

Peter Carey
The Chemistry
of Tears

A novel

Two-time winner
of the Booker Prize

The
CHEMISTRY
of TEARS

Peter Carey



ALFRED A. KNOPF · NEW YORK

2012

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PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Carey, Peter, date.

The chemistry of tears / by Peter Carey.—1st American ed.
p. cm.

eISBN: 978-0-307-95839-6

1. Women museum curators—Fiction. 2. Brandling, Henry C. (Henry Charles), b. 1818—Fiction. 3. Robots—Fiction. 4. London (England)—Fiction. I. Title.

PR9619.3.C36C44 2012

823'.914—dc23

2012005880

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Front-of-jacket photograph by Francois Coquerel/Gallery Stock;
(gear detail) The Bridgeman Art Library International
Jacket design by Peter Mendelsund

For Frances Coady

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DEAD, AND NO ONE told me. I walked past his office and his assistant was bawling.

“What is it Felicia?”

“Oh haven’t you heard? Mr. Tindall’s dead.”

What I heard was: “Mr. Tindall hurt his head.” I thought, for God’s sake, pull yourself together.

“Where is he, Felicia?” That was a reckless thing to ask. Matthew Tindall and I had been lovers for thirteen years, but he was my secret and I was his. In real life I avoided his assistant.

Now her lipstick was smeared and her mouth folded like an ugly sock. “Where is he?” she sobbed. “What an awful, *awful* question.”

I did not understand. I asked again.

“Catherine, he is dead,” and thus set herself off into a second fit of bawling.

I marched into his office, as if to prove her wrong. This was not the sort of thing one did. My secret darling was a big deal—the Head Curator of Metals. There was the photo of his two sons on the desk. His silly soft tweed hat was lying on the shelf. I snatched it. I don’t know why.

Of course she saw me steal it. I no longer cared. I fled down the Philips stairs into the main floor. On that April afternoon in the Georgian halls of the Swinburne Museum, amongst the thousand daily visitors, the eighty employees, there was not one single soul who had any idea of what had just happened.

Everything looked the same as usual. It was impossible Matthew was not there, waiting to surprise me. He was very distinctive, my lovely. There was a vertical frown mark just to the left of his big high nose. His hair was thick. His mouth was large, soft and always tender. Of course he was married. Of course. Of course. He was forty when I first noticed him, and it was seven years before we became lovers. I was by then just under thirty and still something of a freak, that is, the first female horologist the museum had ever seen.

Thirteen years. My whole life. It was a beautiful world we lived in all that time, sw1, the Swinburne Museum, one of London’s almost-secret treasure houses. It had a considerable horological department, a world-famous collection of clocks and watches, automata and other wind-up engines. If you had been there on 21 April 2010, you may have seen me, the oddly elegant tall woman with the tweed hat scrunched up in her hand. I may have looked mad, but perhaps I was not so different from my colleagues—the various curators and conservators—pounding through the public galleries on the way to a meeting or a studio or a store room where they would soon *interrogate* an ancient object, a sword, a quilt, or perhaps an Islamic water clock. We were museum people, scholars, priests, repairers, sand-paperers, scientists, plumbers, mechanics—train-spotters really—with narrow specialities in metals and glass and textiles and ceramics. We were of all sorts, we insisted, even when we were secretly confident that the stereotypes held true. A horologist, for instance, could never be a young woman with good legs, but a slightly nerdy man of less than five foot six—cautious, a little strange, with fine blond hair and some difficulty in looking you in the eye. You might see him scurrying like a mouse through the ground-floor galleries, with his ever-present jangling keys, looking as if he was the keeper of the mysteries. In fact no one in the Swinburne knew any more than a part of the labyrinth. We had reduced our territories to rat runs—the routes we knew would always take us where we wanted to go. This made it an extraordinarily easy place to live a secret life, and to enjoy the

perverse pleasure that such a life can give.

In death it was a total horror. That is, the same, but brighter, more in focus. Everything was bolder, crisper and further away. How had he died? How *could* he die?

I rushed back to my studio and Googled “Matthew Tindall,” but there was no news of any accident. However my inbox had an email which lifted my heart until I realized he had sent it at 4 p.m the day before. “I kiss your toes.” I marked it unread.

