last few years. I don't mean that I've fallen out with them, in any dramatic way. We've just decided not to stay in touch. And that's what it's been: a decision, a conscious decision, because it's not difficult to stay in touch with people nowadays, there are so many different ways of doing it. But as you get older, I think that some friendships start to feel increasingly redundant. You just find yourself asking, 'What's the point?' And then you stop.

Anyway, about Stuart and his driving. He had to stop because of the panic attacks. He was a good driver, a careful and conscientious driver, and he had never been involved in an accident. But occasionally, when he got behind the wheel of a car, he would experience these panic attacks, and after a while they started to get worse, and they started to happen more often. I can remember when he first started telling me about all this: it was lunchtime and we were in the canteen of the department store in Ealing, where we worked together for a year or two. I don't think I can have listened very carefully, though, because Caroline was sitting at the same table, and things between us were just starting to get interesting, so the last thing I wanted to hear about was Stuart and his neuroses about driving. That must be why I never really thought about it again until years later, at the restaurant on Sydney harbour, when it all came back. His problem, as far as I can remember, was this. Whereas most people, as they watched the coming and going of cars on a busy road, would see a normal, properly functioning traffic system, Stuart could only

perceive it as an endless succession of narrowly averted accidents. He saw cars hurtling towards each other at considerable speeds, and missing each other by inches – time and time again, every few seconds, repeated constantly throughout the day. 'All those cars,' he said to me, 'only *just* managing not to crash into each other. How can people stand it?' In the end it became too much for him to contemplate, and he had to stop driving.

Why had this conversation just come back to me, tonight of all nights? It was 14 February 2009. The second Saturday in February. Valentine's Day, in case you hadn't noticed. The water and the lights of Sydney harbour were shimmering behind me, and I was dining alone since my father had, for various weird reasons of his own, refused to come out with me, even though this was my last evening in Australia, and the only reason for me visiting Australia in the first place had been to see him and try to rebuild my relationship with him. Right now, in fact, I was probably feeling more alone than I had ever felt in my life, and what really brought it home to me was the sight of the Chinese woman and her daughter playing cards together at their restaurant table. They looked so happy in each other's company. There was such a connection between them. They weren't talking very much, and when they did talk, it was about their card game, as far as I could tell, but that didn't matter. It was all in their eyes, their smiles, the way they kept laughing, the way they kept leaning in to each other. By comparison, none of the diners at the other tables seemed to be having any fun. Sure, they were all laughing and talking too. But they didn't seem to be entirely *absorbed* in each other, the way the Chinese woman and her daughter did. There was a couple sitting opposite me, out on a Valentine's Day date by the looks of it: he kept checking his watch, she kept checking her mobile for text messages. Behind me there was a family of four: the two little boys were playing on their Nintendo DSs, and the husband and wife hadn't spoken to each other for about ten minutes. To the left of me, slightly blocking my view of the waterfront, was a group of six friends: two of them were involved in this big argument which had started out as a discussion of global warming, and now seemed to have more to do with economics; neither of them was giving any

ground, while the other four sat there in bored silence, looking on. An elderly couple on the other side of me had chosen to sit side by side at their table, rather than opposite each other, so that they could both look at the view instead of talking to each other. None of this depressed me, exactly. I dare say that all of these people would go home thinking that they'd had a perfectly enjoyable night out. But it was only the Chinese woman and her daughter that I really envied. It was clear that they had something precious: something that I wanted badly. Something that I wanted to share in.

