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SIMON VAN BOOY



ALEX CHRISTOFI GLASS

A NOVEL

'Günter Glass, with his flaws and his limitations, and his belief in the better part of human nature, is a great pleasure to spend time with'

STEPHEN KELMAN,
AUTHOR OF
PIGEON ENGLISH

Alex Christofi was born and grew up in Dorset. After reading English at the University of Oxford, he moved to London to work in publishing. He has written a number of short pieces for theatre, and blogs about arts and culture for *Prospect* magazine. *Glass* is his first novel.

‘Günter Glass, with his flaws and his limitations, and his belief in the better part of human nature, is a great pleasure to spend time with. I was moved and amused and ultimately comforted by Günter’s sky-reaching spirit and his quest for deeper meaning in a world of transparencies’ Stephen Kelman, author of *Pigeon English*

‘*Glass* was such a pleasure to read, funny, beautiful and perceptive. I found Günter a gentle endearing hero, a unique little fish in an extremely moving *bildungsroman*. It struck a deep note about the fleeting nature of existence’ Sara Crowe, author of *Campari for Breakfast*

‘*Glass* is a brilliant novel with a first-person narrative voice that’s so natural and understated, I found myself re-reading passages in order to relive emotional experiences that were happening as a result of the gentle, but Nabokovian precision of Alex Christofi’s prose’ Simon Van Booy, author of *The Illusion of Separateness*

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Someone taught that temples are for fanatics only and took away the temples and promised there was no need for temples. And now there is no shelter. And no map for finding the shelter of a temple. And you all stumble about in the dark, this confusion of permissions. The without-end pursuit of happiness of which someone let you forget the old things which made happiness possible. How is it you say: *'Anything is going'*?

David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

Foreword

I am well aware that you probably do not consider glass to be crucial to the success of the human race. Let me assure you, it is as essential to the story of humanity as light, or water, and has a quality of character unsurpassed in any other substance. It appears pure and clear though, like the pearl, it is in purity composed of dirt. There is nothing like glass to catch the various accretions of the world on its surface, though we create it for its opposite quality: that of transparency.

Glass is a cipher. It can be sharp, or soft. It can stop sound; it can make the blind see. It can bend light itself with the dexterity of water; it can focus light into a cutting laser, or disperse it into a thousand droplets. Glass can even form mirrors to turn light back on itself, and show us what we are. Without glass, there would be no civilisation, any more than there might be without fire. It was glass that brought light into our homes; that reeled in the whole wide universe, so that we might better scrutinise it. Without glass, we would live in a windowless, flat world, unshaven, blind, thirsting, sullenly groping at our faces to discern what shape they made.

One man is responsible for my deep awe of glass. I met him in Salisbury, at the Cathedral where he worked. He is dead now, sadly – his family has a tradition of jumping the queue to meet their Maker and as one of few who might understand his hidden motivations, I have taken it upon myself to tell the story that he now cannot. I have gleaned what particulars I can from newspaper and police reports, and from those who knew him.

You wouldn't believe the truth if I told it to you, so I am taking the liberty of couching it in my own brand of picaresque. Above all else, it amuses me. But if I deviate from the reality, or invent character here and there, I do so only to separate out the various truths, just as a prism shows which light to be composed of a number of distinct and brilliant colours. I am convinced it is the only way to proceed: he was a very great man, composed of many contradictions, and I do not propose staring at the sun.

Of course, I do not know whether Günter would have approved of my rendering him in a work of fiction. I rather think that he might cry out, like Jesus before him, 'Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come.'¹

Dean Angela Winterbottom, Salisbury, 2 May 2010

An Introduction to Glass

As it happens, my name is Glass. My mother cut a deal with my father: if I was to get his surname, she would pick my forename. Perhaps yearning for the abandoned country of her birth, she decided on a solid German name, a hero's name. And so they called me Günter.

I have come to wonder whether I will make it through my twenty-third year. In the nine months since my mother died, I started a new job, which led me to meet a number of new people, one of whom I killed in a misunderstanding. But other things happened in the first twenty-two years that should explain first.

My first years, as you might imagine, were unremarkable. I went through all the usual phases: vegetable (0–1), animal (1–4), memorable (4+). I look down on my early childhood as a time when I didn't know many words and couldn't put things in categories. The benefit of this was that almost everything came as an epiphany. A gloopy substance! It tasted nice! Light changed colour through it! It was sticky! It stuck to the cat! The downside was that I had to formulate rules for behaviour, such as 'one is only allowed honey sometimes (when?)' and 'do not pour honey on the cat'. It seems to me now, though it wasn't apparent at the time, that growing up is the forfeit of one's pure experience in return for the comfort and reliability of rules.

I would say that we had a happy family. I mean, Dad's not the sort of person to actually say that he is happy, and obviously, if you picked a day at random, the strong likelihood was that there would be some kind of disturbance or argument, but the important thing was that it was always replaced by a different one the next day, so that it didn't develop into a feud. Apparently there weren't any arguments before Max was born, but that was only a year after I was born, so I can't remember. I can't think that I would have caused any.

I should explain something about my brother. People assume that, because he's deaf, he can't be a bad person. But his being deaf is completely unrelated to the fact that he's a total bastard. Whenever he gets too much I close my eyes and think to myself, *you'll never hear music*,² and then I feel bad for him, and I suspect that other people do something similar and this is why he gets away with being such a bastard. But I know what you're thinking: surely he wasn't always such a bastard. Maybe there was an event in his childhood that made him lash out at the people who cared about him, and maybe before this event there existed a pre-bastard Max.