There was no one I dared turn to. I thought, I will work. It was what I had always done in crisis. It was what clocks were good for, their intricacy, their peculiar puzzles. I sat at the bench in the workshop, trying to resolve an exceedingly whimsical eighteenth-century French “clock.” My tools lay on a soft grey chamois. Twenty minutes previously I had liked this French clock but now it seemed vain and self-preening. I buried my nose inside Matthew’s hat. “Snuffle” we would have said. “I snuffle you.” “I snuffle your neck.”

I could have gone to Sandra, the line manager. She was always a very kind woman but I could not bear anyone, not even Sandra, handling my private business, putting it out on the table and pushing it around like so many broken necklace beads.

Hello Sandra, what happened to Mr. Tindall, do you know?

My German grandfather and my very English father were clockmakers, nothing too spectacular—first Clerkenwell, then the city, then Clerkenwell again—mostly good solid English five-wheel clockmaking—but it was an item of faith for me, even as a little girl, that this was a very soothing, satisfying occupation. For years I thought clockmaking must still be any turmoil in one’s breast. I was so confident of my opinion, so completely wrong.

The tea lady provided her depressive offering. I observed the anticlockwise motion of the slight curdled milk, just waiting for him, I suppose. So when a hand did touch me, my whole body came unstitched. It felt like Matthew, but Matthew was dead, and in his place was Eric Croft, the Head Curator of Horology. I began to howl and could not stop.

He was the worst possible witness in the world.

Crafty Croft was, to put it very crudely, the master of all that ticked and tocked. He was a scholar, a historian, a connoisseur. I, in comparison, was a well-educated mechanic. Croft was famous for his scholarly work on “Sing-songs” by which is meant those perfect imperial misunderstandings of oriental culture we so successfully exported to China in the eighteenth century, highly elaborate musical boxes encased in the most fanciful compositions of exotic beasts and buildings, often placed on elaborate stands. That was what it was like for members of our caste. We built our teetering lives on this sort of thing. The beasts moved their eyes, ears and tails. Pagodas rose and fell. Jewelled stands spun and revolving glass rods provided a very credible impression of water.

I bawled and bawled and now I was the one whose mouth became a sock puppet.

Like a large chairman of a rugby club who has a chihuahua as a pet, Eric did not at all resemble his Sing-songs, which one might expect to be the passion of a slim fastidious homosexual. He had a sort of hetero gung-ho quality “metals” people are expected to have.

“No, no,” he cried. “Hush.”

Hush? He was not rough with me but he got his big hard arm around my shoulder and compelled me into a fume cupboard and then turned on the extractor fan which roared like twenty hairdryers all at once. I thought, I have let the cat out of the bag.

“No,” he said. “Don’t.”

The cupboard was awfully small, built solely so that one conservator might clean an ancient object with toxic solvent. He was stroking my shoulder as if I were a horse.

“We will look after you,” he said.

In the midst of bawling, I finally understood that Croft knew my secret.

“Go home for now,” he said quietly.

I thought, I’ve betrayed us. I thought, Matthew will be pissed off.

“Meet me at the greasy spoon,” he said. “Ten o’clock tomorrow? Across the road from the Annex

Do you think you can manage that? Do you mind?”

“Yes,” I said, thinking, so that’s it—they are going to kick me out of the main museum. They are going to lock me in the Annexe. I had spilled the beans.

“Good.” He beamed and the creases around his mouth gave him a rather catlike appearance. He turned off the extractor fan and suddenly I could smell his aftershave. “First we’ll get you sick leave. We’ll get through this together—I’ve got something for you to sort out,” he said. “A really lovely object.” That’s how people talk at the Swinburne. They say object instead of clock.

I thought, he is exiling me, burying me. The Annexe was situated behind Olympia where my grief might be as private as my love.

So he was being kind to me, strange macho Crofty. I kissed him on his rough sandalwood-smelling cheek. We both looked at each other with astonishment, and then I fled, out onto the humid street pounding down towards the Albert Hall with Matthew’s lovely silly hat crushed inside my hand.

I ARRIVED HOME STILL not knowing how my darling died. I imagined he had fallen. He had hit his head. I hated how he always tipped back on his chair.

