Paradise

A. L. Kennedy

I

How it happens is a long story, always.

And I apparently begin with being here: a boxy room that's too wide to be cosy, its dirty ceiling hung just low enough to press down a broad, unmistakable haze of claustrophobia. To my right is an over-large clock of the kind favoured by playschools and homes for the elderly, the kind with bold, black numbers and cartoon-thick hands that effectively shout what time it is whether you're curious or not. It shows 8.42 and counting. Above, is a generalised sting of yellow light.

8.42.

But I don't know which one – night or morning. Either way, from what I can already see, I would rather not be involved in all this too far beyond 8.43.

In one fist, I notice, I'm holding a key. Its fob is made of viciously green plastic, translucent and moulded to a shape which illustrates what would happen if a long-dead ear were inflated until morbidly obese. I only know that it's actually meant to be a leaf, because it is marked with an effort towards the stem, the ribs and veins that a leaf might have. I presume I'm supposed to like this key and give it the benefit of the doubt because people are fond of trees and, by extension, leaves. But I don't like leaves, not even real ones.

I'll tell you what I do like, though: what I adore – I'm looking right at it, right now and it is gorgeous, quite the prettiest thing I've seen since 8.41. It concerns my other hand – the one that is leaf-free.

It is a liquid.

I do love liquids.

Rising from the beaker to the jug in that continually renewing, barley sugared twist: falling from the jug into the beaker like a muscle perpetually flexed and reflexed, the honey-coloured heart of some irreversibly specialised animal. It's glimmering and, of course, pouring – a drink pouring, hurrying in to ease a thirst, just as it should. I put down the jug and I lift up the glass, just as I should.

I presume it's filled with some kind of apple juice and, on closer acquaintance, I find this to be so – not very pleasant, but certainly wet and necessary. The air, and therefore my mouth, currently tastes of cheap cleaning products, unhappy people, a hundred years of stubborn cigarette smoke and the urine of young children, left to lie.Which means I need my drink. Besides, I really do have, now I think about it, a terrible thirst.

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'Terrible weather?'

I'm swallowing ersatz fruit, not even from concentrate, so I can't have said a word – it wasn't me who spoke.

Terrible thirst: terrible weather – but the echo is accidental, I would have to be feeling quite paranoid to think it was anything else.Nevertheless, the remark feels intrusive – as if it had access to my skull – and so I turn without even preparing a smile and discover the party responsible tucked behind me: a straggly, gingery man, loitering. He has longish, yellowish, curly hair, which was, perhaps, cute at some time in his youth, but has thinned now into a wispy embarrassment. I can almost picture him, each evening, praying to be struck bald overnight. God has not, so far, been merciful.

Mr Wispy's expression attempts to remain enquiring although he says nothing more and I do not meet his eyes or in any way encourage him. He is the type to have hobbies: sad ones that he'll want to talk about.

Checking swiftly, I can see there are no windows, which may explain his lack of meteorological certainty. There's no way that either of us can know what the weather is doing outside. Then again, Straggly has the look of a person habitually unsure of things: it may be he's stolen a peek beyond the room and already has prior knowledge of whatever conditions prevail – monsoon, dust storm, sleet – he may simply hope I'll confirm his observations.

Of course, I have no prior knowledge, not a trace.

There is a fake cart rigged up, beyond us both – it's clearly made of stainless steel, but is burdened with a feminine canopy and fat, little flounces of chintz. Inside, I can make out a seethe of heat lamps and trays of orange, brown or grey things which ought to be food, I suppose. The whole assembly smells of nothing beyond boredom and possibly old grease.

'Really dreadful . . .Yes?' He tries again: maybe harping on about the weather, maybe just depressive, I can't say I care.

'Appalling.' I nod and angle myself away.

But Straggly has to chip in again. 'Tchsss . . . .' He seems to be taking the whole thing very personally, whatever it is. And I notice there's something slightly expectant in the scampery little glances he keeps launching across at me. It could be that he will give me a headache soon.

'Ffffmmm . . . ' He nods, as if his repertoire of noises has any meaning beyond his own mind.

But I can't deny that he is also speaking English, just about – which is a clue. It means that I can probably assume I'm in a hotel somewhere English-speaking. Either that, or I've been ambushed by Mr Wispy who is himself English-speaking and has guessed that I am, too, and I could, in fact, be

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anywhere at all. Meanwhile, he's continuing to linger inconclusively and I do hope this won't blossom into some weird expression of long-term, national solidarity.To help him move on, I try to sound forbidding, although I will never discover what I'm trying to forbid: 'Ghastly. Almost frightening.'