Let's have a look at the evidence. When I was four and he was three, he managed to get hold of some scissors and cut my comfort blanket up into neat confetti. When I was five and he was four, he put Lego under my sheets and in my empty shoes and everywhere he thought they might cause me discomfort. When I was nine and he was eight, he woke up early and unscrewed the inside door-handle of our shared bedroom before shutting me in. I thought I was stuck in some inescapable nightmare and, needing the toilet very badly, resorted to escaping through the (ground floor) window, only to find that he'd also locked the back door. The cat appeared, staring at my bare feet and pyjamas, as if to say, *you too?*

In return for these human rights abuses, I had the privilege of sitting with Mum every time we took a family trip to the hospital. Dad would go in with Max, and Mum would sit with me in the waiting room, where there was an abacus and some other toys that I was too old for. When we arrived, there was always a gang of two or three children playing with them who would tell me to go away. Once, I remember distinctly, I was called 'fatty fats McNugget'. I suppose I didn't really mind being outlawed, though, if my mum was there. I would sit on her lap and help with her wordsearch. Mum explained that a wordsearch was easier than a crossword because you didn't need to know what the word meant, but she always did know, and she would always tell me. I thought of wordsearch like battleships. The big boat might look bigger and therefore nastier, but it was the easiest to hit. So if there was a word like 'sesquipedalian', it wouldn't be hiding in the corners. When we first started playing, Mum would read the words to me; later, she would try to make me read them to her. She took great pleasure in pronouncing long words with me. German has lots of long words because you can join two words together to make a new one.³

The fact that it was always my mother who looked after me during these long waits confirmed my instinct that my mother and I got on the best. Though the rules weren't stated, we wouldn't speak significantly in the waiting room, and we would not talk about Max.

Lots of people love their mothers, but I think it's fair to say I loved mine more than you love yours. When I was very young, it felt as if we were still one person, as if my every need were preempted by her. Nestled in close, I could hold her and have her arms surround me and almost feel she still carried me through the world. We had been separated, of course, but I was still a part of her. If I ventured out into the world at all, it was on her behalf, as an extension of her, and I would always report back on the things I had seen and done, the knowledge I had collected to share with her. Sometimes, to help me with my job of bringing the world to her, she would tell me things that she already knew, things that would help me understand what I was seeing and doing. And even though I got things wrong, and I never knew the right thing to say, and I sometimes forgot to put socks between my feet and my shoes, she loved me.

She wasn't pretending, either. She liked to look at me. She thought my jokes were funny, even especially if they didn't make sense. As we grew older I wanted to reach a balance point in our relationship where I might also look after her. But I never got that far. Even in the end, I had no way to comfort her as she had comforted me.

Salad Days

When I was seven, my father took me to discover glass. Mum had a shift on the checkouts at Sainsbury's, and there wasn't space to hide me under the till, so I had to go on Dad's business trip. Dad was a salesman. What he sold changed regularly, so the only constant was that he was always selling something. He never excelled, which means he probably didn't cheat anyone out of their money, but when other children asked me what my dad did, I got a bit confused and mumbled something about him wearing a tie.

My father has always been a straightforward man. You wouldn't catch him using two words where one would do. You'd never catch him using words when a nod would do, though this did not make him good at sign language. He was always an advocate of just getting on with it, eating what was put in front of him, putting one foot in front of the other, drinking in moderation, almost hitting target when making ends meet, walking before jogging, but he would never tell you this because he kept himself to himself. He has not, until recently, been the kind to share his thoughts or feelings, so I used to think of him as a kind of anti-philosopher, capable of doing many things unthinkingly that others might question.

On this particular day, my father had to take a trip to Dudley. He couldn't very well have taken me into his meeting, as I liked to pull out long strings of questions which, if left unchecked, would unravel the very jumper of the universe. I might have ruined the meeting, and cost Dad his reputation or worse, his job, and then there wouldn't be any money for food or the mortgage. To have allowed that to happen would have been irresponsible. So he did something that would no longer be considered Good Parenting: he found the nearest museum, put me in it, and told me not to leave the building.⁴

At first I wandered around peering at and through the pieces on display, marvelling at how they chewed up the world and spat it back out in swirls and strange perspectives. It was very like a liquid but frozen, so when a kindly old man told me that glass was in fact a very slow liquid, I could see for myself that he must be right. And yet how very like a solid it behaved, how very like ice. I had just learnt about solids and liquids and gases, and it definitely looked like a solid. It was exciting to see something breaking the rules.

I learnt that glass was one of the first materials that man made; that scientists found glass very useful because it could hold almost any chemical; glass was made of the same stuff as sand; glass was the reason Galileo saw the stars.

I imagined that my family were the royalty of glass. I was Günter, Prince of Glass, and people could see straight through me, and they came to me to ask about the stars and I gave them all the answers. As I wandered towards the end of the hall, I wondered what my father, King of Glass, was up to. He was probably magicking sand into crystal palaces for the people of Dudley. That must be why he travelled so much, because Salisbury didn't really have any sand. And he went on a trip to Bournemouth once, and there was lots of sand there.

Thinking about my dad made me feel lonely. I looked around and there were some adults standing

still and looking at things and holding their chins, but they all looked very stern, and I was hungry, and my dad had left me all alone. I began to well up. If Dad was making castles he had to show me how to do it when I was king, and it was very mean of him not to take me along. Instead I was alone in this stupid place, and he'd been gone for – I looked at the clock – thirty-seven minutes! I started to cry in earnest.

The old man who had told me about glass being a liquid came over and knelt down beside me.

'Now then, where's your daddy?'

'I don't know,' I said angrily. I'd thought that much was obvious.

'Deary me,' he said. 'Would you like to come and sit with me behind the desk?'

I nodded, still a bit angry.

'Come on then,' he said. I took his hand, which felt like sugar paper.

We sat behind the desk in the foyer, and I took the money from people and gave it to him to put in the register. He gave me one of his liver sausage sandwiches. When he chewed, his moustache wriggled.

'Your moustache is lovely,' I told him. He laughed.

'Thank you,' he said. 'Where's your moustache?'

'I left it at home,' I said. 'My moustache is made of glass.'

'Is it now?'

'Yes, it was a present from the Queen of Sweden,' I said. I instantly regretted saying the last bit. It had been quite believable up to then. Now he probably knew I was fibbing. I wasn't very good at telling lies.