Now there would be a funeral. I tore my shirt in half, and ripped the sleeves away. All night I imagined how he had died, been run over, squashed, knifed, pushed onto the tracks. Each vision was shock, a rip, a cry. I was in this same condition fourteen hours later when I arrived at Olympia to meet with Eric.

No one loves Olympia. It is a hateful place. But this was where the Swinburne Annexe was, so that was where I would be sent, as if I was a widow and must be burned alive. Well, light the leaves and pyre wood, I thought, because nothing could hurt more than this.

The footpaths behind the exhibition centre were unnaturally hot and narrow. The lanes were looped and dog-legged. Lethal high-speed vans lifted the dust and distributed the fag ends up and down the street where the Annexe awaited. It was not a prison—a prison would have had a sign—but its high front gates were festooned with razor wire.

Many of the Swinburne’s conservators had spent a season in the Annexe, working on an object whose restoration could not be properly undertaken at the main museum. Some claimed to have enjoyed their stay, but how could I be severed from my Swinburne, my museum, my life where ever, my stairway and lowly hallway, every flake of plaster, every molecule of acetone contained my love for Matthew and my evacuated heart?

Opposite the Annexe I found George’s Café with its doors wide open to the freakish heat.

You would think the author of *Balance of Payments: The Sing-song Trade with China in the Eighteenth Century* would be clearly distinguishable from the four sweaty policemen at the bar booth, the drivers from Olympia, the postal workers from the West Kensington Delivery Office who, it seems, had been given permission to wear shorts. Not a good idea, but never mind. If the distinguished curator had not risen (awkwardly, for the plywood booths did not encourage large movements to make this sort of motion) I might not have picked him out at all.

Crofty liked to say that he was a *perfect no one*. Yet although he was so opaquely estuary and his bone-crushing handshake had roots somewhere in the years of his birth, in the manly 1950s, he might turn up to drinks for the Minister for Arts where you, if you were lucky enough to be invited, might learn that he had been in Scotland hunting with Ellsworth (Sir Ellis Crispin to you) on the previous weekend. It appeared that I was now to be protected by this powerful man.

I saw his eyes—all the frightening sympathy. I fussed with my umbrella and placed a notebook on the table, but he covered my hand with his own—it was large and dry and warm like something you would hatch eggs in.

“What a horror it all is,” he said.

“Tell me. Please, Eric. What happened?”

“Oh Christ,” he said. “Of course you do not know.”

I could not look at him. I rescued my hand and hid it in my lap.

“Heart attack, big one. So sorry. On the tube.”

The tube. I had seen the tube all night, the dark hot violence of it. I snatched the menu and ordered baked beans and two poached eggs. I could feel Eric watching me with his soft wet eyes. They were no help, no help at all. I rearranged my cutlery violently.

“They got him off at Notting Hill.”

I thought he was going to say that this was good, to die so close to home. He didn't. But I could not bear the thought that they had taken him back to her.

And she, that great designer of marital “understanding,” would play the grieving widow. “I suppose it is Kensal Green, the funeral?” Just up the Harrow Road, I thought, so handy.

“Tomorrow actually.”

“No, Eric. That is totally impossible.”

“Tomorrow at three.” Now he could not look at me. “I don't know what you wish to do.”

Of course, of course. They would all be there, his wife, his sons, his colleagues. I would be expected to go, but I could not. I would give everything away.

“No one gets buried that quickly,” I said. “She's trying to hide something.” I thought, she wants him in the ground away from me.

“No, no, old love, nothing like that. Not even the awful Margaret is capable of that.”

“Have you ever tried to book a funeral? It took me two weeks to get my father buried.”

“In this case, they had a cancellation.”

“They what?”

“Had a cancellation.”

I don't know who laughed first, maybe it was me because once I started it took a while to stop. “They had a cancellation? Someone decided not to die.”

“I don't know, Catherine, perhaps they got a lower price from a different cemetery, but it's tomorrow at three o'clock.” He pushed a folded piece of paper across the table.

“What's this?”

“A prescription for sleeping pills. We'll look after you,” he said again.

“We?”

“No one will know.”

We sat quietly then, and a suffocating mass of food was placed in front of me. Eric had wisely ordered a single hardboiled egg.

