Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Tony and Susan

Written by Austin Wright

Published by Atlantic Books

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

First published in the United States in 1993 by Baskerville Publishers Ltd.

Originally published in Great Britain in 1994 by Touchstone,
an imprint of Simon & Schuster Ltd.

Reissued in Great Britain in 2010 by Atlantic Books,
an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

This paperback edition published in Great Britain in 2011
by Atlantic Books.

Copyright © Austin Wright, 1993

The moral right of Austin Wright to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination and not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities, is entirely coincidental.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Paperback ISBN: 978 1 84887 022 2
Open Market Edition ISBN: 978 1 84887 807 5

Printed in Great Britain

Atlantic Books
An imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London WC1N 3JZ

www.atlantic-books.co.uk

TONY AND SUSAN

BEFORE

This goes back to the letter Susan Morrow's first husband Edward sent her last September. He had written a book, a novel, and would she like to read it? Susan was shocked because, except for Christmas cards from his second wife signed 'Love,' she hadn't heard from Edward in twenty years.

So she looked him up in her memory. She remembered he had wanted to write, stories, poems, sketches, anything in words, she remembered it well. It was the chief cause of trouble between them. But she thought he had given up writing later when he went into insurance. Evidently not.

In the unrealistic days of their marriage there was a question whether she should read what he wrote. He was a beginner and she a tougher critic than she meant to be. It was touchy, her embarrassment, his resentment. Now in his letter he said, damn! but this book is good. How much he had learned about life and craft. He wanted to show her, let her read and see, judge for herself. She was the best critic he ever had, he said. She could help him too, for in spite of its merits he was afraid the novel lacked something. She would know, she could tell him. Take your time, he said, scribble a few words, whatever pops into your head. Signed, 'Your old Edward still remembering.'

The signature irritated her. It reminded her of too much and theatened the peace she had made with her past. She didn't like to remember or slip back into that unpleasant frame

of mind. But she told him to send the book along. She felt ashamed of her suspicions and objections. Why he'd ask her rather than a more recent acquaintance. The imposition, as if what pops into her head were easier than thinking things through. She couldn't refuse, though, lest it look like she were still living in the past. The package arrived a week later. Her daughter Dorothy brought it into the kitchen where they were eating peanut butter sandwiches, she and Dorothy and Henry and Rosie. The package was heavily taped. She extracted the manuscript and read the title page:

NOCTURNAL ANIMALS
A Novel By
Edward Sheffield

Well typed, clean pages. She wondered what the title meant. She liked Edward's gesture, reconciling and flattering. She had a sneaky feeling that put her on guard, so that when her real husband Arnold came in that night, she announced boldly: I heard from Edward today.

Edward who?

Oh, Arnold.

Oh Edward. Well. What does that old bastard have to say for himself?

That was three months ago. There's a worry in Susan's mind that comes and goes, hard to pin down. When she's not worrying, she worries lest she's forgotten what she's worrying about. And when she knows what she's worrying about, like whether Arnold understood what she meant, or what he meant when he said what he meant this morning, even then she has a feeling it's really something else, more important. Meanwhile

she runs the house, pays the bills, cleans and cooks, takes care of the kids, teaches three times a week in the community college, while her husband in the hospital repairs hearts. In the evenings she reads, preferring that to television. She reads to take her mind off herself.

She looks forward to Edward's novel because she likes to read, and she's willing to believe he can improve, but for three months she has put it off. The delay was not intentional. She put the manuscript in the closet and forgot, remembering thereafter only at wrong times, like while shopping for groceries or driving Dorothy to her riding lesson or grading freshman papers. When she was free, she forgot.

When not forgetting, she would try to clean out her mind to read Edward's novel in the way it deserved. The problem was old memory, coming back like an old volcano, full of rumble and quake. All that abandoned intimacy, his out-of-date knowledge of her, and hers of him. Her memory of his admiration of himself, his vanity, also his fears – his smallness – knowledge she must ignore if her reading was to be fair. She's determined to be fair. To be fair she must deny her memory and make as if she were a stranger.

