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Opening Extract from...

Umbrella

Written by Will Self

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Umbrella

Will Self

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I'm an ape man, I'm an ape-ape man . . . Along comes Zachary, along from the porter's lodge, where there's a *trannie* by the kettle and the window is cracked open so that *Muswell Hill calypso* warms the cold Friern Barnet morning, staying with him, wreathing his head with rapidly condensing *pop breath. I'm an ape man, I'm an ape-ape man, oh I'm an ape man* . . . The lawns and verges are soft with dew, his arms and his legs are stiff – a rigor he associates with last night's tense posture, when *I aborted* the fumbled beginnings of a non-committal congress. While Miriam fed the baby in their bed *hawsers and pipelines coiled away into milky, fartysteam – the enormous projectile retracted into the cradle of my belly and thighs . . . I'm an ape man, I'm an ape-ape man* . . . the Austin's steering wheel *plastic vertebrae bent double, kyphotic* . . . had pulled at his shoulders as he wrestled the car down from Highgate, then yanked it through East Finchley – knees jammed uncomfortably under the dashboard – then across the North Circular and past the blocks of flats screening the Memorial Hospital before turning right along Woodhouse Road. Under the bonnet the

pistons hammered at his coccyx, the crankshaft turned his pelvis round and around, while each stop and start, each twist and turn – the very swivel of his eyeballs in their sockets – didn't ease this stress but screwed it still further into his frame: *bitindrill, chuckinlathe, poweron* . . . In his already heightened state he had looked upon the city as an inversion, seeing the parallelograms of dark woodland and dormant grass as man-made artefacts surrounded by growing brick, tarmac and concrete that *ripples away to the horizon along the furrows of suburban streets* . . . While his domestic situation is by no means quiescent, nor is it settled, and the day ahead – Ach! *A beige worm of antiseptic cream wriggles into the festering crack of a bed sore* . . . Bitterly he had considered: Is my dip' psych even relevant when it comes to this first-aiding, the sick parade of a shambling citizen militia? . . . *I'm an ape man, I'm an ape-ape man* . . . The drive into work is already automatic. — Still, it's a shock that his destination is this *folly with a Friends' Shop*. *Along comes Zachary* . . . Hush Puppies snaffling the gravel path that leads from the staff car park – where cooling steel ticks beside floral clocks – towards the long repetition of arched windows and arched doorways, of raised porticoes and hip-roofed turrets. *Along comes Zachary* . . . creeping noisily up on the high central dome with its flanking campaniles in which no bells have ever rung, as they are only disguised ventilation shafts designed to *suck the rotten fetor from the asylum* . . . *Along comes Zachary* . . . avoiding the unseeing eyes of the tarnished bronze statue that hides behind some forsythia – a young man *clearly hebephrenic* . . . his face immobile forever in its suffering, the folds of his clothing *plausibly heavy* . . . for he looks altogether weighed down by existence itself. *Along comes Zachary* . . . chomping beside the arched windows now, and the arched doorways, and then the arched windows *again*. He

admits himself into this monumental piece of trompe l'œil not by the grand main doors – which are permanently bolted – but by an inconspicuous side one – and this is only right, as it begins the end of the delusion that he will encounter some Foscari or Pisani, whereas the reality is: a low banquette covered with *dried-egg* vinyl, and slumped upon this *a malefactor*, his face – like those of so many of the mentally ill – *a paradoxical neoplasm, the agèd features just this second formed to quail behind a defensively raised shoulder*. A hectoring voice says, You will be confined to your ward and receive no allowance this week, DO YOU UN-DER-STAND? *Oh, yes, I understand well enough* . . . which is why he continues apace, not wishing to see any more of this *routine meanness* . . . *Along comes Zachary – and along* a short corridor panelled with damp chipboard, then down some stairs into the lower corridor. *Along comes Zachary – and along* – he has clutched his briefcase to his chest, unfastened it, and now pulls his white coat out in *stiff little billows*. You'll be needing one, Busner, Whitcomb had said – *a jolly arsehole, his long face a fraction: eyes divided by moustache into mouth* – else the patients'll think . . . *Think what? Think what?!* But the consultant's attention span was so short he had lost interest in his own phrase and fallen to reaming the charred socket of his briar with the end of a teaspoon, the fiddly task performed inefficiently on the knobbly tops of his knock-knees. – Why were the staffroom chairs all *too low or too high*? *Along comes Zachary – and along . . . I'm an ape man, I'm an ape-ape-man, oh I'm an ape man*, his splayed shoes crêping along the floor, sliding across patches of lino, slapping on stone-flagged sections, their toes scraping on the ancient bitumen – wherever that was exposed. *Scrrr-aping*. He wonders: Who would dream of such a thing – to floor the corridors, even the wards, of a hospital with a road surface? Yet there is a

rationale to it – *a hectoring, wheedling, savage rationale* – that explains itself via the voices that resound *inside the patients' bony-stony heads, their cerebral corridors and cortical dormitories* . . . because these are roadway distances – a hundred yards, a hundred feet, a hundred more, *a North Circular of the soul*. No signs, though, *no Tally-Ho Corner* – instead: lancet windows that peer out on to the airing courts from under lids of grime, *exercise yards, really*, separated by the wings and spurs that partition the *long sunless trench* between the first and second ranges of the hospital. *Spurs budding from wings – more spurs budding from them*, *the whole mad bacterium growing steadily larger and more complex in the hospitable suburban substrate*. *Along comes Zachary* . . . On the windowless side of the corridor there are doors with bossy signs on them: PORTERS, CANTEEN, MAINTENANCE DEPT CANTEEN, SYNAGOGUE, BOUTIQUE – *boutique!* then BREAD ROOM – *a room full of bread* . . . and there are also ramps leading up to the wards above. *On he comes* . . . and still the *deep throat gapes* in front of him, a gullet of light-stripes indented with bands of pockmarks – the original plasterers' decorative scheme – or else scattered with medallions and stone-rustic quoins seeped-upon-brown. *On he comes* . . . tenderly touching the flaking veins of old gas pipes, to the bare copper of one of which has been Sellotaped a single flyer for POPULAR SWING BAND, The Rhythmaires – but, he thinks, can this be that dated, or is it that the air in here and everything else ages faster? This is at the corner where the western corridor intersects, a rounded corner *worn down by lurch-upon-lurch – No! It was designed that way to stop them killing themselves, which they will do*. And get used to it, Whitcomb had said perkily from behind his *plastic comb moustache*, because you'll have to deal with a great many more. That's just the way – how it is. A great shame – but how it is. Hanging may've been repealed by