I watched him crack its shell, peeling it away to reveal a soft and shiny membrane.

“What happens to his emails?” I asked, because I had been thinking about that all night as well. Our personal life was preserved on the Swinburne server in a windowless building in Shepherd's Bush.

“It's down,” he said.

“You mean down, or you mean deleted?”

“No, no, the whole museum system is down. Heat wave. Air conditioning failed, I'm told.”

“So it's not deleted at all.”

“Listen to me Cat.”

I thought, Cat is not a word that can live in public air. It is a frail naked little thing, all raw and

hurting. Please do not call me Cat.

~~“Tell me you didn’t write to each other on office email.”~~

“Yes we did, and I won’t have strangers reading them.”

“It will have been taken care of,” he said.

“How can you know that?”

This question seemed to offend him and his tone became more managerial. “Do you remember the scandal with Derek Peabody and the papers he tried to sell to Yale? He came back to clear out his office and his email was already gone. Over.”

I never knew there was a scandal with Peabody. “So his email was deleted forever?”

“Of course,” he said. He did not blink.

“Eric, I don’t want anyone to access those emails, not I.T., not you, not his wife, not anyone.”

“Very well, Catherine, then I assure you that your wish has already been granted.”

I thought he was a liar. He thought I was a bitch.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Who else knows?”

“About you and Matthew?” He paused, as if there were all sorts of different answers he might give. “No one.”

“I’m rather shocked *anyone* knows.” And then I saw I had hurt his feelings. “I’m sorry if that sounds offensive.”

“That’s all right. I’ve arranged for a little sick leave. You have been diagnosed with bronchitis. If anybody asks. But I thought you might like to know that there is a future. Perhaps you should peek at the object that will be waiting for you when you finally come back to work.”

So he was *not* going to insist I go to the funeral. He should have, but he didn’t. His eyes had changed now and I was witness to some quite different emotion triggered by the “object,” which I assumed would be some ghastly Sing-song mechanism. Connoisseurs can be like that. Not even a colleague’s death could completely obliterate the pleasure of his “find.”

I was not particularly offended. If I was raging it was because I was excluded from the funeral, but of course I was far too unhinged to be at Kensal Rise. Why would I lower myself to stand with them? They didn’t know him. They didn’t know the first thing.

“Might we talk about it just a little later?” I said, and knew I had been rude. I was so sorry. I did not want to hurt him. I watched him unscrew the top of the clogged shaker and make a little pile of salt. This he dipped his naked egg. “Of course,” he said, but he was slighted.

“It ‘surfaced’ somewhere?” I suggested.

In return for this tiny show of interest, he bestowed upon me a rather feline smile. So I was forgiven, but I was not nice.

I thought, while Matthew’s heart attack was crawling up his legs, Eric had been trawling in the museum’s old catalogues. He had found a treasure that none of the present curators knew about. Something weird and ugly he could now make the subject of a book.

I wondered if the object catered to the obsession of some posh person, the hobby horse of a minister, a board member. I could have politely questioned him about it, but I really didn’t want to know. A clock is a clock, but a Sing-song can be a nightmare, involving glass, or ceramics or metal, or textiles. If that was so I would be forced to work with conservators from all those disciplines. I would not, could not, work with anyone. I would howl and weep and give myself away.

“I’m sorry,” I said, hoping to cover all my offences. And they were offences, for he was being so extraordinarily kind.

We left the greasy spoon. There was a pristine red Mini Minor parked in front. It was not the Mini that I knew, but it looked just the same and I could feel Eric wished to talk of the coincidence. But I could not, I would not. I fled across the road, and entered the most secure museum facility in London.

Of course the chaps in Security had no interest in horology. They would rather be on their Harley screaming like mad bees around the North Circular. To my astonishment they knew who I was and displayed towards me an unexpected tenderness which made me mad with suspicion.

“Here you are darling, let me swipe that for you.”

As we moved through the first secure door I was still very shaken by the Mini. I could feel Eric's meaty hand hovering about an inch behind my back. He meant only to comfort me, but I was a mad woman. The hand's proximity was oppressive, worse than actual contact. I *swatted* at it, but there was no hand at all.