That seemed to go well, though. He edges back a step, and another, then bolts into a crestfallen retreat. I feel I am safe to believe our exchange is exhausted.

Around me, various groups and solitaries are hunched over bowls of cereal, plates of glistening stuff, collapsing rolls. The carpet is liberally scattered with a sort of bread-related dandruff: each table has its dusting, too, along with a thread or so of unconvincing foliage in a throttled vase. At uneasy intervals the walls display reproductions of old European advertisements: a British hotel, then. This particular level of grisliness could only be fully achieved in the British Isles. And this surely must be breakfast. So: 8.44, no 8.45, in the morning and breakfast in a cheap, British hotel.

I'm home. Perhaps.

Their backs to a wall, a shouting wife and inaudible husband are picking at mushrooms and sausages.'We have to get a gas grill. That was the loveliest meal I had when we were there, the loveliest. That was the loveliest meal.' Her partner chews and chews while I try not to imagine the finer and finer paste he is producing. 'And that Continental . . . Continental . . . Continental . . .'

Continental what? Quilt? Breakfast? Lover? Self-improving language course?

She is never going to finish and I'm never going to know and he is never going to swallow – I can tell. I do not wish to think of them travelling freely across the globe, dementing people, everywhere they go – driving them into gas grills for relief. I refill my glass and concentrate.

Then I remember, with aching clarity, an air steward blocking the ragged perspective of an aisle and dancing his arms through the usual safety drill: the oxygen mask for yourself before your gasping children, the floor-level guides to coax you through darkness and smoke. He was enjoying himself, sweating only a little with all of those swooping indications in time to the comforting script. Then he tried to put on his For Demonstration Only life jacket and failed comprehensively.

I watched, couldn't stop myself watching, while his previously smooth hands stuttered and the rubberised yellow crumpled and began to look unhelpful – like a grubby bib. By the time he was meant to be tying a firm double bow at his waist (and then moving on to display his inflation tubes, his convenient whistle and nice light) his drawstrings were only tangling perversely and the more he jerked them and smiled to reassure, the more everything twisted and snagged. His head dropped then and he fought at the jacket outright, a neck blush rising to his hair. Full-blown knots had developed now, his fingers scrabbling round them, wetly impotent. He blinked up for a breath and I grinned at him – what other expression was possible, but a firmly

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encouraging grin? – and something about the moment made it plain that we both knew he was now demonstrating a true emergency. This was precisely the way that we really would panic and fluster and take too long as the plane went down.This was how we'd be trapped in the dark, inanely struggling. This was how we would stare, while horrors struck against our wills.This was how we'd be plunged into water and feel every trace of protection ripped easily adrift. He was showing us how we would die.

The demonstration ended, but he stayed where he was, puzzled by himself, almost tearful, the jacket still round him, lopsided, improperly tied.

This is a recent memory, it tastes close at hand.

And I am, once again, grinning firmly and thinking that I must have been somewhere and must now be coming back, which is new and important information and a cause for joy.

One of the many pleasures of forgetting is, as we all of us know, remembering.You trot from room to room and can't imagine where you left your keys the night before: without them, you're locked in your house.Under the bed, in the knife drawer, behind the Scotch, behind your shoes, in the pockets of every garment that has pockets, the pedal bin, the compost bin, the bread bin: you have panicked into every likely nook. You sit on your bed, despairing, unsure of who has your spares and if they still like you and then – your hand gently brushes that lovely clump of metal, that heavy, little spider of keys to everything. They've been lounging on the duvet the whole morning, just winking whenever you've passed. But you have them at last and you are happy, much happier than you would have been if you'd picked them up without confusion from their customary place.

This morning it's very clear that I've misplaced at least a day, so you can imagine that I'm pretty much delighted.

But still thirsty.

Now, I already have a substantial glass, filled and in my possession – probably 300 millilitres, or even a drop in excess. I've left a decent interval between the meniscus and the brim – anything else is antisocial and draws attention – but even if the juice were slopping right up to the top, it wouldn't be enough. A litre might begin to be enough, might start to feel refreshing, a litre and nothing less. So I need to down this while I stand, refill, down, refill again and then sit somewhere secluded, rehydrate.You have to be undisturbed to rehydrate. I presume I am safe in believing that this is the usual snatchall- you-can rolling buffet sort of situation and no one will intervene when confronted with naked appetite.

As it turns out, I'm not wrong.

Clutching glass number four, I wander through the wreckage and mumbling, keeping an eye out for somewhere bearable to sit. The place seems clotted suddenly, nothing unoccupied.

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I may have a little toast later, if there is toast. I can only assume I have money to buy some, it's unlikely I'd have come here otherwise.