But he didn't seem to notice, and after a few minutes another man came up to us and said hello. He was wearing a short-sleeved T-shirt with thick, tight sleeves over his forearms like black bandages.

'Would you like to see how we make glass?' said the moustache man. I nodded vigorously, the sandwich rattling round in my head. 'This is my friend Daz. What's your name, son?'

'Günter.'

The other man shook my hand with thumb and fingers. 'Nice to meet you, Günter.' I left the moustache man at the desk and followed T-shirt man through a door to a workshop.

I watched, mesmerised, as he took a long metal rod about his height from the corner, and walked over to a big thing on the back wall that looked like a cupboard. He opened a little door to reveal a circular hole, belching heat and glowing orange. It looked like a rising sun. My face got hot.

He dipped the rod into the middle of the sun, and then pulled it back out again, a gloopy mass of sun-honey glowing on its tip. He twirled the rod in his fingers quickly, blowing into the end so that the sun-honey blew up into a balloon. He was a sorcerer, a priest. I decided then that I would live here, in this room, sleeping under the work bench and living off liver sausage sandwiches, and I would learn how to make glass birds and castles and moustaches. The sorcerer rolled the glass around on a metal table surface, shaping it into a perfect oval and always keeping it moving before it dripped out of shape. I was enraptured.

I heard shouting from behind me. Only in crescendos did I hear the words '—WOULD YOU LEAVE HIM—' and '—YOU BLOODY—' and I realised that my father had come to take me back. Could he not see I had made a life for myself here?

The door opened to reveal the moustache man, red in the face, and my father, redder. The T-shirt man had to keep the glass moving while it was still cooling. I walked over to say hello, sensing that this was what the situation required, and Dad pushed me out of the room with a big hand on the back of my head.

'You shouldn't have let him in here with all the equipment,' my dad continued, his face gradually returning to its normal colour. 'He has some funny ideas. Not much going on up there,' he said, patting my head.

‘He was as good as gold,’ said the moustache man. And then, with the apologetic tone of the defeated, ‘Mind you, you shouldn’t have left him on his own like that.’

I personally thought there was a lot going on in my head, but I decided that my dad wouldn’t understand. I decided that it was really other people who were stupid and not nearly as interesting things like sun-honey. When I grew up, I didn’t want to be a man with an angry face and a tie, I wanted to make beautiful things and have a moustache.

We didn’t say much in the car on the way home. I only interrupted the silence for really important questions, like, ‘Is glass where our name comes from?’

‘No.’

‘It sounds the same.’

‘The word is German. The name is Welsh.’

‘Mum’s German.’

He didn’t reply to that, so I assumed my line of reasoning was correct. How wrong we can be when all we have is logic.

But I wasn’t stupid. I didn’t care if Dad thought I was. People could think of me whatever they wanted. I knew what was interesting, and that was what mattered. My classmates all had boring ambitions. If they didn’t want to be in the emergency services, they were going to follow their parents into the army or onto a farm, or they wanted to stay in school as a teacher. At a push, they could conceive of breaking news to people as a lawyer or a doctor. Not one person ever claimed they wanted to be a magician, a spy or a ship’s captain. There were a million jobs out there, and half of my classmates wouldn’t even end up in one of the jobs they said they wanted – they’d end up wearing a tie and farming invisible fruit. Not me. I didn’t know what it was yet, but I was going to find something different.

A Death in the Family

The week that my mother died was eventful for many reasons. Dad had his last day at work, and after decades on the road, I think he was secretly looking forward to staying in one place for a bit. It was my twenty-second birthday. Max had just got a job, which was a massive step for him. Though no one ever officially discriminated against him, he would always receive a carefully worded letter describing a 'more able candidate' or someone whose CV 'better reflected the qualifications they were looking for'. That was the thing about discrimination that was never mentioned: it was the passive option, the coward's way out. *You don't have any legs? Well, we do have stairs ... Although in the interests of fairness, looking at your CV, I think we can find a more able candidate*. One company even had the gall to tell him that the position had already been filled, while they continued to advertise the vacancy.

So the circle of life continued: Max was gainfully employed and my dad was given a crystal whisky tumbler and a bottle of Laphroaig for his long service to the company. It has always amazed me looking back, how easily trivial events make an impact on people's lives. If I'd told him, at the start of that week, that he'd soon discard the tumbler in favour of drinking straight from the bottle, he probably would have replied that he didn't often drink whisky, and point to the novelty gift on the wall, which had appeared one Christmas under the tree, with no named sender or addressee. It was mocked up to look like a fire alarm. It said IN CASE OF EMERGENCY, BREAK GLASS. Behind the little clear plastic barrier, there was a minibar-sized bottle of whisky. 'That's been there for, what, nine years,' he'd have said.

My parents were fussing around the kitchen, having just returned from an anniversary break in Rotterdam. Mum was getting some lunch together and Dad was fiddling with the new DAB radio that he'd bought.

'Can you pass the red pepper, Günter?' asked Mum.

'Yes of course.'

What is this button? signed Dad.

That's to save the channel as a favourite, signed Max.

'Try one of these,' my mum said.

And this one? signed Dad.

'What is it?' I asked.

That's to switch back to FM, signed Max.

'It's a Dutch waffle,' said my mum. 'Try it.' I bit into it. 'It's mostly syrup. Don't eat them all, we've got lunch ready in half an hour.'

'Ishhamazhin,' I said through a mouthful. 'Whatshitcall?'

'Stroopwafel.⁵ I tell you what though, those Dutch, they never eat any veg. I didn't see a carrot the whole time we were there. They won't touch a vegetable unless it's pickled.'

'Sounds like German food,' I said.

She rubbed my back affectionately. Mum was always a touchy-feely person, which I miss. Dad more of a ~~get-drunk-and-punch-a-wall~~ person now.