Parliament . . . he puffed small and aromatic clouds of *cosmic faux pas* . . . but it remains the number one method of execution in here – this decade is proving quite as swinging as the last! Not that Whitcomb was being callous, it was just that that's *how he is* – like so many psychiatrists of passable competence, so accustomed had he become to speaking to the distressed and the deranged in tones bridled by concerned neutrality, and employing vocabulary purged of any upsetting words, that when set free he became laughably inappropriate – or would be *if there was anything to laugh about*. Nor had he expected his new junior to deal with the amusing suicides himself – certainly not by swabbing, or even so much as looking – *that's what nurses were for, surely!* – only that he should be prepared for how the more feisty ones, *with sprightliness fizzing in their melancholy*, would smuggle a sheet to the lavatory, tear, twine and then knot it to the crook of the pipe where it entered the cistern. *The blessing as well as the curse of this Victorian plumbing*, Busner had felt Whitcomb might well have said – it was his sort of remark – but instead he was obliged to furnish his own homily, for any death, no matter how meagre, demanded at least this consideration: *The blessing as well as the curse of this Victorian plumbing is its robustness. Kick and thrash as they might, the most ardent suicide was unable to break the pipe* . . . They sometimes manage – this from Perkins, the nastier of the charge nurses on 14, one of the two chronic wards to which Busner had been assigned – to hang themselves from the bloody chain, would you believe it! We find 'em with their bare tootsies in the kharzi . . . Busner believed it. He saw rivulets of urine and faeces running down the gutters between metatarsals, *plip-plopping into the commode while up above the cistern splutters unceasing* . . . That first suicide, which he had not only looked upon but also helped Mboya – the nice nurse – to cut down, had

suspended herself from the completely reliable pipe – and so in death she was wedged in the awkward gap between it and a white-painted window that had been halved lengthwise when this cubicle was partitioned into existence – *yet more evidence – if any were needed – of how the hospital altered its own cellular structure to create new morphologies for new pathologies to be diagnosed by psychiatrists accredited by new professional associations* . . . while the inmates remained the same, patient only in the way she now was: inert, with no sign of her bowels having been emptied apart from . . . *that smell*. Instead, her papery skin, *oh so fine*, crinkled into the flannelette of a too-big nightie. She was, Busner had thought, a dead dry moth, its cellular structure decaying inside of this far larger one.

. . . Apart from that smell: *faecal*, *certainly – but antiseptically chemical too, with a sharp tang of floor polish* — a still more intense blending of the odour that emanated from the pores, mouths and hidden vents of the inmates confined to the first psychiatric ward Busner had ever visited, more than a decade before, where he had *student-foolishly* inquired, What's that smell? And been told it was paraldehyde, a liquid sedative as limpidly brown as the state it was intended to induce . . . *in Henry*, *in Napsbury* . . . *where he still is* . . . *my brother lest I forget*. Paraldehyde – how much of it had been poured down throats in asylums throughout the past half-century? *Gallons* . . . *demi-johns* . . . *barrels? Hosed into them, really, to put out the fire*. And now what was left – *this rain inside the building, this rusty old rain falling down from the saturated plaster to the asphalt floor*.

All this had jetted Busner forward *sea-sluggishly through the greeny-briny*, the sounds of crying, sobbing and cackling amplified by the third-of-a-mile corridor, distorted by its scores of alcoves, then spun by its rifling so that, with unerring accuracy, they strike him in one

ear and revolve around his head to the other . . . *Axoid: Bold as Love. Along comes Zachary, my tremolo arm vibrating as I sing to my own don't-step-on-the-cracks-self* . . . past the HAIRDRESSER and the SCULPTURE ROOM, then out from the main block of the hospital towards ART THERAPY and the REMINISCENCE ROOM – the last Whitcomb's own humane innovation. In this section of the corridor the light from the south-facing windows gives him the sensation of trundling lousily along a trench, *paraldehyde . . . paral- . . . parados!* that was the word for it – the side of the trench where they stood to *fire their machine gun, its traverse . . . the airing court, its ticcing picking off the enemy that comes bellowing across the dormant grass: madness – a banshee. Along comes Zachary* . . . Not that he has had the corridor to himself – there's been a steady stream of staff and a few purposeful patients on their way to buy pathetic sundries or attend therapy sessions. A few purposeful – but many more let out from their wards simply to wander the sprawling building. There was one platoon – or so he'd been told – who marched from the Camden Social Services office in the north-west to the Haringey Social Services office in the north-east, then headed south to the lower corridor, and tramped the entire length of it before heading north once more, and so completing a mile-long circuit of the hospital's insides which they would make again and again, until ordered to halt for food by their bellies, or for rest by their feet, or for medication . . . *by their keepers*. Yes, there have been these patients in their charity cardigans soiled at the hem, thick socks sloughing from thin ankles, their eyes cartooned by the wonky frames of their National Health glasses – for whom *a corridor is a destination*. None of them is real – nor remotely credible, not compared to this: *Along comes Zachary . . . the me-voice, the voice about me, in me, that's me-ier than me . . . so real, ab-so-lute-ly, that*