How could I be sure that she was Chinese? Well, I couldn't. But she looked Chinese, to me. She had long black hair, slightly wild and unkempt. A thin face, with prominent cheekbones. (Sorry, I am just not very good at describing people.) Bright red lipstick, which struck me as an odd touch. A lovely smile, slightly tight-lipped but all the brighter for that, somehow. She was expensively dressed, with some sort of black chiffon scarf (I am not very good at describing clothes either – are you looking forward to the next 300 pages?), held in place with a large golden brooch. So she was well-off. Elegant – that would be a good word to describe her. Very elegant. Her daughter was well dressed too, and also had black hair (well, you don't get many Chinese blondes), and seemed to be about eight or nine years old. She had a beautiful laugh: it started as a throaty chuckle and then bubbled up into a series of giggles which cascaded and finally died away like a stream tumbling down a hillside into a series of pools. (Just like the ones Mum and I used to walk past whenever she took me for a walk on the Lickey Hills, all those years ago, at the back of The Rose and Crown pub, on the edge of the municipal golf course. I suppose that's what her laugh reminded me of, and perhaps that's another of the reasons why the Chinese girl and her mother made such an impression on me that evening.) I don't know what was making her laugh so much: something to do with the card game, which wasn't a really silly, childish one like snap, but didn't seem to be very serious or grown-up either. Perhaps they were playing knock-out whist or something like that. Whatever it was, it was making the little girl laugh, and her mother was playing along with her laughter, encouraging it, joining in, surfing on its waves. It was such a pleasure to look at

them, but I had to ration my glances, in case they noticed that I was looking and the Chinese woman decided that I was some kind of creep. Once or twice she had noticed me looking at her and she had held my gaze for a couple of seconds, but it wasn't long enough, I couldn't read any kind of invitation into it and after those couple of seconds she looked away and she and her daughter would start talking and laughing again, quickly rebuilding that wall of intimacy, that protective screen.

Right at that moment, I would have liked to text Stuart, but I didn't have his mobile number any more. I would have liked to text him to say that I understood, now, what it was that he'd been trying to tell me about cars. Cars are like people. We mill around every day, we rush here and there, we come within inches of touching each other but very little real contact goes on. All those near misses. All those might-have-beens. It's frightening, when you think about it. Probably best not to think about it at all.

Can you remember where you were the day that John Smith died? I suspect that most people can't. In fact I suspect that many people can't even remember who John Smith was. Well, there have been a lot of John Smiths, of course, over the years, but the one I'm thinking of was the leader of the British Labour Party, who died of a heart attack in 1994. I realize his death doesn't have the global resonance of a JFK or a Princess Diana, but I can still remember where I was, with absolute clarity. I was in the canteen of that department store in Ealing, having my lunch. Stuart was with me, and two or three other guys including one called Dave, who was an absolute pain in the arse. He worked in Electrical Goods and was just the kind of man I can't stand. Loud and boring and much too sure of himself. And sitting at the table next to ours, all by herself, was this lovely woman in her early twenties with shoulder-length, light-brown hair, who looked lonely and out of place and kept glancing in our direction. Her name (as I was to find out, soon enough) was Caroline.

I'd only been working at this department store for a month or two. Before then I'd spent two or three years on the road selling toys for a company based in St Albans. It was a nice enough job, in a way. I

became good friends with the other South-eastern rep, Trevor Paige, and we had some great times together, in those two or three years, but I never enjoyed being on the road as much as he did, and it wasn't long before the novelty of all that travelling had well and truly worn off. I started looking for a chance to settle down. I'd recently put down the deposit on a nice little terraced house in Watford (not far from Trevor's, as it happened) and was keeping my eyes open for a new job opportunity. The store in Ealing had always been one of my regular calling-points and I'd also made it my business to become friendly with Stuart, who ran the toy department. There's always something rather artificial, I suppose, about friendships formed for business reasons, but Stuart and I did genuinely grow to like each other, and after a while I tried to make sure that Ealing would be my last call of the day, so that we could go out for a quick drink together after we'd had our meeting. And then one evening Stuart called me at home, outside work hours, and told me that he was being promoted to a job in the office upstairs, and he invited me to apply for his job running the toy department. Well, I hesitated at first, worrying how Trevor was going to react; but in the event, he was fine about it. He knew that it was just what I'd been looking for. So a couple of months later, I found myself working in Ealing full-time, and having lunch every day in the canteen with Stuart and his colleagues, and that was when I started to notice this lovely woman in her early twenties with light-brown hair who always seemed to be eating lunch by herself at the next table.