On the fourth floor I was permitted to swipe my own card. We entered the rather too cool windowless corridor, strip lights above, tiled walls, mostly white. I felt the hair of my neck lifting.

I had half a 0.5 mg Lorazepam in my purse but I could not find it—it had clearly become lodged with fluff along the seam.

Eric swung open a door and we frightened a very small bespectacled woman at a sewing machine.

The next door, the correct door, remained jammed shut until it swung back on its hinges and crashed against the wall. I was immobile, as was the whole brutal concrete structure of the Annex. Horologists do not like alien vibrations, so it would be thought that this was a “good” place for me to be. I felt intensely claustrophobic.

There were three high studio windows suffused with morning light. I knew too much to raise the blinds.

There were eight tea chests and four long narrow wooden boxes stacked against the wall below the blinds.

Was I the first conservator on earth who did not wish to open up a box?

Instead I opened a door. My studio had its own washroom. Ensuite, as they say. The look on my protector's face told me I was meant to be pleased by this. I found a dustcoat and wrapped myself inside it.

When I came back, there was Eric, and the tea chests. I was suddenly certain it was some awful tribe of clockwork monkeys blowing smoke. Sir Kenneth Claringbold had a horrendous collection of automata, clockwork Chinamen and singing girlies of all sorts. In fact my first assignment at the Swinburne had been his gift to the museum: a monkey.

That particular monkey had had a certain elegance, except for the way it drew back its lips to smile, but for a person raised on the austere rational elegance of clockwork it was creepy beyond belief. I got headaches and asthma. Finally, in order to complete the restoration, I had to cover its head with a paper bag.

Later there was a smoking Chinaman who was not quite so horrid, but there was always, in any circumstance, something extremely disturbing about these counterfeits of life and I sniffed around my new studio more and more irritated that this was what Eric had chosen to console me with—eight tea chests were much more than you needed to contain a clock.

“Aren't you going to see what it is?”

I imagined that I detected some secret in Eric's mouth, a movement below the fringe of moustache.

“Are there textiles involved?” I demanded.

“Why don't you look at your presents?”

He was talking to Catherine Gehrig who he had known so very well, for years and years. He had seen me in very stressful (dangerous, in museum terms) circumstances and I had never given him any cause to see me as anything other than calm and rational. He liked that I never seemed to raise a sweat. Eric, by contrast, loved big emotions, grotesque effects, Sing-songs, the Opera. Whenever I found fault with me it was for being too cautious.

So dear Eric had no idea that the present beneficiary of his kindness had become a whirring, mad

machine, like that sculpture by Jean Tinguely built to destroy itself.

~~He wanted me to inspect his gift to me. He did not know it would blow me wide apart.~~

“Eric, please. I can’t.”

Then, I saw the blood rising from his collar. He was cross with me. How could he be?

And then in the stinging focus of his gaze I understood that he had pulled a lot of strings, had pissed off a lot of people in order to get the backstreet girl set up where her emotions would not show. I was looking after me for Matthew, but for the museum as well.

“Eric, I’m sorry. Truly I am.”

“Yes, I’m afraid you have to go through Security if you want to smoke. You are still smoking?”

“Just tell me it’s not a monkey,” I said.

Tears were welling in my eyes. I thought, you dear moron, please just go.

“Oh Lord,” he said. “This is all awful.”

“You’ve been very sweet,” I said. “You really have.” For a second his whole face crumbled but then, thank God, he pulled himself together.

The door closed and he was gone.

IN THE MIDDLE OF the night I lost Matthew’s hat and got in a mad panic, stripping the bed, knocking over the reading light until I found what I had lost. I took a pill and had a scotch. I ate some toast, switched on the computer and the museum email was functioning again.

“I kiss your toes.”

An insane fear of my employers prevented me replying. I filed: “unread.”

I wrapped myself up in his shirt and took his hat and went to bed and snuffled it. I love you. Where are you?

Then it was the morning, and he was dead. The server was down again. Matthew was completely gone forever. His poor body was lying somewhere in this stinking heat. No, in a refrigerator with a label on his toe. Or perhaps he was already trapped inside a coffin. The funeral was at three o’clock.