might not self-consciousness itself be only a withering away of full-blown psychosis? This must, Busner thinks, occur to everyone, every day, many times, whether or not they are walking along a corridor so long that it would challenge the sanity of *a once-born, a cheery Whitman. Still . . . that way madness about madness lies* . . . a madness that has already diverted his career from the mainline before it got started, sending him *rolling into the siding that connects to this laager*, with its *buttoned-up soul-doctors and Musselmen, all of them compelled to serve under the campanile, the water tower, and the chimney from the stained brickwork of which a smooch of yellow smoke licks the grey sky over North London. Along comes Zachary* . . . the corridor is narrow – ten feet at most – yet none of the human traffic thus far has detained him until now — when he is fixated by one transfixed. It is a patient – a woman, an old woman . . . *a very old woman, so bent – so kyphotic*, that upside down she faces the sagging acrylic belly of her own cardigan and *vigorously assents to it*. This is all that Busner can see: the back of her *nodding-dog* head, the whitish hair draggling away from two bald patches – one at the crown, the second a band across the rear of her cranium. At once, he thinks of twitchers he has seen on his chronic ward, screwing their heads into the angle between the headrest and the back of their allotted armchair – twitchers, wearing themselves away as opportunity hammers away at the inside of the television screen and applause comes in monotonous waves. She is at once a long way off and close enough for him to manhandle. After the eruptions – and there are many lifetimes of afterwards – it settled down on him, an understanding soft and ashy, that all the important relationships in his life – with his uncle Maurice, with Alkan, with Sikorski and the other Quantity Theorists, with his wives – definitely with his children – were like this: *fondling familiar, their breath in my*

nostrils caries-sweet, sugar-sour – yet also radiophonically remote, their voices bleeping and blooping across the lightyears.

They take a long time to reach one another – the psychiatrist and the old woman patient. To see her, to *see her* properly, Busner has to wade through a Brown Windsor of assumptions about the elderly insane. — Moral aments, McConochie had called them in the subdued and amphitheatral lecture room at Heriot-Watt, neither knowing nor caring – so far as the young Zack could see – whether this malaise was born of heredity, anoxia, syphilitic spirochetes, shell shock – or some other malfunction in the meaty mechanism altogether. The dopamine hypothesis was beyond hypothetical to McConochie, *the dope*, whose favoured expository method was to get a chronic patient in from the back wards and *put them through their hobbling paces on the podium*. This, a dour travesty of Charcot's mesmerism, for it was his students who became hypnotised by their professor's monotonous description of the schizophrenic to hand, whose own illness rendered her altogether incapable of evoking the harrowing timbre of her own monotonous voices. McConochie, the worn-out pile of whose fustian mind would be bared – as he wandered from lectern to steamy radiator and back – by his inadvertent references to general paralysis of the insane, or even dementia praecox, obsolete terms that meant far less than the vernacular: loony – yet which served their purpose, inculcating his students – Busner too – with the obstinate conviction that any long-stay inpatient above a certain age was afflicted not with a defined pathology but a wholly amorphous condition. — It is this loonystuff, at once fluid and dense, that Busner wades through, and that, besides clogging up the interminable corridor, also lies in viscous puddles throughout the extensive building and its annexes. The old woman's head *vibrates beyond my*

reach: a component on an assembly line just this second halted by the cries of shop stewards . . . She tics, and her crooked little feet, shod in a child's fluffy bedroom slippers, kick and kick at a lip of linoleum tile that has curled away from the asphalt. *Kick and kick: micro-ambulation* that yet takes her nowhere. Busner thinks, inevitably, of a clockwork toy ratcheting on the spot, *a plastic womanikin doomed to topple over* . . . but she doesn't, and so he comes on, his thighs *heavy, aching* as he forces his way through his own clinical indifference.

Right beside her now, bent down like her so that he can peer round her palsied shoulder and into her face, which is . . . *profoundly masked: rough-bark skin within which frighteningly mobile eyes have been bored.* – Shocked, he withdraws, and the old woman is at once *far away again, shaking and ticcing, her fingers scrabbling, her arms flexing I'm an ape man I'm an ape-ape* . . . Perceptible flames of movement ignite on her left-hand side, in the middle of the densest thickets of akinesia, a paralysis not only of the muscles . . . *but of the will itself – abulia?* then flare up one arm, across the shoulders, before *exploding into ticcy sparks and so dying away . . . Torticollis* comes to Busner *uselessly* – and such is the parasympathetic drama he has just witnessed that he is amazed when two auxiliary staff, their black curly hair *aerated cream* in white nylon snoods, casually part to circumvent them – . . . I tellim mek a gurl an offer she'll 'preciate, their remarks volleying between him and the old woman . . . See, 'e cummup 'ere mos days . . . – before they reunite and carry on, oblivious. — *Electric woman waits for you and me* . . . with Nescafé and a marijuana cigarette *burning rubber* after the International Times event at the Roundhouse. Somewhere in the bedsit grot of Chalk Farm . . . Busner had taken the *wrinkled fang trailing venom*, his eye caught by Ronnie Laing and Jean-Paul

Sartre paperbacks stacked in the brick-and-board bookcase . . . *nauseating*. Her boyfriend's hair hung down lanker than the bead curtain she clicked through with the mugs. She was in velvet – the boyfriend *in a sort of hessian sack*. Was it Busner who had been time-travelled here from a past as jarringly austere as his test-card-patterned sports jacket and drip-dry tie, or, to the contrary, they who had been op-art-spiralled from a pre-industrial opium dream of foppery and squalor? *Later* . . . she frigidly anointed him with tiger balm and then they coupled on a floor cushion covered with an Indian fabric that had tiny mirrors sewn into its brocade. The boyfriend hadn't minded *gotta split, man* and Busner was split . . . *a forked thing digging its way inside her robe*. She fiddled with bone buttons at her velvety throat. His skin and hairs snagged on the mirrors, his fingers *did their best with her nipples. She looked down on me from below* . . . one of his calves lay cold on the floorboards. There was *the faint applause of pigeons* from outside the window. — His strong inclination is to touch the old woman, his touch, he thinks, might free her from this entrancement – but first: Are you all right? Can I help you? *Nothing*. The upside-down face *faces me down*, the eyes slide back and away again, but their focal point is either behind or in front of his face, never upon it. – Can you tell me which your ward . . . is? He grasps her arm – more firmly than he had intended *acute hypertonia wasted old muscles yet taut, the bones beneath acrylic sleeve, nylon sleeve, canvas skin . . . thin metal struts*. The fancy new quartz watch on his own plump wrist turns its shiny black face to his as her malaise resonates through him . . . *Along comes Zachary* . . . he wonders: Am I blurring? Ashwushushwa, she slurs. What's that? Ashuwa-ashuwa. One of her bright eyes leers at the floor. He says: Is it my shoes – my Hush Puppies? Her eye films with disappointment – then clears and leers pointedly at the floor again.