It all seems like such a long time ago, now. Anything seemed possible, in those days. Anything at all. I wonder if that feeling ever comes back?

Best not to go down that path.

OK, then: the death of John Smith. There was a bunch of us guys in the canteen that day, sitting at one of the Formica-topped tables having our lunch. It was early in the summer of 1994. Don't ask me if it was sunny or rainy, though, because no sense of the weather outside ever managed to filter through to that dimly lit space. We took our lunches in a sort of perpetual twilight. What was different about that day, however, was that Dave – that's the obnoxious guy

from Electrical Goods, the one I couldn't stand – had asked Caroline to join us. Clearly, his plan was to try chatting her up, but it was all rather painful to witness because he kept making all the wrong moves. After failing to impress her with a description of his sports car and the state-of-the-art stereo system at his fancy bachelor pad in Hammersmith, he turned to the subject of John Smith's death – which had been announced on the radio that morning – and started using it as an excuse for a series of bad-taste jokes about heart attacks. Things like this: apparently, following Smith's first heart attack in the late 1980s, the doctors had been able to revive his heart but not his brain – so was it any wonder that they'd made him leader of the Labour Party? Now, it was obvious to me that Caroline was annoyed and upset by this stupid attempt at humour, but she wasn't sure enough of herself to answer back. Instead she just smiled weakly, and apart from some tepid waves of laughter around the table there was no response until I heard myself saying – slightly to my own astonishment – 'That's not funny, Dave. Not funny at all.' Most of the guys had finished their lunches by now, and it wasn't long before people started getting up and leaving, but not me and Caroline: neither of us actually said anything, but we both decided to stay behind and linger over our puddings, as if by some sort of unspoken agreement. And so for a minute or two we sat there in awkward, somehow expectant silence, until I made some embarrassed comment about sensitivity not being Dave's strong point, and then, for the very first time, Caroline spoke to me directly.

That was the same moment, I believe, that I fell in love with her. It was her voice, you see. I had been expecting something clipped and ultra-refined to go with her looks, but instead she came out with this really broad, down-to-earth Lancastrian accent. It took me so much by surprise – I was so enthralled by it – that at first I forgot to listen to what she was actually saying, and just let her voice play over me, almost as if she was talking in some mellifluous foreign language. Quickly, though, before I made too disastrous an impression, I pulled myself together and started to concentrate and realized that she was asking me why I hadn't joined in with the jokes. She wanted to know if it was because I was a Labour supporter and I said, No, it was

nothing to do with that at all. I just told her that I didn't think it was right to make jokes about someone so soon after he had died, especially when he had always seemed to be a decent man and was leaving a wife and a family behind. Caroline agreed with me about that but she also seemed to be sorry about his death for a different reason: she thought that it had come at a terrible time for British politics and said that John Smith would probably have won the next election and might have turned out to be a great Prime Minister.

Well, I admit that this was not the sort of conversation you usually heard in the canteen of this department store, let alone the sort that I very often took part in myself. I've never been very interested in politics. (In fact I didn't even vote in the last two elections, although I did vote for Tony Blair in 1997, mainly because I thought it was what Caroline wanted me to do.) And when I found out, as I soon did, that Caroline was only working in the maternity section of the department store as a temporary measure, while she began work on her first novel, I felt even more out of my depth. I hardly ever read novels, never mind trying to write one. But in a way this only fuelled my curiosity. I couldn't work Caroline out, you see. After spending all those years on the road, cold-calling people and trying to sell them stuff, I was fairly satisfied with my ability to size people up and decide, in the space of a few seconds, what it was that made them tick. But I hadn't met many people like Caroline. I'd never been to university (she was a history graduate from Manchester) and had spent most of my adult life in the company of men – businessmen, at that. The kind of people who never gave away much about themselves when they talked and tended to take the status quo for granted. Compared to them, Caroline was an unknown quantity to me. I couldn't even begin to guess what had brought her here.