'Ah . . .?' Again. Mr Wispy is flapping one hand annoyingly above an empty seat. The only visible empty seat. 'A-ah . . .?' He keeps repeating that one sorry, wheedling vowel.

I could just stand.

On either side of him lurk what can only be his children: a surly-looking blonde girl of maybe eight and a smaller, darker boy. Happily, neither of them has inherited his hair.They are both intent on squeezing the contents from several tiny plastic containers of jam and then spreading the resultant mess across random objects.

I could dodge back to the fruit-juice counter.

I could run.

'You won't disturb us. Really. It's all right.'

'I will.'

'No you won't.'

'I think I will.'

'No-o.'

The children lose interest in smearing the milk jug and the girl sucks at her palm, eyes me appraisingly.

'Perhaps for a moment.' I edge past the worst of it. 'Like pustules, aren't they?'

Father Straggle swallows less than happily.

'The jam packets – when you squeeze them out, they're just like . . . well, they're a little like . . .' I give up, sit and sip my apple juice in the silence. Five or six swallows and breakfast will be done. Except I still feel below my volume,somehow, a glass or three owing, nagging me.

'Whee-HA. Whee-HA.' Of course he has an abnormal laugh, why would he have a normal one? How often would he get the chance to use it with his life? 'Pustules.Whee-HA.'

In any case, it's ugly and should be stopped. 'So . . .You're leaving?'

He is sombre again, flushed, and softly offers,'Coming back.'

'Uh-huh.'

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The little boy nudges me under the table, his hand unmistakably adhering as it leaves my leg. I'm wearing jeans – they look new – new jeans and a T-shirt. My forearms have a vague tan. The boy tries again. I engage him with my best patientandopenfunloving expression. Sooner or later, this always works. I am a person other people warm to – without exception, they all warm. My lack of memory, if I were in a film, would mean that I am a killing machine, patiently trained by some dreadful governmental agency and soon my amnesia will evaporate in a bloodbath of conscienceless combat and burning cars. But I know I'm not any variety of machine. I am a human being, a proper one. And I am likeable – almost unnaturally easy to like.The boy turns shy under my attention, but is not truly uncomfortable. The girl glowers with some vehemence. She would take me more time.

'Amelia. That's not how we behave.'

'She's fine. Don't fret.Tired perhaps. Not used to strangers.' I gulp down the last of the juice, preparatory to moving off – somewhere I may have a room with other resources and no jam. Father Straggle's ears are almost scarlet – he is obviously a man who prefers that his children should be polite, which is admirable, but such hopes can be taken too far. He is patently furious now, insisting on being annoyed, so I become placating. 'Amelia. That's a lovely name.'

At this, the girl gives me a slightly wounded flick of her eyes and stares at the tablecloth. She expected me to know her name, then. She expected me to remember. So we've met before.

On a flight? Inside an airport? Hotel foyer? At 8.35?

I do recall an airport and scuffling about in the usual way as I waited to be off to somewhere else – wasting time in the record shop, thumbing through the DVDs.

'Tell me, Lesbian Tarts Having Sex – what's that about?'

The counter man sleepy, or drugged-up, or clinically bored, 'Hm?'

'Lesbian Tarts Having Sex – seems a bit vague. I mean, I wouldn't want to end up buying something I wasn't sure of. Does it have harpsichords? Or skating? Folding chairs? Do any characters feign amnesia as a ruse?' I was in that running-offat- the-mouth mood, chirpy, in need of a chum to banter with.

The counter man was not my chum. 'Do you want to buy it.'

Even as I opened my mouth again, I realised he might be misinterpreting my chatter as a come-on of some kind, which it wasn't, not in any way.

'Of course I don't want to buy it – where's the mystery in it, the imaginative flair?'

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Actually, he wasn't responding as if he was being seduced – he was barely responding as if he was still alive. 'You don't want to buy it.' He was, in all respects, monotone.

'No. I have no desire to make a purchase.' And I removed myself before I could say something else.

Or.

I really said, 'I wouldn't buy that DVD if it was the last one on earth.'

And then he said, 'You know what you can do.'

And then I said, 'Fuck myself and make a video of it called Fucking Myself.'

I can remember both endings, which is tricky. But I think I'm more convinced by the first. I think I told him I had no desire to make a purchase and then left. However it played out, there were no children anywhere near me at that stage – I would never have used offensive language and referred to sexual acts had there been any young folk present. I have standards.

'Amelia?' I try not to look like someone who is thinking of bad words and begin to make amends with the daughter, which is good of me because I will have done her no genuine wrong. She had thought of me as a friend, perhaps, and I've seemed to be slightly non-friendly, forgetful, nothing more. That's the sort of behaviour my brother detested when he was her age. Me, too. It's nothing serious, but even so, 'Amelia, I hope you have a pleasant journey home. Are you looking forward to it?'