She couldn't believe he merely wanted her to read his book. It must be something personal, a new twist in their dead romance. She wondered what Edward thought was missing in his book. His letter suggested he didn't know, but she wondered if there was a secret message: Susan and Edward, a subtle love song? Saying, read this, and when you look for what is missing, find Susan.

Or hate, which seemed more likely, though they got rid of that ages ago. If she was the villain, the missing thing a poison to lick like Snow White's deep red apple. It would be nice to know how ironic Edward's letter really was.

But though she prepared herself, she kept forgetting, did not read, and in time believed her failure was a completed event. This made her both defiant and ashamed until she got a card from Stephanie a few days before Christmas, with a note from Edward attached. He's coming to Chicago, the note said, December 30, one day only, staying at the Marriott, hope to see you then. She was alarmed because he'd want to talk about his unread manuscript, and then relieved to realize there was still time. After Christmas: Arnold her husband will be going to a convention of heart surgeons, three days. She can read it then. It will occupy her mind, a good distraction from Arnold's trip, and she needn't feel guilty after all.

Anticipating, she wonders what Edward looks like now. She remembers him blond, birdlike, eyes glancing down his beaky nose, unbelievably skinny with wire arms and pointed elbows, genitals disproportionately large among the bones. His quiet voice, clipped words, impatient as if he thought most of what he was obliged to say were too stupid to need saying.

Will he seem more dignified or more pompous? Probably he has put on weight, and his hair will be gray unless he's bald. She wonders what he'll think of her. She would like him to notice how much more tolerant, easygoing, and generous she is and how much more she knows. She fears he'll be put off by the difference between twenty-four and forty-nine. She has changed her glasses, but in Edward's day she wore no glasses at all. She is chubbier, breasts bigger, cheeks rosy where they were pale, convex where they were concave. Her hair, which in Edward's day was long straight and silky, is neat and short and turning gray. She has become healthy and wholesome, and Arnold says she looks like a Scandinavian skier.

Now that she is really going to read it, she wonders what kind of novel it is. Like traveling without knowing what country

you're going to. The worst would be if it's inept, which might vindicate her for the past but would embarrass her now. Even if it's not inept, there are risks: an intimate trip through an unfamiliar mind, forced to contemplate icons more meaningful to others than herself, confined with strangers she never chose, asked to participate in alien customs. With Edward as guide, whose dominance she once so struggled to escape.

The negative possibilities are tremendous: to be bored, to be offended, bathed in sentimentality, stunned by depression and gloom. What interests Edward at forty-nine? She feels sure only of what the novel will not be. Unless Edward has changed radically, it won't be a detective story or baseball story or Western. It won't be a story of blood and revenge.

What's left? She'll find out. She begins Monday night, day after Christmas, after Arnold has gone. It will take her three evenings to complete.

THE FIRST SITTING

ONE

That night, as Susan Morrow settles down to read Edward's manuscript, a fear shocks her like a bullet. It begins with a moment of intense concentration which disappears too fast to remember, leaving a residue of unspecified fright. Danger, threat, disaster, she doesn't know what. She tries to recover what was on her mind, thinking back to the kitchen, the pans and cooking utensils, the dishwasher. Then to catching her breath on the living room couch, where she had the dangerous thought. Dorothy and Henry with Henry's friend Mike are playing Monopoly on the study floor. She declines their invitation to play too.

There's the Christmas tree, cards on the mantel, games and clothing with tissue paper on the couch. A mess. The traffic at O'Hare dies in the house, Arnold is in New York by now. Unable to remember what frightened her, she tries to ignore it, rests her legs on the coffee table, puffs and wipes her glasses.