She is drooling, spit pools at the point of her cheekbone and stretches unbroken to where it doodles on the tile with a *snail's silvering*. At long last . . . *slow, stupid Zachary* bends down and presses down the lip of the tile so that the toe of the kicking slipper scoots over it. Then . . . *she's off!* Not doddering but pacing with smoothness and fluidity, her shoulders unhunching, her neck unbending and pivoting aloft her head as her arms swing free of all rigidity. – It took so long for Busner to reach her, so long for him to decide to touch her, that he's agog: she should be right in front of him not twenty yards off and *falling down the long shaft of the corridor. Except* . . . already her gait is becoming hurried then *too fast* . . . *festination*, another uncalled for Latinism, pops into his mind as the old woman is *swept away from me on the brown tide* . . . Is this, he wonders, a contradictory side-effect of her medication? The lizardish scuttle that counter-points Largactil's leaden tread? Because, of course, it is unthinkable that she shouldn't be dosed with some form of chlorpromazine – everyone is. The drug saturates the hospital in the same way that paraldehyde formerly soaked the asylum, although a few isolated voices – Busner's muted one among them – have, while not doubting its efficacy, its . . . humanity . . . questioned its necessity. For all the good this does, because there's no damning its sepia-sweet flow, a single wave that nonetheless drowns out many, many voices. Not having seen quite so many chronic mental patients in one place for some years, Busner has been struck, since arriving at Friern, by *the chloreography*, the slow-shoe-shuffle of the chorus from which an occasional principal choric breaks free into a high-kicking and wind-milling of legs and arms. Noticed this tranquillising – but also become aware of a steady background pulse of involuntary move-ment: tardive dyskinesia that deforms the inmates' bodies, flapping

hands, twitching facial muscles, *jerking heads* . . . They are possessed, he thinks, by ancient subpersonalities, the neural building-blocks of the psyche . . . *She is gone* – or, at least, too far down the corridor to be seen any more *a human particle*. Busner, who is interested in most things, has read about linear accelerators, and so he takes a green-capped Biro from the row ranged across his breast pocket – green for his more imagistic aperçus, red for clinical observations, blue for memories, black for ideas – then writes in the notebook he has taken out and flipped open: *What will she smash into? What will happen then? All the subhuman parts of her – can they be observed?* in the long dark corridor where they play all sorts: *skippin'* and boats and *hoopla-for-chokkolits*. Mary Jane comes to *smackem*, Lookit the skirtin'! she cries. In the passage it's *allus* dark – so *dark inna coalhole*. Illumination comes only from a fanlight above the door, comes on sunny days in a single oblique beam a *Jacob's ladder* that picks out a *burnin' bush* on the floorboards that Stan and Audrey jump into and out of – Yer put yer leff hand in, yer put yer leff arm out, Shake it a little, a little, then turn yersel about, the little ones, they are, going *Loobeloo, loobeloo*, but Bert just laughs at them: You're rag-arses, you aynt got no proper cloves, juss smocks, and he swings open the front door and goes out on the step to play with his marbles . . . his *wunner* . . . *his fiver an' sixer inall*. He has them all neatly wrapped up in one of their father's noserags, wrapped up and tied in a little bindle. He sits on the front step and gets them out and places them in a row. Audrey peeks from behind the door and sees *claybrown, marblewhirl*, *glasstripe* with *sunrays* shining through it *so pretty* she cannot resist it when he goes down the four steps to sit at the kerb and twist fallen straw – but *grabs it* and darts back inside. Stan's eyes are wide, Yul catchit, he says, yul catchit. They stand in the *burnin' bush* looking at the striped

marble glowing in Audrey's palm and neither of them can move – Yer put yer leff leg in, yer put yer leff leg out, yer put yer leff leg out, *yer put yer leff leg out* . . . but it won't go *no ferver*, it is stuck there kicking and kicking against an invisible barrier, while, terrorised by the imagining of what Bert *will do to me*, Audrey's head shakes, *Yer put yer noddle in, yer put yer noddle out* . . . The door crashes back on its hinges and there he is: Where's me stripey! He howls, then charges for her, *Yer put yer whole self in, yer put yer whole self out* . . . He grabs her wrist so hard she feels the bones grating together inside it, then twists it so that the fist opens helplessly. A'wah-wa-wa! A'wah-wa-wa! she blubs. Audrey's big brother's starting eyes are fixed on his beloved marble – but hers, hers, are equally held by the peculiar bracelet he wears, its golden segments *fiery* in the *burnin' bush*, and on the back of it a huge black jewel *Mother's jet beads*. Audrey staggers, almost falls, bends double to escape the *hurt* and is caught there feeling the long *Vulcanised* strip of tension that loops round her middle and stretches in either direction the length of the passage *an inner tube pulled tight round the rim of a bicycle wheel*.

Stuck in the present's flesh are the looking-glass fragments of a devastating explosion: a time bomb was primed in the future and planted in the past. The debris includes the row of houses along Novello Street towards Eel Brook Common, their top two storeys weatherboarded and bowing over the roadway under widows' peaks of rumpled tiling. There's the fat-bellied kiln of the pottery in the crook of the King's Road and the ragged patterning of the yews in the misty grounds of Carnwath House. Old Father Thames sucking on weedy-greasy piles stuck in the mud all along the riverside from the bridge to the station. Her own father sucking on a hazel twig he's cut and whittled with his pocket knife to slide in and out of his