She gave me the explanation for that on our first date, and a very sad story it turned out to be. We were in a branch of Spaghetti House (one of my favourite chains, back in those days, though you don't see so many of them any more) and while Caroline picked at her tagliatelle carbonara she told me that, when she was at university in Manchester, she'd got quite deeply involved with this man who was studying English in the same year as her. Then he'd got a job in

London, working in a TV production company, so they'd both moved down and found themselves a flat in Ealing. Caroline's real ambition was to write books – novels and short stories – so she took this job in the department store as a temporary thing, trying to get on with her writing in the evening and at weekends. Meanwhile, her boyfriend started an affair with someone he'd met at the production company, and fell madly in love with her, and within a couple of weeks he'd dumped Caroline and moved out, and she was left all by herself, living somewhere where she had no friends and doing a job in which she had no interest.

Well, the truth is obvious enough now, isn't it? There's a phrase, a cliché, for the state Caroline was in, back then: *on the rebound*. She liked me because I was being kind to her, and because I'd caught her at a low ebb, and because I probably wasn't quite as crass and insensitive as the other guys in the canteen. But there's no denying, in retrospect, that I was out of her league. In a way it's amazing that we lasted as long as we did. But of course, you can't see into the future. I usually have trouble seeing a couple of weeks ahead, never mind fifteen years. Back then, we were young and naive and at the end of that evening in the Spaghetti House, when I asked her if she'd like to drive out into the country with me at the weekend, neither of us had the slightest idea where it would lead and all I can remember now is the shining light of gratitude in her eyes as she said Yes.

Fifteen years ago. Is fifteen years a long time, or a short time? I suppose everything is relative. Set against the history of mankind, fifteen years is just the blink of an eye, but it also seemed that I had travelled a long way, an unimaginably long way, from the hope and excitement of that faraway first date in the Spaghetti House to the evening a few months ago, 14 February 2009, when (at the age of forty-eight) I found myself sitting alone at a restaurant in Australia, the water and the lights of Sydney harbour shimmering behind me, and I couldn't stop staring at the beautiful Chinese woman and her little daughter who were playing cards together at their table. Caroline had left home by then. Walked out, I mean. She had been gone six months and she had taken our daughter, Lucy, with her. They had

moved up north, to Kendal in the Lake District. What was it, finally, that drove her away? Just a long-standing build-up of frustration, I suppose. Apart from the birth of Lucy, it seemed that the last fifteen years hadn't brought Caroline any of the things she'd been hoping for. The great novel remained unwritten. She hadn't even managed to finish a short story, so far as I knew. Lucy's arrival had put paid to a lot of that. Motherhood is pretty demanding, after all. I certainly couldn't see why being married to me should stop her from writing anything, if that's what she really wanted to do. Another thing that occurs to me is that Caroline might, deep down (and this is a painful thing to admit) have been a little bit ashamed of me. Of my job, to be more precise. I'd moved on, by now, to one of the biggest and most prestigious department stores in central London, where I was employed as an After-Sales Customer Liaison Officer. It was an excellent job, as far as I could see. But maybe there was a part of her that thought the husband of an aspiring writer should do something a bit more . . . I don't know – artistic? Intellectual? You'd think we might have discussed some of these issues but the saddest thing about our marriage, during the last few years, had been the almost complete lack of communication. We seemed to have forgotten the art of talking to each other, except in the form of screaming rows accompanied by the swapping of painful insults and the hurling of household objects. I won't rehearse all the details but I do remember one of our exchanges, from the penultimate squabble or perhaps the one before that. We had begun by arguing over whether to use an abrasive scourer or a soft sponge to clean off the stainless steel surface of our cooker, and within about thirty seconds I heard myself telling Caroline that it was clear she didn't love me any more. When she failed to deny it, I said, 'Sometimes I don't even think you *like* me that much,' and do you know what she said to that? She said, 'How can anybody like a man who doesn't even like himself?'