'Mummy likes it better at home.'

'Oh.' Thank God, they have a mother: they're not wholly dependent on Wispy Dad. 'Well, that's good then.'

At this,Wispy Dad can't resist butting in to slow the conversation. 'Their mother is still in our room. Tired.'

Well, that's understandable, I'd be eternally bloody exhausted if I was married to you. 'Travelling is a strain.'

At the food cart, a woman is shovelling out what could be eggs. Even from here, I can see them shudder and slide.They unnerve me in a way they should not – because eggs ought to have no particular power over me – and I realise that I'm about to have a feeling, something unpleasant, an episode.What I can only imagine as a huge, grey lid is threatening to close on top of me. This means that, far too soon, I may cry, or become unsteady, or find myself vomiting.Without doubt my head is, once again, about to let me down.There will be pain involved: there always is: and it will be bad unpredictable pain: it always is. After so many years, I can recognise the signs.

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I softly stand and the boy glances at me, definitely glum to see me up and off. 'Goodbye, you.' No idea what his name is. 'Goodbye, Amelia.' Amelia kicks at nothing and ignores me. 'Goodbye . . .' I move forward and brush against a restraining hand – who else but Dad, standing, wriggling from foot to foot. He ought to know he shouldn't do this, not now. I am becoming urgent and so is my head.Wispy adjusts his gesture into one half of a handshake, faintly pleading, and, courteous to the last, I clasp his soggy fingers and soggier palm.'Goodbye.'

'Goodbye, Hannah.'

'Yes.' We exchanged names across the board, then, how extremely chummy and civilised. 'That's me away then, bye.'

'Great to have met you. Sorry about the ah . . . children.' He licks his lips with an odd, little grating sound, as if he is made of something peculiar.

'Yes.'

'The way they are, ha?' He seems not to grasp the essential intention of saying goodbye. 'Well. Hmm. Goodness . . . Blow me.'

Not in a million years. 'Yes.'

'Safe home.'

'Yes,' I nod – which sparks up a layering sensation, the impression of being loosely, poorly stacked – the head is growing delicate and I don't move it again, but pause – wring out a grin – and finally he does first loosen his grip, and then abandon it.

'Good-uh . . . bye.'

Although I fear he may snatch in again.

I withdraw as smoothly as I can. 'Goodbye . . . all of you. Really.' Trying to balance myself at the top of my neck, not picturing my personality starting to slop out over my sides, running down to my chin.

Which carries me past a last view of Wispy's vaguely stricken offspring and off on a wavery march for the doorway, then out, a passageway (passageways lead to staircases and lifts, they are my friends), through a fire door and into a foyer complicated with several queues – not helpful – but, yes, here is a lift.

When I stop, the momentum of my thoughts sends them rushing forward, pressing and wetting the backs of my eyes. I raise my key to aid steadier inspection – it is attached by a chain to leaf number 536: fifth floor, then.

And, thankfully, no one else is with me when the doors whump shut and seal me in the queasily rising box. The surrounding walls are mirrored from waist height up which suggests an illusion of space and must be a comfort

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to claustrophobics, but which also – due to the laws of physics – does have one truly horrible consequence: I can see myself. Not only one's self, naturally: from a few especially disastrous angles my right selves and my left selves reflect each other unrelentingly. On both sides, I can watch my head diminish along an undulating corridor of shrinking repetitions until I finally coalesce into one last, pinkish drop of light. This aches.

It isn't fair. All I wanted to do was find 536 and take care of my head, but instead I'm trapped inside this 3-D memento mori – staring at eternity while it howls graphically away, before and after (as if I were an extra in some truly sadistic, educational short), and all that I'm fond of as me is cupped up in this single, staring instant – which isn't enough. Look at me – this is the only point where I'm recognisable, where I make sense – beyond it, I'm nothing but distortion and then I completely disappear. What is this – a Jesuit lift? I am not at an appropriate moment to be metaphysical. For Christ's sake, I was only trying to cut out the stairs. I didn't ask to be forcibly reminded that I don't want to die, not ever, no thank you very much. I am not well and terrified and I don't have the room to be either properly.

So I am not in quite perfect condition when the lift shunts open and gives a gloating little ding. Meanwhile,my sweat gets a chance to chill in the passageway where small metal plaques with arrows are waiting for me, all set to suggest hypothetical directions.

543–589, this way: 502–527, that way; 518 over there.