We all sat down for lunch and passed each other dishes, and we all ate healthily, and the food was delicious in a way that I took for granted at the time. It never occurred to me that cooking might go wrong, because Mum made it look easy.

‘Shall we all go out for a celebratory dinner tonight?’ asked Mum, as she cut up a spinach and ricotta filo pastry. She put down the spatula. *Celebrate? Max has a job now, Günter is turning twenty-two and your father’s finally going to have a rest.*

‘I told you I don’t mind working,’ said Dad irritably. ‘I’ve been working all my life, another year won’t kill me.’

‘It’s not your choice to make, dear. You’re getting older, you have to retire. Simple as that.’

Me and Günter will help, signed Max. *Well I will, and Günter can when he finds a job.* Ha! He never lifted a finger round the house. Mum did everything for him, washed his clothes, practically bathed him. He lived off her guilt. I had always tried to tell her that Max’s deafness wasn’t her fault. She was convinced that it was something she’d eaten during her pregnancy, but I told her it wasn’t that simple. I’d even printed out a page from Wikipedia to show her the week before but she had refused to read it.

‘What’s the point in reading it if some idiot can come along and write any old rubbish?’ she asked.

‘It’s not like that, Mum. The people who write this thing, they’re participating in something higher than they’re idealists. There’s an article on basically anything that’s ever existed.’

She didn’t say anything, but I could tell she was impressed.

Later that night, after we had decided to go out for a meal at the Seafood and Steakhouse, she picked up the conversation again.

‘So this encyclopaedia.’

‘Wikipedia.’

‘Yes. Can you learn about any topic on there?’

‘You can learn about pretty well anything, I suppose.’

‘You should brush up, then. One day, someone’s going to ask you about Napoleon or, or trigonometry, and you’re going to feel very silly.’

I stared at the menu guiltily. The three men in the family ordered steak, and Mum went for seabass. We all shared a bottle of wine, since it was a special occasion, and we held our glasses silently to the centre of the table. A waiter arrived, carrying four plates using only two arms.

‘Who ordered the steak tartare?’

Did he say T-A-R-T-A-R-E? signed Max to Mum.

Yes, I signed. ‘It’s my brother’s.’

The waiter looked at Max nervously.

‘I wish I could learn sign language,’ he said as he put the plate down.

‘Is there a court injunction preventing you?’ asked my mum with an encouraging smile.

‘And who ordered the seabass?’ he cut in.

‘That would be me,’ she replied.

‘There you are. And two steak frites.’

He gave a perfunctory smile and made a hasty getaway.

We ate, and Max talked about all the things he wanted to buy with his new salary.

Because I’m retiring, signed Dad gracelessly, *I might try painting.*

Max and I both stifled a laugh, Max making his small glottal noises, and Mum coughed on a mouthful of seabass.

But you’ve never liked art. You always used to say that art was for people who didn’t have jobs,

signed.

~~But I don't have a job, signed Dad. It might be good. I need to stay busy or I get glum.~~

Mum was still coughing on her food, and threw back a mouthful of water.

'You okay my love?' asked Dad. 'Pat on the back?'

Mum shook her head. Her eyes were filling up.

Bread, she signed.

The waiter was studiously ignoring our table so I got up and asked for some bread, as Dad tried pat her on the back. She put her hand into her mouth, which was the moment that I realised something must really be wrong. My mother always had impeccable manners. She winced. Then she tried to drink more water, but couldn't. Around us, everyone chatted amicably, murmuring and knocking together sonorous cutlery together. Mum had closed her lips but her mouth looked unnatural, like she was harbouring a golf ball. She rooted around in her handbag, pushed her plate away and emptied the handbag's contents onto the tabletop, finding a compact mirror. She opened her mouth again to inspect, but by now she was quite red in the face. I stood up and cleared my throat.

'Is there a doctor in the building?' I said loudly, not knowing quite where to look.

'Günter ...' began my dad, who hated to make a fuss.

'She's choking!' I hissed.

One woman in the corner had wiped her mouth with a napkin and excused herself from the woman that she was dining with. She had a dark bob and almond eyes. Everybody was looking at us, though they pretended to continue their discussions.

The doctor led Mum off to the bathroom, picking up tweezers from the spilled contents of the handbag on the table. We shifted in our chairs. Max prodded at his yolk, which burst and dribbled down the side of the mince, pooling at the bottom and mingling with the blood.

'I should go and check on her,' I said.

'She's in the ladies', Dad replied.

Max grinned at me. *Don't let it stop you.*

This isn't funny, I signed back.

It's only a fish bone, he replied.

All I could think was whether Mum's last word would be *Bread*.

She came back out, eventually, and insisted that the doctor join us for a glass of wine. The doctor, in turn, insisted that she couldn't leave her friend alone, so her friend joined us, and we spent an awkward twenty minutes trying to make conversation, with Max looking at the time on his phone and asking me to translate the odd comment that he couldn't catch.

The next morning, I brought her a cup of tea but she didn't drink it. She made throaty noises with each inhalation and I didn't know what to do, other than to phone for an ambulance. As we sat waiting in the lounge, a small bird flew into the patio doors, its beak hitting the window like a hailstone. It dropped to the floor and remained there. Our elderly cat appeared and began to inspect it for vital signs with its paw.

The paramedics wanted to take her to hospital, so I sat in the ambulance with her. She gave me a wan smile.

'I'll be fine,' she whispered.

'Of course you will,' I said.

We hit a little bump.

'I didn't bring any make-up,' she whispered, as if it was the only thing on her mind.

'It's okay. We'll be out in no time.' I squeezed her hand. It felt horrible, lying to each other like this. I wanted to say something true.

They didn't think that she was in immediate danger, so she sat up in a bed amongst many others and

waited for the doctor to come round to her. I asked if there was anything she wanted. I hated hospital. I was hoping she wanted something outside.

‘You know what I would love?’ she rasped, smiling like a dame at a ball, ‘A glass of water.’