muddy mouth, in between his remaining weedy-greasy teeth. — Audrey's father, Sam Death: not De'Ath, not lar-de-dar, not like some uz thinks they're better than they should be. Namely, Sam's brother Henry, who styles himself like that and resides in a new villa somewhere called Muswell Hill. They have their own general, the De'Aths. Audrey has heard this said so many times that even now, a big girl of ten, she cannot forestall this vision: a rotund man in a scarlet jacket hung all over with gold braid, and sitting on a kitchen chair in a scullery. His white mutton chops creamy on the rim of his high collar, his red cheek pressed against the limewashed wall. Not that Audrey's mother speaks of the De'Aths' general enviously – there has always been a niceness to this understanding: while the Deaths are not the sort to have servants, neither are they those *what serve*. And while the Deaths are no better than they should be, neither are they worse than they might. Whispering in the parlour before the new bracket was put in, before the cottage piano arrived – whisperings when Mary Jane put a solar lamp on the table at dusk and it rounded off the corners of the room with its golden globe of light. Guttersnipes, they hissed, urchins, street arabs – different ones came on several occasions to say, If it please you, sir, ma'am, I bin by the line-up fer the Lambeth spike, anna bloke wot wuz innit said if'n I wuz to cummover west an' tell iz people there'd be a tanner innit. But Sam Death is not the whispering sort: A tanner! A tanner for a windy nag stuffed with skilly! You'll count yerself bloody lucky t'cummaway frummeer wiv a thru'pence – now fuck off, or I'll call fer the blue boys! The arabs aren't down – thru'pence is *a good dip*, so they skip from the avenue into the Fulham Road, tossing their caps up as Audrey's father buttons the long skirts of his rabbit-skin coat, saying, There's one as won't be dining wiv Duke 'Umphrey t'night.

Audrey never sees *ve windy nag*, knows only of her father's other brother from these evening sallies – Sam heading off to head him off, muttering that: It's a crying shame Honest John Phelps the ferryman is no more, so cannot take him across to the Surrey side. So, James Death the pauper uncle becomes all paupers for Audrey – when she's sent to fetch her father from the Rose & Crown for his tea *Jim's* is the shadow that capers beside the trapdoor dancers. In the flare of a naptha lamp, she sees him, grovelling beneath one of the coster's stalls in Monmouth Street market – cowering there, picking up orange peel and *pressin' its smile to 'is ol' man's mouf* . . . Then there's the screever kneeling on the pavement outside the ironmonger's on King Street, where Audrey waits while her mother goes in to buy a tin of Zebra grate polish. This rat-man scratches a gibbet on the granite with charcoal, not chalk – a fraying hank of marks from which hangs Uncle Jim, who sings: *Je-sus' blood ne-ver failed me ye-et* . . . his cap in hand.

Stanley, his blazer hung from the privy's latch, feeds the chalky inner tubing into the steel groove – *Gilbert, Gilbert Cook* . . . does something similar so that Audrey *bites my lip* –. But not yet – before then, when Albert sits at the kitchen table, his shirtsleeves cinched by *fascinating* bands, their parents are already styling themselves Deeth, to rhyme with teeth Sam picks, his face *swellin' beet-red*. You'll have an apoplexy, guv'nor, says Albert, dipping his nib and filling in Olive's line of the census form with quick, clever, cursive, clerkish writing. Don't guv'nor me, you jack-gentleman, Sam growls, what matter if we change an a to an e? Whose business but our own? Albert has his father's hand-me-down face, which would be handsome enough *onna a fat man*, although it appears queer on their tapered heads – the smooth flesh *bunching up* at their brows

and along their jawlines. It'd be the Ministry's business, I'd say, t'would be better if you left off – and as he speaks Albert continues to write, Death, Violet May, daughter, —, — — — —, — —, Secondary, his pen *morsing* from box to box, the dashes indicating further shared characteristics – 'til at least I've gone into rooms, I've no wish to speak for the others . . . who, despite having grown up with Albert always before them, are still agog when he does two things at once, *both perfectly*: piano playing and reading the evening paper, timing an egg while totting up the household accounts – no alternation between hand and foot, or coordination between eye and hand faults him, no variability of scales confounds him. 'E's twins inna single skin, said a local wag, seeing Bert unerringly volley a football even as he was marking possibles for the guv'nor in the Pink 'Un with a stub of pencil – this when father and son were still close, down at Craven Cottage, the playing field all round kicked and stamped into a happily tortured morass. Audrey thought: if we're Death, then Uncle James must be dearth – this a word gleaned from Bible and Bunyan at school, for the Deaths are not regular attendees, let alone communicants.

When four out of the five Death children had left the house on Waldemar Avenue, Death, Samuel A. Theodore, 51, married, 31 years, Night Garage Inspector, Omnibus Coy, Worker, was still known, familiarly, as Rothschild Death, on account of the flutters and the rabbit-skin coat, and the *arf and arfs* he downed in pubs and penny gaffs from King Street to Parsons Green and Mortlake beyond, ales that imparted a jovial gloss to his coating of bombast. Familiarly, *yes*, for *those sort won't be told*, but formally it was Deeth, and when the three Deeths transplanted themselves from the London clay to the red Devon loam, with Albert's assistance taking up residence in

a cottage at Cheriton Bishop – where Mary Jane had been raised – they became known locally as the Deers. — Sam Deer totters around the small garden, Olive Deer watches him. She has seen pictures in the illustrated weekly and read the accompanying text. The pictures are obscure – the words surpassing allusive. Olive, who knows nothing of adult bodies besides her own, still wonders how it is that they get food into the women in Holloway Prison who won't eat . . . who keep their jaws clamped shut. She wonders what it might be like to tell someone that a twisting rivulet of ants has leaked into the cottage from the rain-washed garden. Got in, flowed up the stairs, sopped up the grooves of the candlewick and, not unpleasantly, are infesting *me merry bit* . . .

Stanley mends the inner tube, feeding it through the water in the wooden pail, the *kinked eel* sends a *piddle* of bubbles to the surface. He pulls it out, mops it, marks its *gills* with the chalk. Caught in the *kink*, the corridor stretching away in front of her . . . *longer than time*, Audrey *burns with covetousness* for that safety bicycle, convinced she can ride it better than him – fix it quicker. *Neat as a pin* in the tailor-made she's bought with her first week's wages from Ince's, she covets it – and resents him. It was one thing to be still soaping Bert's collars – from when they were nippers his primacy was taken so much for granted that there was no more need to speak of it than *what you got upter in the privy*. But Stanley – her *baby*, her *bumps-a-daisy*, that he should have this and not her, well, she was reft, the suspicion creeping into her that he's never *given a fig* for her. Playing out, playing Queenie – and *I was Queenie*, and the Wiggins boys all *mocking me* . . . and that lousy boy, who come up from Sands End – the one Mother said az the stink of gas onnis togs – picks up the ball and dips it inna puddle, then rolls it in some horse shit, and when I turn

round he throws it at me so 'ard the string busts and all the soggy, shitty paper wraps round my face and spatters my pinny, an' Stan leaps on 'im, thumpinim proper, defendin' his big sis, and the Sands End kid ad vese big obnail boots, no stockings, juss vese boots . . . coming down on Stan's face . . . a yelp! The Wiggins boys screamin', turnin' tail. There mustabin a nail come loose – there was that much blood. When Bert come out of the house and dragimoff, the Sands End kid was spittin', Garn! Piss up yer leg an play wiv ve steam! Still . . . maybe . . . maybe even then *it was all a bloody show* . . .