The worry on her mind insists, it's greater than she can explain. She dreads Arnold's trip, if that's what it is, like the end of the world, but finds no logical reason for such a feeling. Plane crash, but planes don't crash. The convention seems innocuous. People will recognize him or spot his name tag. He'll be flattered as usual to discover how distinguished he is, which will put him in the best of moods. The Chickwash interview will do no harm if nothing comes of it. If by rare chance something does come of it, there's a whole new life and the

opportunity to live in Washington if she wants. He's with colleagues and old hands, people she should trust. Probably she's just tired.

Still, she postpones Edward. She reads short things, the newspaper, editorials, crossword puzzle. The manuscript resists, or she resists, afraid to begin lest the book make her forget her danger, whatever that is. The manuscript is so heavy, so long. Books always resist her at the start, because they commit so much time. They can bury what she was thinking, sometimes forever. She could be a different person by the time she's through. This case is worse than usual, for Edward coming back to life brings new distractions that have nothing to do with her thoughts. He's dangerous too, unloading his brain, the bomb in him. Never mind. If she can't remember her trouble, the book will paint over it. Then she won't want to stop. She opens the box, looks at the title – *Nocturnal Animals*. She sees, going into the house at the zoo through the tunnel, glass tanks in dim purple light with strange busy little creatures, huge ears and big eye globes, thinking day is night. Come on, let's begin.

Nocturnal Animals 1

There was this man Tony Hastings, his wife Laura, and his daughter Helen, traveling east at night on the Interstate in northern Pennsylvania. They were starting their vacation, going to their summer cottage in Maine. They were driving at night because they had been slow starting and had been further delayed having to get a new tire along the way. It was Helen's idea, when they got back into the car after dinner, somewhere in eastern Ohio: 'Let's not look for a motel,' she said, 'let's drive all night.'

'Do you mean that?' Tony Hastings said.

'Sure, why not?'

The suggestion violated his sense of order and alarmed his habits. He was a mathematics professor who took pride in reliability and good sense. He had quit smoking six months before but sometimes still carried a pipe in his mouth for the steadiness it imparted. His first reaction to the suggestion was, don't be an idiot, but he suppressed that, wanting to be a good father. He considered himself a good father, a good teacher, a good husband. A good man. Yet he also felt a kinship with cowboys and baseball players. He had never ridden a horse and had not played baseball since childhood, and he was not very big and strong, but he wore a black mustache and considered himself easygoing. Responding to the idea of vacation and the freedom of a highway at night, the sudden lark of it, he was liberated by the irresponsibility of not having to hunt for a place to stay, not having to stop at signs and go up to desks and ask for rooms, lifted by the thought of riding into the night leaving his habits behind.

'Are you willing to share the driving at three a.m.?'

'Anytime, Daddy, anytime.'

'What do you think, Laura?'

'You won't be too tired in the morning?'

He knew the exotic night would be followed by the ghastly day and he would feel horrible trying not to fall asleep in the afternoon and getting them back on a normal schedule, but he was a cowboy on vacation, and it was a good time to be irresponsible.

'Okay,' he said. 'Let's go.'

So on they went, zipping along the Interstate through the slowly descending June twilight, bypassing industrial cities, bending slowly at high speed around the curves and over the

long rises and descents through farm land while the sun sinking behind them flashed in the windows of farmhouses in the high meadows ahead. The family of three was ecstatic with novelty, exclaiming to each other on the beauty of the countryside in this declining day, this angle of light looking away from the sun with the yellow fields and green woods and houses all tinted and changed with ambiguous brightness, and the road pavement also ambiguous, silver in the mirror and black in front.

They stopped for gas in the twilight, and when they came back to the highway the father Tony saw a ragged hitchhiker standing on the shoulder of the ramp up ahead. He began to accelerate. The hitchhiker had a sign, BANGOR ME.

The daughter Helen cried in his ear, 'He's going to Bangor, Daddy. Let's pick him up.'

Tony Hastings sped up. The hitchhiker had overalls and bare shoulders, a long yellow beard and a band around his hair. The man's eyes looked at Tony as he went past.