There were only useless little cones at the water cooler down the corridor, so I went into several wards and asked around until a kindly nurse offered to get me one from the staff kitchen. She brought it to me full past the brim, so at first it looked empty. The water level was above the top of the glass held together only by a strange physics. I took a sip and carried it back to my mother’s ward slowly and carefully. As I reached Mum’s place, I found her looking a little off colour, her skin shining like waxwork. The index finger on her right hand was extended, as if pointing outside – at the sun, perhaps, or the window. I put the water down and opened the window to let the air in.

She beckoned me with her hand, and I came over to sit on the side of the bed. Her eyes were red and full. She said nothing, but she looked so sad, as if she’d witnessed a tragedy she didn’t want to share. I looked for a way to comfort her. She shook her head very softly. That was her answer: *no, Günter. I am not. I won’t. It won’t*. Now I didn’t want the truth. I wanted her to tell me a sweet lie. I wanted the truth to be different. She held up her thumb, forefinger and little finger. The little finger: *I*. The thumb and forefinger: *L*. The thumb and little finger: *Y*. She leant back against the pillow and put two hands over her chest. *Love*. Suffocation. I put my hand up to her mouth and nose. She had stopped breathing.

I pushed the emergency help button.

No one came in five seconds. Her hand was burning hot. I said, ‘Excuse me,’ to the corridor. No one came in ten. She looked like she was stuck halfway up a mountain. Someone ran in after fifteen seconds. She looked strangely at peace. A crowd had formed by thirty. They wheeled her away to a new room where I wasn’t allowed. This wasn’t something we could share. This wasn’t somewhere I could follow.

And here, at the heart of the crisis, I was alone. Everyone else was busy. I was not. I was the only person here who knew my mother, but these things don’t matter in the end.

My dad arrived soon after, having followed the ambulance, and Max followed straight from work. I sipped at the water and looked out the open window.

When I think of Mum in hospital, I picture the sparrow flying into our patio doors. It is the moment that my mind has replayed many hundreds of times, and the cat nudging it as it lay there, the little bird already unconscious, incapable of safeguarding its dignity. I suppose, if my father had always assured me that life isn’t romantic, my mother inadvertently taught me that death is no better. It stops you in your tracks like an invisible wall. From a very acute angle, you can see it coming, but most people find it catches them full pelt.

The Plain Dealer

Avon College for Boys is one of those schools that no one wants to talk about after they've left. I suppose I'll have to. But no one really enjoys their schooldays, do they? If you were supposed to enjoy it, they wouldn't make the uniforms grey. It was a big school, which made it easy to blend in, or would have, if I hadn't had my early growth spurt. I'm 5'10" now, but I was already 5'8" by the time I was twelve, and the sixth-tallest in the year when we lined up for gym class. I'm sure I would have been the tallest except that I was born in August, so I was young for my year. They say that during puberty you grow up, then out; it was widely believed that I had already completed both stages of development, though as it would later prove I had yet to finish growing out.

You might think this ensured I was left well alone, but bullies do not, in my experience, pick on the smallest prey. They might reinforce the hierarchy every now and then, but there is no honour in felling a sapling. On the contrary, bullies most like to fight with someone impressive looking but ineffectual. One also has to bear in mind Tall Man Syndrome: having lower blood pressure, and not needing to vocally assert themselves, tall people are more laid back.⁶

The fact of my height, coupled with my refusal to behave antisocially, combined to make me a conspicuous target amongst my peers. Although I had pointed out many times that my name was Günter, pronounced with the same phonetics as Oompa-Loompa, many insisted on calling me Gunter to rhyme with Munter. I was sometimes alternatively addressed as Gunther, or Munter Arse, and over time my year group settled on the contraction Munt. Later, some of the worst boys substituted the first letter again, but I'd rather not dwell on that.

Karl Baggett was one particularly obnoxious classmate. He spent all his time with the football players and the rough kids but, lacking any particular skill which would have made him 'cool', chose to specialise in sadism.⁷ He was in all my classes except English, Music and Science, and he would always sit directly behind me. I could go into some detail about the reasons I know he was disturbed but to pick an example at random: he once stapled the webbing between his thumb and index finger during a maths exam, with the only apparent intention of putting off Tom, who was sat next to him and who was scared of blood. In every lesson, he would prod me in the back, put things down the back of my shirt, flick ink on my shirt, and make it impossible for me to take in any of what was going on. The pleasure he took in sitting behind me would always outweigh the attraction of sitting with anyone he'd have wanted to call a friend, to the extent that against both of our wills, we became known as a sort of double act ('Where are Munt and Karl going to sit?').

It is impossible to overstate the ability of idiots to think they have won an argument. Almost every day, we would run through a version of,

'Munt. Munt. Hey, Munt.' A prod in my back.

'Munt.'

'What? I'm trying to listen.'

'Teacher's pet.'

‘What do you want?’

‘Günter, pay attention please.’ This from whoever happened to be standing, oblivious, by the whiteboard.

‘Do you love your dad?’

‘Of course I do.’

‘GAY.’

‘That’s not what gay means.’

‘Pretty sure it is.’

‘Being gay is when two men want to have sex with each other.’

‘Oh my god, you’re like an *expert* on gays. Did you do a gay degree?’

Very occasionally – on a good day – I’d get a brief glimpse into the cankered swamp that bore him.

‘Do you love your mum?’ (Karl was not an innovator.)

‘Yes, very much.’

‘Motherf—’

‘Don’t you love yours?’

‘No, she’s a bitch.’

‘Well, what about your dad?’

‘He doesn’t want to live with us when he gets out.’

And so I couldn’t even hate my own torturer, but only feel a great sadness for the world that had made him this way.

Things got worse when Max joined Avon. Everyone except Karl was kind and inquisitive about Max’s deafness, whereas Karl was just inquisitive, particularly when it came to Max’s vocalisation. The following week followed some unpleasantness during which both Max’s ego and Karl’s testicles were bruised. As the older brother, I was apparently supposed to have leapt to Max’s aid, but, as I tried to explain, he didn’t need it. He told me it was a matter of principle, he felt betrayed, and there wasn’t much I could say about that. The damage had been done. It was around that time that Max stopped speaking out loud in my presence.