Cold meat, mutton pies, Tell me when your mother dies . . . November in *Foulham*, the streets greasily damp – the colour of rotten logs. Bad air from the river, bad air from the Works, rotten malt gusting from the Lamb brewery over Chiswick way. In the back bedroom Audrey rubs the soot-stained muslin curtain against her cheek and peers down in the near-darkness at the backyards of their terrace and those of the terraces behind, fret-worked by walls and fences into separate territories, each with its own upright hut . . . *a command post – Ladysmith relieved. Come inter the ga-arden, Maude!* And see the raspberry canes *scattered spilikins*, the humpback of an abandoned cask, a pile of bricks, a birdcage *shaped like the Crystal Palace* that *them two doors down adfer a myna*, which had croaked back at the cat's-meat-man: *Ca-a-at's me-eat!* Until *p'raps a cat gotit*. Audrey! *Or-dree!* Cummun get yer tea! *Cat meat, mutton pies, Tell me when your mother dies* . . . She should have been down there with her sisters, fetching yesterday's leg of mutton down from the meat safe, peeling and boiling potatoes, scraping dripping from the pale blue enamel basin. *Or-dree!* She can't be *doin' wivvit*. Time enough for tasks later – her soda-scraped hands *bloaters* floating in the *scummy* water. Besides, she cannot abide her mother just now – Mary Jane who stinks of

chlorodyne, and slumps narcotised on the horsehair chaise her sons dragged in from the parlour when it split. Her *Ladysmith*, a bell tent of grey woollen shawl and black bombazine, her tired auburn hair down *rusting* on her big shoulders. I can't be bovvered wiv me stays, she says, not when me mulleygrubs comes upon me. Audrey is repelled by her – disgusted that her mother vouchsafes her *women's ailment* to her alone – the *sly thing*, *Or-dree!* – where they jumble together in the sewn-in pockets of time swung apart from the *general shindy* of Death family life.

She comes clattering down the bare stairs – the runner in the hall has yet to reach them, it trails behind the Death's measured tread as they mount from floor to floor of No. 18 Waldemar Avenue. When they had arrived, the house – barely twenty years old – had just suffered its first demotion: sold on by the family who had bought it from its spec' builder to one Emmanuel Silver, who had sliced it into three residences. The Deaths – Samuel, Mary Jane and the three older children, who were then very small – had the ground floor, a proper kitchen range and a *spankin' new geyser*, although they and the other families still had to share the old bucket privy in the backyard. The Poultneys had the rooms on the first floor for a while, until Abraham Poultney was laid off from his job as a fitter with Ellis Tramways, a happenstance that coincided – or may have been caused by – the death of their younger daughter, Rose, from diphtheria. She wuz not the right sort, Mary Jane said of Missus Poultney. Not that she wuzzn respectable – but she 'ad no backbone, poor soul. I didn't see little Rose for, ooh, on toppuv a week – you remarked onnit, Ordree – so I goes up there and finds they'd put her on toppuv the wardrobe in the back bedroom. The whiffuvit – terrible, it wuz. The merciful Deaths had paid for the funeral – including the toy casket,

knocked up from deal, *cheap but decent*. At about the same time, Samuel had secured his own position as Deputy General Manager of the London General's Fulham garage – this, after long service as a driver, and latterly a conductor. *'E was a blackleg in the strikes*, said Stanley, years later, *so they give iz nibs iz dibs*. Audrey never thought this the whole story – she had seen how her father was with horses *bussing and petting 'em* . . . She had been with him one time when he stooped down in the road after another hearse had passed by and said, See 'ere, girl, 'ere's shit an' straw both. What they eats an' what they lets fall at the far end. Straw's 'ere to muffle it up when they carts us away. When they've planted us in the ground, we'll turn inter 'urf – which is only by wayuv sayin' another sorta droppin'. It was an uncharacteristically lengthy speech for her father to have made – at least, in the presence of a member of his own family. — Parked outside the Cock & Magpie with a jujube to suck – or not, Audrey heard not Father, Samuel or Sam, but Rothschild Death holding forth in the public bar: on the follies of the turf, the moonstruck fancies of the new women and the socialistic madness of the Progressives. An occasional late hansom or growler might bowl along King Street – straw bristles plaited in its horses' tails, followed by a 'bus rattle-chinking towards her father's garage. A swell got up in Ulster and homburg might elbow a tinker woman away from the pub door, *bloody jade*, giving a keyhole warbler the chance to slide in to the *goldensmoky* mirrored cacophony on his coat-tails. Once ensconced she might yowl out, Well if you fink my dress is a littulbit, juss a littulbit – not too muchuvit! While hiking up her petticoats, such as they were, until overwhelmed by cries of outrage: Flip 'er a tinker, Rothschild! Gerriduv ve drab! Her father's face hanging mottled from the shiny platter of his topper's brim, the hiss of the

jets in the outsized glass lamp that hung above the double doors. Up there, in the elemental radiance, floated a softly moulded figure in a dainty print gown. Up there, where *speechless Thought abides, Still her sweet spirit dwells, That knew no world besides* . . .

Audrey had seen her father with horses – and she had seen him with men, a stallion among them, his commerce easy enough – yet fraught with sufficient danger to give him authority, *Gentlemen, I have dived into Romano's, and now* . . . his *sausage seegar sizzles innis face . . . my tissues are refreshed!* He's a study, Rothschild, a quick turn, who hooks his thick neck in the crook of his bamboo cane and hoiks himself offstage. He had *so they said* once thrashed a navvy to *wivvi-naninch,* not that you would divine these *fistic manoeuvres* from the way he plotted his course home down the Fulham Palace Road, his flame-haired *slippuv a dorter* clipping along in front of him, lighting the way through the particular to *anuvver meat tea* . . .