'Aw, Daddy.'

He looked over his shoulder to clear his way back to the highway.

'He was going to Bangor,' she said.

'You want his company for twelve hours?'

'You never stop for hitchhikers.'

'Strangers,' he said, wanting to warn Helen of the world's dangers but sounding like a prig just the same.

'Some people aren't as fortunate as we,' Helen said. 'Don't you feel guilty passing them up?'

'Guilty? Not me.'

'We have a car. We have space. We're going the same way.'

'Oh Helen,' Laura said. 'Don't be such a schoolgirl.'

'My pals who hitchhike home from school. What would they do if everybody thought like you?'

Silent a little. Helen said, 'That guy was perfectly nice. You can tell, how he looked.'

Tony amused, remembering the ragged man. 'That guy who wanted to bangor me?'

'Daddy!'

He felt wild in the growing night, exploratory, the unknown.

'He had a sign,' Helen said. 'That was polite of him, a considerate thing to do. And he had a guitar. Didn't you notice his guitar?'

'That wasn't a guitar, that was a machine gun,' Tony said. 'All thugs carry their machine guns in instrument cases so they'll be mistaken for musicians.'

He felt his wife Laura's hand on the back of his head.

'He looked like Jesus Christ, Daddy. Didn't you see his noble face?'

Laura laughed. 'Everybody with a flowing beard looks like Jesus Christ,' she said.

'That's exactly what I mean,' Helen said. 'If he has a flowing beard he's got to be okay.'

Laura's hand on the back of his head, and in the middle was Helen, leaning forward from the back seat with her head on the seatback between them.

'Daddy?'

'Yes?'

'Was that an obscene joke you made, a moment ago?'

'What are you talking about?'

Nothing. They drove quietly into the dark. Later the daughter Helen sang camp songs and the mother Laura joined in, even the father Tony, who never sang, contributed a bass, and they took their music along the great empty Interstate into Pennsylvania, while the color thickened and clogged into dark.

Then it was full night and Tony Hastings was driving alone, no voices now, only the roar of wind obscuring the roar of engine and tires, while his wife Laura sat silent in the dark beside him and his daughter Helen was out of sight in the back seat. There was not much traffic. The occasional lights on the opposite side flickered through the trees that separated the lanes. Sometimes they rose or dropped when the lanes diverged. On his own side from time to time he would overtake the red lights of someone ahead, and occasionally headlights would appear in the mirror and a car or truck would catch up with him, but for long stretches there was no one on his side at all. Nor was there light in the countryside, which he could not see but which he imagined to be all woods. He was glad to have his car between him and the wilderness, and he hummed his music thinking coffee in an hour, while meanwhile he enjoyed his good feeling, wide awake, steady – in the dark pilot house of his ship with the passengers asleep. He was glad of the hitchhiker he had left behind, of the love of his wife and the funny humor of his daughter.

He was a proud driver with a tendency to be self-righteous. He tried to stay as close to sixty-five as he could. On a long hill he overtook two pairs of tail lights side by side blocking both lanes ahead of him. One car was trying to pass the other but could not pull ahead, and he had to reduce his speed. He got into the left lane behind the car trying to pass. 'Come on, let's go,' he muttered, for he could be an impatient driver too. Then it occurred to him the car on the left was not trying to pass but was having a conversation with the other car, and indeed both cars were slowing down still more.

God damn it, quit blocking the road. It was one of his self righteous principles never to blow his horn, but he tapped it

now, one quick blast. The car in front of him zoomed ahead. He pulled forward, passed the other, slid into the right lane again, feeling a little embarrassed. The slow car fell behind. The car in front, which had pulled ahead, slowed down again. He guessed the driver was waiting for the other car to resume their game, and he pulled out to pass, but the car in front swung left to block his way, and he had to hit the brakes. He felt a shock as he realized the driver of the other car meant to play games with him. The car slowed more. He noticed the headlights of the third car in the mirror far behind. He avoided blowing his horn. They were down to thirty miles per hour. He decided to pass in the right lane, but the other car swung in front of him again.