My grades didn’t improve, either. By the time of my mock GCSE exams, I was barely scraping by. In English, my marked paper had lots of question marks on it, with the comment, *try to be clear about what you’re saying*. In Double Science, my papers were a mix of ticks and crosses. *Use the appropriate wording, and, it’s not enough to know the answer: show your working*. Music was fine in theory, but there was no way to backdate keyboard practice, and my performances brought my average down. Karl put paid to my chances of success in other subjects.

Mum wanted me to get into college, and go to university. Dad thought it best that I ‘start earning’ since, by the time I had paid off university debt, I would be a ‘middle-aged loner still living with his mum’. Max helpfully suggested that the latter would happen in either case. As it turned out, I got a C, two Bs, a C, five Ds and an F, meaning that I didn’t qualify for college, so, if only by default, I took my dad’s advice and joined the working world.

There was an advert in the *Salisbury Plain Dealer* for milkmen: ‘cheerful, reliable, early to bed and early (3am) to rise’. Thankfully qualifications weren’t mentioned at all in my interview with Mick, the operations manager, who looked like an oversized, milk-fed baby. While I was too young to drive, I would work in the depot, stacking bottles on each of the floats to match the orders that had been requested on the system, and then after a year I could get my licence and drive my own float.⁸

I would come home from work about the same time the rest of my family got up. As I was to learn, I had entered a dying trade. You see, milk lasts much longer than it used to, so people can buy lots of it at the supermarket and keep it all week and half of the next. And then there’s long-life – don’t get m

started on long-life.

But it was a good job while it lasted and did, at least, avoid the doldrums of a nine to five. I would get up while everyone was sleeping and walk to the depot, past drunks trading poorly aimed haymakers over their stilettoed princesses, the peal of war cries rising even as sirens burst through the stale air.⁹ I would arrive at the depot crunching over broken glass, sober as a drudge and dressed in my white coat. I'd take my float and drive my figure of eight round the neighbourhood, picking up empties and delivering bottles of creamy white cow-juice, capped with red foil. The silence was impeccable at around six. The sun would rise pink or orange like a furnace. Sometimes there were squirrels, or foxes, or woodpeckers.

I felt a certain smugness that I had seen so much of a day before the other residents had even mastered consciousness. I'm not one of these people who snaps awake at six every morning, while others dream of stretching out the morning as they fumble for the snooze. I am by nature a late riser, a lover of sleep. For me, the only thing worse than having to wake up would be not waking up. I have known what it is to doze like a cat through a summer's day and out the other side, woken only by my mother for the family dinner. And so, to wake so early, to have out-flanked even the early risers, was satisfaction enough. There were small pleasures, too, and each day I might find a little joy in the way an empty bottle trapped the first pink light of dawn, or the symphony of willows in wind.

I continued on in that job for some years, only realising I'd come out the other side of adolescence when I discovered, one evening, that I couldn't lie down properly in the bath. Suddenly, arbitrarily, it had been decided that I was now a Responsible Adult. At twenty-one, I couldn't just buy alcohol; I could sell it. I could adopt a child, and then drive it around in an HGV, such was the trust conferred on me by society.

As I towelled myself, dressed, went to the kitchen and hugged my mum, I saw that we were Russian dolls¹⁰ that didn't fit any more. I was no longer a solid little offspring, but a big, hollow shell of my own.

The four of us sat at our kitchen table for dinner, munching while my mother soliloquised on her latest obsession (... Thomas Hardy, Norse mythology, Buddhism ...), or tried to teach us new words. My parents had a tacit pact whereby Dad was allowed to stuff food into his mouth for precisely as long as her lesson lasted, at which point Mum would stand abruptly and sweep the plate out from under his fork. Over the years, this had turned Dad into an incredibly efficient eater.

As luck would have it, the subject of today's homily was Employment. We were having lasagne, Dad's favourite. He removed the top layer of pasta, scraped all the remaining béchamel away, grimaced, and shovelled a forkful of mince into his mouth. He really loved Mum's lasagne.

'Do you want a glass of wine?' asked Mum, hovering.

'God no,' said Dad, smothering his mince in Worcestershire sauce. 'Can't drink on a weekday. I'd never get up.'

'Oh, come on, live a little. You're retiring, you should enjoy yourself.'

'It's bloody boring. I want to be out there making a bit of money.'

There's more to life than making money, signed Mum to everyone as she sat down. *Why don't you sign up for a course? she asked Dad. Learn something? We should all keep learning, throughout life.*

People don't take courses any more, I signed. If you need to know something, you can just google it.

But learning opens doors, she signed back. If you had more qualifications you might be able to get a different job.

What's wrong with my job? I asked.

Nothing's wrong with it, she signed, but it gives you options. Learning makes your world bigger. There are two ways to change the world. Go out there and make it better, or change the way you think about it. Knowledge gives you the option to do both.

You can talk, I signed. Even I've got more qualifications than you.

Mum looked wounded. Max pushed mince around his plate, looking down, which was like putting his hands over his ears.

'We can all imagine a better life for ourselves,' Mum said judiciously, her voice wavering ever so slightly. 'And you're capable of so much more.'

I flushed with shame and pride. No one other than my mother had ever really believed that I was capable of anything. I secretly nursed the idea that I might be an undiscovered genius, and sometimes googled 'Einstein's school report'¹¹ to cheer myself up, but I got on better with ideas than I did with people, and it is rarely left up to ideas to decide whether you're a serial underachiever.

'Don't go giving the boy ideas, Mathilda,' said Dad. 'He's hardly a bloody rocket scientist, is he?'

'Very supportive, Arthur, thank you.' She turned to me as Max looked up. 'Günter, you can do anything you set your mind to.'

Yeah, signed Max, You're a regular superhero. Charmless, half-blind and fat.