Albert and Stanley sit, both with books held open by the lips of their plates, both with collars unbuttoned, their tea cups cradled in their hands for warmth as much as refreshment. Vi and Olive gawp, pasty faces pinched by pointed shoulders, each with a slice of bread and dripping in their hand as they behold this virile spectacle: the man and the boys taking turns to hack at the leg of mutton, then put meat in their too-similar faces. Albert's glassy paperweight eyes, Welsh-slate blue, scan up and then down the narrow columns of Rous's Trigonometric Tables – not consigning cosines, sines and tangents to memory, only confirming the tight joins of the granite setts already laid out along the rule-straight roadways of his metropolitan mind. And Stanley – his complexion cooler, his brows finer than those of his older brother – he sighs, ahuh, shuffling fingertips from one page to the next of a Free Library book. His eyelids flicker

and his fringe bobs, the whirring mechanism of Bakelite and crystal rods, propelled by scores of flywheels, squeezes his very atoms into the kinetomic beam in a number of abrupt spasms that, while they bend him back so far his just-stropped neck touches his rear, are not in the slightest discomforting – and all the essence of Stanley is then discharged from the elevated muzzle of the contraption, shooting a streak of light between the spokes of the Great Wheel at Earls Court. Up and up above the city it goes – dolorous hoots from the steamers anchored at Tilbury, gas-mantle-ssssh! in the upper atmosphere – and higher still, the clouds flickering far below. In one aperture pickelhaube-helmeted Junkers slash each other's cheeks to ribbons, in another the Tsarina kisses an egg set with rubies and garnets. The beam is so high now that Stanley's atoms sweep into orbit, girdling the earth once, twice, thrice! Before tending down and down into the viridian heart of Africa, where, in a jungle clearing, awaits *Fortescue, my mechanic*, cranking the handle of an apparatus that sucks the beam into its celluloid funnel. Stanley is an apparition that swiftly solidifies, panting in a patented woollen Jaeger bicycling suit. He and Fortescue shake hands vigorously. Capital shot, old bean! the mechanic says, as a nigger chief steps forward from the trees, his honour guard of naked warriors dropping their tribute of tusks *at the feet of the scientific adventurer* . . .

. . . *Olive*, Olive! Oh, I dunno, there's summat wrong wiv you, girlie, carncher see yer father's wantin' izale? Olive turns back to the scullery, limping on the toes of her too-tight boots – she almost lays a hand on the ruddy range to steady herself. Audrey agrees *there's summat wrong wiv that girlie*, and moreover: *They're in cahoots*, they want her to be like this, lost, confused, *a top spinnin' round 'em*. Sam plucks the beaded cloth from the jug and pours a draught into his

moustache cup, and there are *beads* of sweat on Mary Jane Death's forehead. Above her in the cabbage-steam-fug hangs a sampler Audrey sewed at school. — *One, two, three, four, girrrls. One: needle in the right hand. Two: thread in the left. Three: Through the eye. Then four: loop and knot. Now, thimble drill* . . . Audrey's hands, not suited to this fine work, twitched and shook in an ague that she felt incapable of mastering, or even to be a part of her at all, but something that snowed down poisonously from the arsenical-green ceiling . . . *Thimbles on yer thumbs, one-two, thim-thumbs, thimthums, tee-to-tum* . . . — Out of the eater, she says, came forth meat and out of the strong came forth – Burrrurp! Really, Samuel, Mary Jane says, laughing, mussyer? *They're in cahoots*, together *they've made five now an' loss none*. Stanley laughs at his father's eructation and says, Judges, Chapter 14, Verse 14 – thass evens, guv'nor. Albert, without looking up, grimaces and Audrey can hear what he hears: the echo of one brother inside the other's bony cave. I'm inbertween 'em – I'm a prism or a lens. Beams of Stanley, beams of Albert, playing, each on the other brother's *blank face* . . .

The curious *round-'ousing* of a big man pulling himself together with his braces – his moustache is *wet wiv beer* and tobacco-stained above his hidden lip. Hard to imagine that there is a lip beneath it, because Samuel Death's hair is so fleshy in tone, and, if it weren't for the reddening of his cheeks, you would think the *tache wuzziz lip*, while there are waxy skin strands plastered at the back of his bare domed head: Bedlam engraved in the Illustrated London News. — A large worthy-looking body walking along the quayside of a Mediterranean port, a basket of laundry dumped on her head. Four sailors dice in front of a tangle of ropes and spars while gazing at her behind. None of the Deaths know where this racy print has come

from – it simply cropped up on the wall, hiding the wallpaper with its criss-cross pattern of violets and pansies, wallpaper that is steam-slackened, torn into strips, and certainly antedates the Deaths, for, when Audrey was a littler girl, she was convinced her baby sister had been named after it. — Violet now clambers on to the chair her father has risen from, and, smuts on her cheeks, reaches up to fasten his collar stud. All of them have been dragooned into his toilet: Stanley sent to fetch the showy coat from the hook in the passage, Olive buckles his gaiters, Audrey and her mother mix tea and gin into his flask. Only Albert remains at table, his eyes triangulating a realm of purer forms, his fork negligently *scccrrrraping* gravy shapes. Samuel cries, Get the Coniston's! A hair tonic he madly applies to the front and back of his dome, as he places first one profile, then the other, before the oval of looking-glass chained up by the door – this, a motion that shows off to its fullest effect the sharp isosceles that, together with his love of swank, has earned him his moniker. Not, Audrey muses, that he's like the landlord, Silver, who comes attired soberly in bowler, wing collar, impeccably shined and elastic-sided boots – but whose face is sallow, handsome, the features somehow exaggerated, *outlined wiv charcoal*. The Deaths are plaster mouldings, Romish swags and vine trails pressed into their whiteness. They are pink and blond, brown and blonder, all save Audrey, whose flaming glory and cake-crumb-scattered cheeks betoken . . . *wot? Or-dree, Or-dree, Ordree's mammy gorrersel knocked up by a navvy!* Howsoever the taint was acquired, these are no distinguishing marks – leastways not up towards the Munster Road, where the houses are all *knocked abaht* and there's a family of Irish – or two – in every room, and the *ginger nuts* are everywhere in the streets. Still, *Comes the Jew-boy, Comes the Yid, Comes the Jew-boy for iz gelt* . . . is sung with gusto on

Thursday evening, with whichever of the two little girls is to hand, grabbed and bounced on his knee. Samuel breaks off only when he hears the *scccrrrreeeching* of the front gate, then he goes to the door to watch, derisively, as Silver undoes his trouser clips, pulls off his gloves and courteously doffs his hat. From the Horeb heights of the doorstep Audrey's father hands down a tosheroon, then a second, which is followed – after an insulting interval – by a sixpence. He places the coins in the dapper man's palm, *paying t'be fucking crucified*, before, sucking on his own gall, he retreats to the Golgotha of the parlour so that Silver may trot upstairs and do the same to the other tenants.