I had sick leave and sleeping tablets but I would go mad alone—no church, no family, no one to tell the truth, nothing but the Swinburne which I had stupidly made my life. By noon I was back inside the claustrophobic underground. Three trains later, I surfaced at Olympia with unwashed hair. There was a yellow misty haze.

My colleagues at the main museum would, by now, have dressed for the funeral. It was too early for them to leave so they would hover in their workrooms, surrounded by their lives, their personal knickknacks, photographs of their kids, lovers, holidays. My own workroom would tell nothing about its former occupant: the pin board displayed a photograph of a tree in Southwold and an empty street in Beccles, the true meaning of both images being known only to us two. Us one.

The walls of my old studio were cream and the lino was brown. The room contained me as if it were a lovely old chipped jug. My Olympia studio, in contrast, had polished concrete floors and the blinds were down because the view was so depressing. I thought of those nineteenth-century prisoners escorted to their cells with bags over their heads, locked up with their looms to work and work and never know where they were. In my case, it was the tea chests, not the loom.

There was a brand-new Apple Mac on the bench. Gmail was working quite normally but the museum server, typically, was suffering from “Extreme Weather” once again.

My head was furry and my chest thick, but I lined the tools up like a surgeon’s instruments upon my bench—pliers, cutters, piercing saw, files, broaches, hammer, anti-magnetic tweezers, brass and steel wire, taps and dies, pin vice, about twenty implements in all, every one tipped with an identifying spot of bright blue nail varnish. Matthew’s idea.

What can we do? We must live our lives. I opened the first tea chest and found a dog's dinner everything wrapped in the *Daily Mail* on which I could make out the dome of St. Paul's cathedral and the clouds of smoke on the yellow front page. So: it had been packed by amateurs, during the Blitz, evacuated from London to the safety of the country.

I thought, please God let this "thing" not involve clothes or any sort of fabric. Apart from the nasty way it lifted its lip to show its teeth, it was the silk velvet I had most hated about the smoking monkey—faded and fragile, cracked and bruised. When the clockwork turned it was this faded shabbiness that made the undead thing so frightening.

But really, truly, anyone who has ever observed a successful automaton, seen its uncanny lifelike movements, confronted its mechanical eyes, any human animal remembers that particular fear, that confusion about what is alive and what cannot be born. Descartes said that animals were automata. I have always been certain that it was the threat of torture that stopped him saying the same held true for human beings.

Neither I nor Matthew had time for souls. That we were intricate chemical machines never diminished our sense of wonder, our reverence for Vermeer and for Monet, our floating bodies in the salty water, our evanescent joy before the dying of the light.

But now the light was gone. In one hour it would be suffocated in the earth. I dug into the rat's nest of newspaper and came across a very plain tobacco tin. It was yellow, had a brown legend—"Sam's Own Mixture"—and a picture of a dog who I assumed was Sam, a gorgeous Labrador, gazing adoringly upwards. I should have a dog. I would teach it to sleep on my bed and it would lick my eye when I cried.

I tipped the contents into a metal tray. That they were small brass screws would be obvious to anybody. The horologist's eye saw more—for instance, most of them had been made before 1841. The later screws, about two hundred of them, had a Standard Whitworth thread with a set angle of 55 degrees. Could I really see those 55 degrees? Oh yes, even with tears in my eyes. I had learned to do that when I was ten years old, sitting beside my grandfather at his bench in Clerkenwell.

So I immediately knew this "object" had been made in the middle of the nineteenth century when the Whitworth thread became the official standard but many clockmakers continued to turn their own screws. These different types of threads told me that Croft's "object" was the product of many workshops. Part of the restoration would involve matching holes and screws and this might sound maddening but it was exactly what I liked about clockmaking as I had learned it from my grandfather, Gehrige—the complete and utter peace of it.

When I wanted to go to art school, I thought it must feel like this, to paint, say, like Agnes Martin. It never occurred to me that she might suffer from depression.

I hope my father knew this blissful feeling as a young man, but now I doubt it. He had certainly lost it by the time I understood our family secret. That is: my father was an alcoholic. He fell off his stool without me understanding what the problem was. His unannounced trips "abroad" were benders, or suppose, or detox. Did they have detox then? How will I ever know? Poor, poor, dear Daddy. He loved clockmaking, but he was destroyed by what it had become. He hated these city louts coming into his shop demanding to have their batteries changed.