I'm taking little runs to blind ends, finding corridors that loop round on themselves, cupboards, fire escapes, while the floor starts to pitch down quietly beneath my feet, as if I were aboard some ghastly submarine.

The world cannot be as this is, I refuse to accept it.

543–589 this way. But they were that way before.

I deny the existence of this hotel in its current form. I deny the existence of this hotel in its current form.

528, 529, 530 . . . which is encouraging, fairly, I should be okay, it can't be far –

500.

Bastards.

I deny the existence –

I'm not going to be sick.

I deny the existence of this hotel –

533, 534 –

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in its current form.

I deny –

535 . . . 536.

536.

Well, well.

Slowly. Approach it slowly, it may move. Don't let the key chain rattle, make no sudden cries, but, as soon as I'm ready . . . hold the bloody handle, grab it, key in the lock, key in the lock, right in, in, okay. And.Turn.Turn everything.

The room agrees to be opened and it is, indeed, my room – here is my holdall on its floor, lolling open, and this is my own, my personal alarm clock, ticking primly by the raddled bed: the soft, the horizontal, the wanted bed.There is nothing better than being bewildered and unhappy and very tired and then discovering you have a bed.

'Could I, uh . . . I'm in Room Five Three Six, I wonder could you tell me if I'm checking out today . . . five . . . thirty . . . six . . . That's right, three six. Five three six.'

I will admit that I had expected someone who worked in a hotel might be able to keep a grip of perhaps one room number, now and then, but I won't be snappy, that would be unconstructive and would not reflect my mood. I have slept for two blank hours – nearly two and a half – slept through, I can only assume, the whole of my head-related distress and every threatened intimation of death and doom. I am quite fine now, and had I been calmer, I would have known – the whole source of my earlier trouble was tiredness.

As I let myself be comforted, there comes a dull clunking on the line – perhaps the receptionist playing with loose teeth. She mutters a name.

'I'm sorry, who? . . . Oh.And I'd have to check out at twelve? . . . Eleven?'

Why do they do that? – Twelve is bad enough, but now everybody wants you outside in the snow by eleven.Try checking in before five and see what it gets you: a bloody lecture: your bags in a cupboard somewhere until it's dark: that's what. 'In that case, could you be very kind and give me the room for another day? . . .Well, no, not give. Just . . . the usual arrangement.You have my credit card? . . .You do?'

Good. That's a good sign. Cash is a bad sign – credit is good. 'Then that's all very fine then, isn't it? That's all extremely fine.'

Above the window comes a laboured thunder, like a broad stone being rolled in overhead. I get up gently, examine my view.

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Dove-blue clouds, a gold edge to them and spindles of light behind. Nearer, there is a fat concrete tower, topped with the scoop of a radar dish, revolving, and a runway and the slanting rise of a plane, charcoal-coloured. Another stone grinds by.

Which is disturbing. I could swear that I'm on my way home, so why am I still at the airport? Reproachful on the felty, dun carpet, my holdall is waiting – it can usually explain.

Dishevelled contents, the clothes have been worn. Still, they seem to be nobody's clothes but my own and

I need to be sick, immediately.

Thank God the room is tiny – it means the en suite facilities are close.

Shock will do that, unbalance the system, and it always unsettles to be less than clear about where you are. Or, in this case, where I am. Or, more precisely, why.

A dash of cold water on the face, though, and I'm approaching some level of definition, feeling good.

No. Not good. I was mistaken. That was a mistake.

Because my forehead has started torquing – it's a reaction to the cold, or the water, the force of the dash. I can see in the mirror that my bones are not actually moving, not visibly, not as such, but I can – even so – feel them buckle against my brain, suck in and down and squeeze above my tongue. Inside, there's twisting, pulsing where I can't reach, and once that's started, it only gets worse. So I haven't escaped my head: it was just waiting until I'd woken to make itself felt.

All right, then – do what you like up there, run amok. It's not as if we haven't been introduced. But don't think we're friends or that you're welcome. I still know exactly how to cut you short.

So it's back to the holdall and feel for those delicate items, the ones you wrap up in sweaters, the special things you need to take with you and have for company. It isn't great to lean forward while I search, it doesn't aid my equanimity, but this is a necessary evil and will be rewarding in the end.

Yes. First out is something called Affentaler, tucked up snug in a tiny bottle, shaped like a flat, heavy tear – a map on its back to say where it comes from: the meander of a river, Strasbourg marked, the suggestion of fertile plains and peacefulness. It's full, which is never a bad thing, but only 250 millilitres and only 11.5 per cent. What on earth was I thinking? It's practically bloody fruit juice: what good did that ever do?

But then, but then, God bless me – I love it when I leave myself prepared.

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