'Uh-oh,' he said.

Laura moved.

'We've got trouble,' he said.

Now the car in front was going a little faster but still too slow. The third car remained far behind. He blew his horn.

'Don't do that,' Laura said. 'It's what he wants.'

He pounded on the steering wheel. He thought a moment and took a breath. 'Hang on,' he said, pressed his foot down on the gas, and zipped to the left. This time he got by. The other car blew its horn, and he went fast.

'Kids,' Laura said.

From the back seat Helen spoke: 'Bunch of jerks.' He had not known she was awake.

'Are we rid of them?' Tony asked. The other car was behind a short distance, and he felt relieved.

'Helen!' Laura said. 'No!'

'What?' Tony said.

'She gave them the finger.'

The other car was a big old Buick with a dented left fender,

dark, blue or black. He had not looked to see who was in it. They were gaining on him. He went faster, up to eighty, but the other headlights stayed close, tailgating, almost touching him.

'Tony,' Laura said quietly.

'Oh Jesus,' Helen said.

He tried to go faster still.

'Tony,' Laura said.

They stayed with him.

'If you just drive normally,' she said.

The third car was a long way back, the headlights disappearing on curves and reappearing after a long interval on straightaways.

'Eventually they'll get bored.'

He let his speed return to sixty-five, while the other car remained so close he could not see the headlights in his mirror, only the glare. The car began blowing its horn, then pulled out to pass.

'Let him go,' Laura said.

The car drove along beside him, faster when he tried to speed up, slowing down when he did. There were three guys, he couldn't see them well, only the guy in the front passenger seat who had a beard and was grinning at him.

So he decided to drive steadily at sixty-five. Pay no attention, if he could. The guys cut in front and slowed down, forcing him to slow down too. When he tried to pass, they cut left to prevent it. He swung back into the right lane and they let him catch up with them. They pulled ahead and swung back and forth between the two lanes. They went into the right lane as if to invite him to pass, but when he tried they swung back into his path. In a surge of rage he refused to give way, and there was a loud metallic explosion and a jolt, and he knew he had hit them.

'Oh shit!' he said.

As if in pain, the other car backed off and let him by. Serves them right, he said, they asked for it, but oh shit, he also said, and he slowed down, wondering what to do, while the other car slowed behind him.

'What are you doing?' Laura said.

'We ought to stop.'

'Daddy,' Helen said. 'We can't stop!'

'We hit them, we have to stop.'

'They'll kill us!'

'Are they stopping?'

He was thinking about leaving the site of an accident, wondering if the accident to their car would sober them up, if it was safe to assume that.

Then he heard Laura. In spite of the pride in his virtues, he usually relied on her for the finer moral points, and she was saying, 'Tony, please don't stop.' Her voice was low and quiet, and he would remember that a long time.

So he kept going.

'You can take the next exit and report to the police,' she said.

'I got their license number,' Helen said.

But the other car was after him again, they roared up beside him on his left, the guy with the beard was sticking his arm out the window and waving or shaking his fist or pointing, and he was shouting, and the car got ahead of him and veered, edged into his path trying to force him onto the shoulder.

'God help us,' Laura said.

'Smash into them,' Helen screamed. 'Don't let them, don't let them!'

He couldn't avoid it, another bump, a slight one with a crunching sound against his left front, he felt the damage and

something rattling, shaking his steering wheel as the other car forced him to slow. The car trembled as if mortally wounded, and he gave up, pulled onto the shoulder, and prepared to stop. The other car stopped in front of him. The third car, the one that had been lagging behind, came into sight and zipped by at high speed.

Tony Hastings started to open his door, but Laura touched his arm.

'Don't,' she said. 'Stay in the car.'