Well, if she was going to talk in riddles, we were never going to get anywhere.

The Chinese woman and her daughter stayed at the restaurant for a long time. Considering how young the daughter was, it was surprising

that they were still there at about ten-thirty. They'd finished eating ages ago and all that was keeping them there now was the card game. Most of the tables were empty, and soon it would be time for me to go back to Dad's flat, as well. There were some things we needed to talk about before I caught my flight home the next afternoon. I needed a pee before leaving, though, so I stood up from my table and made my way to the gents' in the basement.

I don't like to pee standing up. Don't ask me why. As far as I know, there was no traumatic incident when I was a child, getting molested in a public toilet or anything like that. In fact I don't like to pee standing up even when there is no one else in the gents', in case someone walks in when I'm halfway through, causing me to stop in mid-flow and turn myself off like a tap, and then have to walk out in a fury of frustration and embarrassment, with my bladder still half-full. So I sat down in one of the cubicles – after making the usual preparations, wiping the seat and so on – and that was when it really hit me. The loneliness. I was sitting, underground, in a tiny little box, tens of thousands of miles from home. If I were to have a sudden heart attack sitting on that toilet, what would be the consequence? Some member of the restaurant staff would probably find me just before they locked up. The police would be called and they would look at my passport and credit cards and somehow, I suppose, through the use of some international database, they would work out my connections to Dad and to Caroline, and they would phone them up and tell them. How would Caroline take the news? She'd be pretty upset, at first, but I'm not sure how deep that would go. I didn't play much part in her life any more. It would be worse for Lucy, of course, but even she was growing steadily more distant: it was more than a month since I'd heard anything from her. And who else was there? There might be one or two passing tremors of feeling from friends or work colleagues, maybe, but nothing major. Chris, my old schoolfriend, might feel . . . well, something, some spasm of regret that we'd become estranged and hadn't seen each other for so long. Trevor Paige would be sorry, genuinely sorry. So would Janice, his wife. But my passing wouldn't send out many ripples, beyond that. A Facebook account gone inactive – but would any of my Facebook friends really

notice? I doubted it. I was alone in the world, now, terribly alone. I would be flying home the next day, and pretty much all that would be waiting for me when I got there was an unlived-in flat full of Ikea furniture and three weeks' worth of bills, bank statements and pizza delivery adverts. And now I was sitting by myself in a little wooden box, underground, in the basement of a restaurant beside Sydney harbour, and upstairs, just a few feet above my head, were two people who – however much they might be alone in the world, in other ways – at least had each other; at least were bonded to each other, with a strength and an intensity that was obvious to anyone who so much as glanced at them. I envied them for that, fiercely. The thought of it filled me with a sudden, overwhelming need to get to know this beautiful Chinese woman and her beautiful daughter, who loved each other so much. The prospect of walking away from this restaurant without attempting to introduce myself to them – to make them aware, somehow, that I existed – seemed intolerable.

And the amazing thing was that the more I thought about it, the more I realized there was no reason why I shouldn't actually do it. Why was I even hesitating, in fact? This was the very thing I was supposed to be good at. Before Caroline and Lucy left me, knocking me for six and turning me into a sort of involuntary hermit, I had built an entire career on my ability to get on with people. What else do you think an After-Sales Customer Liaison Officer does, after all? It's more or less the very definition of the job. I could be charming, when I wanted to be. I knew how to put a woman at her ease. I knew that politeness, good manners and an unthreatening tone of voice would usually disarm even the wariest stranger.

And so that night – for the very first time since Caroline had walked out on me, six months earlier – I finally came to a decision: a strong one. Without even bothering to work out what I was going to say, I left the cubicle, gave my hands a cursory rinse, and climbed back upstairs with quick, resolute steps. I was breathing heavily and tense with nervousness but also a sense of freedom and relief.

But the Chinese woman and her daughter had paid their bill and gone.