The Society of Others

William Nicholson

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I'm writing this by the light of a new day, with a pen on paper, the old way. No seamless corrections possible here. I want to see my first thoughts, and the words I cross out, and the words I choose to replace them. First thoughts are usually lies. Vicino says, Write something about yourself, then write the opposite. Then open your mind to the possibility that the second statement is true.

I'm not a bad person. I'm a bad person.

I didn't mean to kill the man in the reading room. I did mean to kill the man in the reading room.

What happened afterwards wasn't my fault, don't blame me. It was my fault. Blame me.

So this is the story of how everything changed. I'm not going to tell you my name. If you want a name, use your own.

Begin with a day picked at random, recalled without hindsight. I must do my best to make you understand what I was, because only then will you understand what I have become. The operation has been a complete success, but, as they say, the patient died.

On this random day from all that time ago, longer ago than yesterday, I'm sitting alone in my room, the blind down over the window and the door locked. There's music playing to which I am not listening. The television is on, with no sound. I'm not watching. It's just there like the crack of light on the windowsill and the pressure in my bladder that tells me I need to piss. Maybe I'll go soon. I'm doing nothing in particular. I do nothing most days. You could say it's what I do, like it's my occupation. This is not a problem. I don't want anything. I have the animal needs like you do, to eat and excrete, to mate and to sleep, but as soon as the needs are met they go away, and everything's the way it was before. That stuff is necessary. We're not talking desire.

I don't even want money. What's the point? You see something you want to buy, you get excited about having it, you buy it, the excitement fades. Everything's the way it was before. I've seen through that game. They make you want things so they get your money. Then they take your money and then they've got it, and what do they do? They use it to buy things someone else has made them want. For a few moments they think they're happy, and then it all fades and everything's the way it was before. How stupid can you get? It's like fish. Fish swim about all day finding food to give them energy to swim about all day. It makes me laugh. These people who hurry

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about all day making money to sell each other things. Anyone with eyes to see could tell them their lives are meaningless and they aren't getting any happier.

My life is meaningless. I'm not getting any happier.

My late father says, 'Your mother tells me you spend all day shut up in your room.'

I say, 'She does not lie.'

He says, 'There's a big wide world out there. You're not going anywhere so long as you stay shut up in your room.'

I say, 'There's nowhere to go.'

He hates that. My negative attitude. I could tell him he's not going anywhere either. But why pop his balloon?

I like my room. I said before I don't want anything, but this isn't entirely true. I want my own room. I don't much care what's in it so long as it has a door I can shut and lock so people don't come asking me to do things. I expect maybe I'll spend the rest of my life in my room, and at the end I'll just die here and no one will find me and that's just fine with me.

This big wide world: first of all, it's not so big and wide. Really the world is only as big as your experience of it, which is not big at all. And what sort of world is it? I would characterise it as remote, uninterested, unpredictable, dangerous, and unjust. When I was small I thought the world was like my parents, only bigger. I thought it watched me and clapped when I danced. This is not so. The world is not watching and will never clap. My father doesn't get this, he's still dancing. It makes me quite sad to see him.

Cat says my world view lacks depth and is merely bitterness. I dispute this. I feel no bitterness. I see things as they are. Nature is selfish. All creatures kill to survive. Love is a mechanism to propagate the species. Beauty is a trick that fades. Friendship is an arrangement for mutual advantage. Goodness is not rewarded, and evil is not punished. Religion is superstition. Death is annihilation. And as for God, if he exists at all he stopped caring for humankind centuries ago. Wouldn't you?

So why leave my room?

My education, such as it was, has ended. I have graduated. I'm supposed to be excited about his. My late father has put aside some money for me, quite a lot, a thousand pounds, so that I can have one last great adventure before real life begins. What kind of sales pitch is that? I mean, real life, bonjour tristesse. Appreciate the gesture, but truthfully there's nowhere I want to go and nothing I want to do.

For as long as I can remember I've been at some kind of school. I don't believe I learned anything at all. It was like half-listening to the safety announcement, the kind they give you on planes before take-off. The voice says this is really important,

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and to please listen carefully, but you still don't listen because it's not going to happen, and if it does you're dead anyway. However I admit now when I look back that the class system gave life a shape. One year followed the next, and without any decisions having to be made on my part I moved up from one class to the next, as if I was climbing a giant staircase. Now here I am at the top, and before me lies what is laughingly called the real world.

I am in the process of not applying for jobs. I'm thinking of becoming a journalist, or possibly a film director. It's hard to decide. Journalists meet a lot of interesting people and get to travel and do their work in short bursts, which means they don't get bored. Film directors spend years on one project and have a seriously bad time if it fails but they get to meet attractive young women and eat location catering. So it's hard to decide.

I'm joking of course. I have a not impressive degree from a not famous college in a not useful subject which I have already entirely forgotten.

'There are any number of jobs out there you could do,' says my father, looking at me with faux-sprightly eyes. Despite or perhaps because of the fact that he left us, he knows it's vital that he does nothing to undermine my self-confidence. If you believe in yourself you can do anything. That's what my father believes. It's the post-Christian faith that has replaced faith in the resurrection. Now each of us is supplied with our own personal resurrection. We get to pump ourselves up out of the tomb.

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