The odd panting and heaving that accompanies a tall and corpulent man working his way into a full-length overcoat. *Oof-oof*. The rabbit fur lies slick and rough in the gaslight, the Coniston is sweating *offuvim stink up the privyole*. Over her father's shoulder Audrey sees Stanley's impish expression: a valet, preparing to *cuttim dahn t'size*, by saying, *I say, Pater, that's a wewwy extwavagant costume for an hexplorer-chappie who ain't heggzackerly headin' up the Wivver Congo, only dahn to the 'bus garage by Putney Bridge* – say it, that is, if *'e wuz mad*. Samuel Death takes a further dekko around the room, then makes a final imposition of paternal discipline: Wozzat?! He snatches the flick-book Violet has just that moment snatched from dozy Olive – Audrey knows which one, it was given away with the Daily Mail on the occasion of the old Queen's final birthday parade, stiff cards sewn so they could be riffled and *By Jingo!* The horsemen fresh back from *bashin' the Boer* soundlessly jingle across Horse Guards Parade, their mounts breasting the staccato dust-puffs. Samuel peers at it, lets it fall to the painted floor, *extwavagantly* unbuttons the just-buttoned skirts of his coat. Parts them and reaches in his waistcoat pocket for his watch. Well, pshaw! – the

skin curtain billows – You're welcome to vese guttersnipes, Mary, me old Dutch – she simpers on the chaise – if'en I don't look lively . . . All eyes are on his fumbling fingers, all except Albert's. Samuel Death holds the timepiece up by its gold-plated bracelet, its face a lozenge of jet eclipsing the present that flows behind and in front of it. He pinches the tiny buttons either side of the casing and peers at the red illumined figures, 08.54, each digit composed with straight bars, bevelled at their ends. *Gaol numbers . . . I'm in gaol . . . in the spike – the booby-hatch, ha-ha-hooo – help me, helpme, hellellellellpme, Stan, Bert's torturin' me! Ashuwa-ashuwa . . .* — The long rubberised strip of tension loops round her middle and stretches in either direction along the corridor, pulling from the past to the future, lashing her to the moment – her belly *bulges so bad*, she feels *queer, like I might . . . I dunno*. Before she came down to tea she took the piece of calico she had folded into an *'Arrington Square* and put it down the front of her bloomers, although not really grasping why *every lady should know the greatest invention of the age for women's comfort* . . . Stanley releases the semi-inflated tube and it snaps into the bicycle wheel and *off I go! Leaping like a pea onna griddle . . . the pink 'un in Holywell Street . . . stuckinim – stuckinerr . . . We only start the generator for the electric from time to time, Miss De'Ath, wouldn't you agree that candlelight is more aesthetically pleasing?* Cables swagging the length of the workshop *sheeee-ung-chung-chung-chung!* Her lathe-bed ratchets back and Audrey loosens the chuck, switches the bit – a fuse rattles down on top of the others. Then they are streaming out from No. 1 Gate, *Where are the girls of the Arsenal? Working night and day, Wearing the roses off our cheeks, For precious little pay* . . . red-and-green flags come from nowhere and are waving on the tops of 'buses thronging

Beresford Square. *Shoulders back! Necks straight! Arms swing! We are the munitionettes, the suffragettes, the wild revolutionary girls!*

What can it mean, this sudden shift from paralysis to movement? Busner is left rooted, all the sour rot from the hospital's miles of intestinal corridor blowing into his puzzled face. This must be, he intuits, something – some definable pathology . . . *surely? The marked counterpoint between akinesia and festi-festi-na-shun, D-E-C-I-M-A-L-I-ZAYSHUN. DECIMALIZAYSHUN. Soon it's gonna change the money round, Soon it's gonna change the money rou-rou-round!* Easier, Busner thinks, to conceive of the Friern corridor as an endless conveyor belt, running around and around, bringing towards him patient after patient pari passu, so that if he can maintain concentration he'll have ample time to make the appropriate diagnosis of neurosis, dipsomania, dementia praecox, generalised paralysis of the insane, syphilis, addiction to socialism, schizophrenia, shell shock – the diseases historically synchronised and so entirely arbitrary, the moral ament becoming, on his next go-round, the mentally deficient, on his third, retarded, fourth, mentally handicapped. *Rou-rou-round. Soon it's gonna change the money round* . . . The hospital's fantasia on the theme of the Italianate belies, he thinks, its real purpose as a *human museum* within which have been preserved intact these *specimens, crushed and mangled round-rou-round, I'm an ape-man, I'm an ape, ape – Enough!* He must seize upon an action with which to fracture this reverie, exactly as the pressed-down tile allowed the elderly woman's foot to scoot forward. He finds it in the *automatism* of consulting his watch, an involved process since his wife – overreacting to an interest in gadgets Busner once feigned – gave him a new quartz model, the first to be affordable, for his thirty-first birthday. So: he flips the heavy gold-plated bracelet from beneath his shirt and

jacket cuffs, he brings the little black face up to his own, then pinches the small buttons either side of its casing so that the digits are illuminated *redly, futuristically*: *08.54 . . . late already for the ward rou-rou-* he at once sees and feels himself to be a colossal white canister spinning slowly end over end and sharply illumined against the infinity of blackness . . . *I am late . . . already, must pinch . . . harder, I can't . . . see . . . the time!*

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