Clark Kent has glasses, I signed.

They're a cover. He can see through walls, you dick.

I walked into that one.

When someone you love dies, the first thing you have to think about is paperwork. You may have recently concluded that all human endeavour is no more than a way to keep our hands busy until we too, die, our life destined to wink only briefly in a cold and unobservant universe. But the first thing you are asked to do is to ignore all that, and to help out with some good old-fashioned box ticking ('Mathilda. With an H. Glass. 2 February 1955. Salisbury. I'm her son. About ten days. Yes, I was there with her.')

Max's new employers said that, since he was new, he was only allowed to take a day off for the funeral as annual leave, so he couldn't help much with the arrangements. Everything happened in a kind of sleepwalk, fumbling along and saying the same things you would say if she was dead: yes, it was a terrible loss; hydrangeas were her favourite, but we might ask people to donate money to a charity. Dad sleepwalked more than me. Overnight, he became a wandering, forgetful shade. He didn't know when he had last eaten, or what day of the week it was.

During this time, others also referred casually to 'what she would have wanted', as if she had granted her approval over our every decision in advance. But Mum was full of surprises. I think she might have been amused by the idea that anyone in the family, least of all my father, had any inkling of her preferences. I suspect the whisky fire alarm was a typical misfire, and that Mum was so bewildered to receive it that Dad refused to own up to such an obviously poor pairing of wife and gift. I'm not saying we didn't love her and sometimes also pleasantly surprise her, but after witnessing Mum's brave face for twenty-two consecutive Christmases, all I know is she didn't like bath salts.

I wandered the streets around Salisbury a lot around this time.¹² I would often go and stare at the cathedral and think about how long it had been there. I would think about why people liked to see an old building, and whether all anyone really wanted was to weave themselves into the story of the world. Salisbury Cathedral:¹³ now that was a big part of the story. People could try and be important for a day, like celebrities or politicians, or they could try and ingratiate themselves with the story by spending time with things that lasted, like vicars or academics. It was a question of how to find your place in the ecosystem.

One day, on my way back from the cathedral, I wandered past a primary school. I stopped by the tessellated diamonds of the fence to watch them play. The children were effortlessly happy, albeit in

volatile, slightly primal way. They were playing near a drain, which was overflowing with scum water. To an adult, this was distasteful, but to a child it was Lucerne by moonlight, it was anything and everything. A boy ran up in his scuffed Velcro-fastened shoes and booted the water as if it were football. It sprayed a nearby group of girls who squealed and shivered with mingled terror and delight and the fattest girl – the enforcer – ran after the boy. Screams sailed into the air as they sprinted towards the other end of the playground.

My thoughts were interrupted by a call from my boss, Mickey.

‘Günter, you have to come back to the depot.’

‘But I’ve delivered all the milk.’

‘I know.’

‘Have I left something behind?’

I heard the boss sigh.

‘Let’s say yeah. Would you be so good as to waddle down?’

‘I’ll be there in half an hour.’

I walked back to the depot, and found Mickey behind the same car-boot-sale desk he was always at. He leant back on two legs of the chair with his hands on his round, taut belly, the cold halogen strip lighting gleaming off his bald pate.

‘So what did I leave behind, Mickey?’

He leant forwards and his chair hit the floor as he picked up a plain white envelope.

‘This.’

It was a cheque.

‘I’m sorry, Günter. You’re a good lad but this is an old man’s game. We’re gonna have to let you go.’

‘You’re firing me?’

‘Redundancy, yeah. People don’t want their milk delivered in this day and age; they want to order off their phones and have it delivered to their work address, they want long-life that lasts a year because they’re never home—’

‘Please, Mickey. You don’t have to explain.’ I shook my head bitterly. ‘I’ve seen the rows of UHT in the supermarkets, they’re taking over. I understand. But this is a very large cheque. Are you quite sure I qualify for this kind of severance pay?’

‘Are you fucking crazy?’ he asked me.

I thought for a moment.

‘No.’

‘Then keep the cheque. I’m not gonna tell anyone.’

‘Does that mean I’m not supposed to have it?’

He rolled his eyes.

‘Just do us a favour and leave, okay?’

On my way out, I took a bottle with me and peeled back the cap, sitting on a wall by the loading bay. I drank it dry and watched the sunlight play through the misty white glass. I wondered how the bottles looked when they were clean. Probably beautiful in the thankless way of everyday things.¹⁴

The next day I went to a recruitment centre in town. Everything was blue or grey, and after I filled out a clipboard’s worth of information, they took me through to a little room with a sofa made out of two seating blocks pushed together, and a little plastic plant. I sat down with a recruitment lady and we talked over my skills – attention to detail, honesty and integrity, neatness, good with hands. She asked me if I’d ever considered a career in recruitment.

‘No, I hadn’t. Isn’t that what you do?’

‘Yes. A role has just come up. Not mine.’ She tittered.

‘So, if I did it, I would be recruiting people for jobs?’

‘That’s right.’

‘And if I were in your shoes, would I be offering people jobs in recruitment?’

She looked less certain about this.

‘I suppose I’m asking a two-part question,’ I said. ‘Is it a pyramid scheme, and if so, what will you do when everyone works in recruitment?’

‘I can’t really say. Shall I put you down as “quite interested” for that one?’

I said that that would be fine, and left.

Church Attendance

On the day of the funeral, Dad, Max, and I stood in the lounge not talking. I was so nervous I felt cold. Relatives and ex-colleagues started to trickle in, some wearing hats. When there were enough of us, we followed the funeral director, Ivan, who, despite his hunch, looked almost inhumanly tall in his hat, as various relatives put magnetic flags on the roofs of their cars. Dad, Max and I got in the hearse which followed Ivan at walking pace to the end of the road, trailed by the other cars in a giant party-coloured snake. Ivan got in and we proceeded through Salisbury, slowing traffic. White-van men let us out at roundabouts. Our line was broken once, by a BMW driver. I forced myself to assume that he hadn't realised what he was doing.