Go away with your damn batteries.

What my father had lost was what my Matthew was always blessed with, the huge peace of metal things. Scientifically, of course, this is a stupid way to speak. Metals don't relax until they have rusted or otherwise been oxidized. Only then can they rest in peace. And then someone like Eric Croft wishes to *shine them* in which showy crowd-pleasing state they are poor creatures with their skins removed, naked in the painful air.

Not only Eric, of course. When Matthew and I first became lovers, I helped him strip a Mini to the

bare metal. Who would have thought that love would be like that?

~~Removing the thin ply lids of tea chests with my rather shaky hands, I came across a great number of twisted glass rods which told me this clockwork thing was probably not a monkey.~~

I began rooting around in a most unprofessional manner. I turned up a nasty coin-in-the-slot mechanism from the 1950s and a number of school exercise books tied together with raffia.

These I carried to the bench, and then I closed the tea chest.

And that was the moment, perhaps thirty minutes before three o'clock, that I began to drift from the straight and narrow. If I had followed the correct protocol I would not have touched this paper until Miss Heller (who did not like me) got the exercise books to the "Paper People." I would not have been permitted to read a word. I would have had to wait—she would have enjoyed that part—perhaps a week, or even two, before the scanned images were made available. By then each page would have endured, first Miss Heller's aggressive protection and then the conservator's treatment—an intentional assault of white light (3,200 degrees Kelvin to be exact) which is known as "the final insult."

His body was surely in the hearse.

The cortège was in the traffic, heading north on the Harrow Road. I sat down. I registered the fact that the notebooks came from the "werks" of one Wm. Froehlich in the City of Karlsruhe in Germany.

Then, as my darling was conveyed into the maze of Kensal Rise, I held, in my naked hands, eleven notebooks. Each one I examined was densely inscribed in a distinctive style. Every line began and ended at the very brink, and in between was handwriting as regular as a factory's sawtooth roof. There was not a whisker's width of margin.

I was in a state of course. All my feelings were displaced, but it was definitely this peculiar style of handwriting that engaged my tender sympathy, for I decided that the writer had been driven mad. I did not yet know his name was Henry Brandling, but I had no doubt he was a man, and I pitied him before I read a word.

Twentieth of June, 1854

NO MATTER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCE might require a man to travel abroad, it will always be pleasant to be awakened by the morning sun and to find, in the chamber of a German hotel, say, safe on the chair beside you, a portmanteau and sac de nuit, and your pleasure will be so much the deeper when you recall that you have survived the inspection of a customs agent who had it in his great German blockhead that you were smuggling plans for what exactly? A very comic instrument of war?

Blessed morning.

I had crossed into Germany with the full assurance of my family that all but the peasants spoke perfect English. Having endured the customs agent I understood that the peasants were very widely distributed and I therefore procured a German Grammar at the railway station.

As I walked about my quiet white-washed chamber next morning, I had a good go at learning German. This was not my *métier* exactly, but never mind—I was a Brandling and even if I must converse in dumb-show like a circus clown, I was determined to return home carrying that trophy I had come to find.

My son had been in the dumps with his hydrotherapy. It was awful to hear the little fellow's shrieks and know the cold wet sheets were being wrapped around his fevered body and another day of treatment had begun.

From the first bronchial event, two years before, my wife had been waiting for the worst. Our firstborn's death had exacted a dreadful toll on her so that now, in all her wary relations with Percy, it was clear as day, she dared not love the little chap. And I? I acted like myself; I could not help it. I persisted with my optimism with the awful consequence that the dear girl who had loved me with all her heart became first irritable and then angry. Finally she established her own separate bedroom on the gloomy north side of the house.

I made every effort to please her. Indeed it was I who commissioned Mr. Masini to paint her portrait and encouraged him to bring his assistant and whatever entertaining friends he wished. I was not wrong in this and the library was soon a regular salon and during all that chatter the portrait did indeed progress. Hermione is a handsome woman.