We arrived at the cathedral. When we had booked the venue, it had felt like a gesture of profound love for my mother, but now it suddenly seemed overblown and ridiculous. There were about forty of us, and the building could probably seat ten times that number. It was gargantuan. One of the life-sized statues built into the wall was holding his own model cathedral.¹⁵ Each of the building's hundreds of arches were built into further, larger arches, spires multiplying on the spires, all pointing up. The huge central spire not only pointed up but seemed to be grasping at something beyond the sky. I thought I saw the very tip of it flash red.

People kept looking at us with dramatically turned-down mouths as the coffin was unloaded. Some of them came up to say they were sorry for my loss, as if it was really no loss to them, and they had only come out of politeness. I probably looked thoughtful, or mildly affronted, as I thanked them, but I was mourning too far below the surface to put up much of an appearance of mourning.

The nave was even larger than I had anticipated as we followed the coffin inside and our small band huddled up in the front rows, the majority behind them empty. A choir was singing a song I didn't know. We were asked to sing a hymn, and very few people sang along properly, perhaps not knowing the tune, perhaps feeling that this wasn't the occasion for an enthusiastic performance. We were asked to pray and I didn't say 'Amen', and I felt bad because almost no one did. A woman decked in long robes at the lectern, or whatever it was called, introduced herself as the Very Reverend Dean Angela Winterbottom.

"“So they poured out for the men to eat,”” she began. ““And it came to pass, as they were eating of the pottage, that they cried out, and said, O thou man of God, there is death in the pot. And they could not eat thereof.””¹⁶ Unfortunately, Mathilda's story is as old as stories themselves. So much has changed since the writing of the Bible, and yet, even in our technologically enhanced age, we still find ourselves afflicted in the most basic ways, and the same things continue to matter to us: our search for family, for friends, for work and for meaning in God. We may have every right to feel that Mathilda was taken from us before she should have been, but seeing you all here today, it's clear that she made a lasting impact in this world.'

The Dean kept indicating the coffin as if my mother might somehow have a right of reply, or as if she was some bottled genie who might at any moment jump out to verify any grand claims made of

her behalf.¹⁷

‘And it may seem hard to tell whether the life she has lived was a good one,’ the Dean continued. “‘There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death. Even laughter the heart is sorrowful; and the end of that mirth is heaviness.’”¹⁸

Even as I listened to her vintage wisdom, I felt that my mother’s funeral was being hijacked. I had to wonder if she’d have wanted to attend her own ceremony.

‘Everybody will one day find that their time has come, and if one tries to bolt the door, one might just find that death is come up into their windows,¹⁹ so to speak.’

I looked away from the Dean and the coffin. Light filtered in through stained glass, transforming from white-grey to ruby, like water to wine.

“‘For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth.’”²⁰ And you can take comfort from that.’

I felt my shoulders sag. I glanced across at Max, who was biting a nail. Dad gave a defeated little huff, and stood, a handwritten page shaking in his hand as he made his way over to the lectern. I hated public speaking. He said hello to everyone, and glanced at Max, who gave him a tight nod.

All I can hear is echoes, said Max.

Can you lip-read? I signed.

Too far away, Max replied.

Okay, I’ll sign: ‘Mathilda was an amazing woman. I met her completely by chance when I was a door-to-door salesman. She answered the door and I started trying to sell her whatever I was flogging back then, but she’d just moved to England and barely spoke a word. Bloody hell, I thought—’ (no, he’s apologising to the Dean for swearing) ‘—she’s a corker. So rather than bother with my swatches or whatever, I told her I was an English tutor.’ (Uncle Dave just did his dirty laugh.) ‘She really went for it, though, so I started giving her these lessons, and before I knew it she could speak English better than me. I expect everyone here knows that won’t have been because of my language skills. She was always looking things up in dictionaries, you know. She loved her weird words.’ (A couple of people are chuckling.) ‘She was clever and ambitious. But one thing or another clipped her wings. The move came at a bad time for her and she didn’t get the right qualifications to go to a university here. She moved in with me, and I always think I didn’t do enough to encourage her. Then we had the kids. When you’re young, you always think you’ll do everything, you’ll beat life, and then you wake up one day and realise life’s been beating you.’ (He’s stopped, he’s crying.)

Max looked up. I had never seen Dad cry. It felt like stepping through my bedroom door as a child and hearing it slam shut, and realising there was no handle on the other side.

‘But she was a good person,’ he said vehemently. ‘She never did a bad deed in her life, and you all know it. She’d let you walk all over her, and she wouldn’t bear a grudge. And she might have thought she had nothing to show for it at the end of the day, but God did it make you love her.’

Dad’s eyes burned; Max shook my useless hand; I felt like I was falling.

And then that was that. My mother was buried. Everyone went back to their living. She had been; she was not. It had occurred to me before that my life somehow contained my death – that the story of my life had to end somewhere – but now I realised that the course of my life was determined all along the way by the deaths of others, her death contained in my life.

I could hardly find a job now. It seemed like an insult, the idea that I might turn away from thoughts of her and start squirreling away money. That I might just set her aside, like an unconvincing boot, fending off guilt by telling myself that I would get around to preserving her memory one day. Before

this, grief had been as inconceivable to me as a black winter coat in a summer heat wave. And yet here it was. I put it on and it fit. It formed a layer between the world and me. It was heavy and stifling; tired me out, made me hungry. Without her and with Max now in a flat of his own, the routines of the house fell apart, and we rarely remembered to shop for food. One day, there was nothing left in the cupboard but the half-finished pack of Dutch waffles, which had gone stale. I ate each of them slowly at the kitchen table, willing them to offer some kind of bite, but they were soft and chewy. They were the last food she had bought. We had eaten every other trace. Time was undoing her effect on the world already. I went shopping at the big Tesco so that I could buy more Dutch waffles, seven or eight packs. It was good to have them there.

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