But I would not abandon my son to pessimism. I had the hydrotherapeutic cistern constructed and employed the Irish girl and gave up my office at the works and slept on a campaign bed in the nursery where, according to the recommendations of Dr. Kneipp, we kept the windows open throughout the fiercest storms.

Each morning when the hydrotherapy was complete and the nursery floor had been mopped down Percy and I sat together with our fruit and grains and planned our "Adventures of the Two True Friends." In the village, apparently, I was thought to have become "potty" because I had been seen to climb an oak with my sick son in my arms. Potty, perhaps. But I was the one who witnessed death on Percy's face as he beheld the four pale eggs of the Great Spotted Woodpecker.

Dr. Kneipp was in Malvern but we were in constant correspondence, and there was never an instance when he did not judge my instincts sound. And I specifically include those cases which were reported as "insane"—for instance, carrying the naked invalid across the raging River Race. "Always remember," Kneipp wrote, "that almost any treatment is safer than the condition you are treating."

I was slow to understand that, in spite of her portrait and her new amusing friends, my optimism was worse than torture to my wife. Only when it was too late, when I had alienated her completely, did I appreciate what damage had been done. But I am who I am. I would not give up, and I still cherish the hope that, when Hermione finally trusted we would not lose our son, her heart would burst with happiness and she would love us, both of us, again.

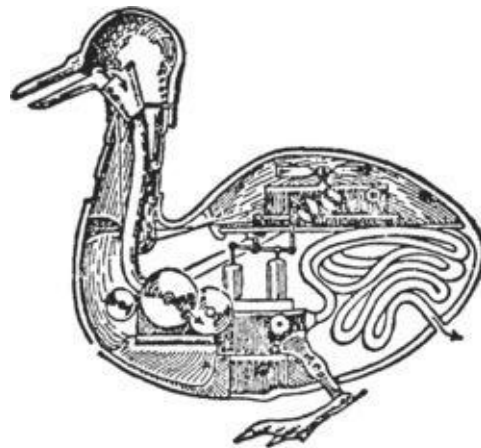
I made definite progress with his cure although it often seemed that only Kneipp and I could see the signs. Then, quite by accident, I came across the plans. They had been already a century old when they were published by the *London Illustrated News* but I immediately saw their possibility and I had one of my brother's draughtsmen draw them afresh and by the time he was finished with the transverse sections and so on, it might have been part of the offering plan for the new Brandling railway.

When my little fellow saw the design for M. Vaucanson's ingenious duck, a great shout—huzza—went up from him. It was a tonic to see the colour in his cheeks, the life brimming in his eyes where he observed the force of what Dr. Kneipp calls "magnetic agitation" which is a highly elevated form of curiosity or desire.

I thought, dear Lord, we have turned the corner.

The ten sheets of plans covered his bed. "Oh Papa," he said, "it is a wonder."

Then I knew that he would live. How alert he was when I explained that, by following the precise instructions on the plans, a clever soul-less creature would be made to flap its wings, drink water, digest grain, and defecate, this last operation being the one that most amused my son and would not offend his mother, who, even as she was outraged by the duck's vulgarity, could not help but see the good result.



Brandling. Cat. No. MSL/1848/.V31

The consequence of this was not exactly as I had wished and I must say that for a day or two I did not quite understand what had happened to me. In Hermione's mind, however, there was no question that I had guaranteed Percy I would have the duck constructed.

"You don't know you have made your son a promise?"

"No."

"Then you were just teasing him. Could you ever be so cruel?"

"But Hermione, I would have to go abroad."

"I am sure you know best how it should be done."

She was a Lyall which is to say, she was driven by a hot engine. This seemed to be a familiar characteristic, as if the heat of the Lyalls' bodies was part of the fermentation process that underwrote their Newcastle ventures. Now, at a lonely dinner I will never forget, I understood that this heat was being applied like a blow torch to encourage my departure from my own household.

NEXT MORNING AT THE Two True Friends' breakfast table, my son asked me, "When will you leave Papa?"

So his mother had been at him already.

"Would you not be sad to see your papa gone?" I asked him.

"You should not be sad, Papa," he said and in his frown I saw the risk that he might glimpse the disstate of his parents' marriage. I had never lied to him before but now I was a jovial clown, so much so that, by the time I poured his cocoa, he believed I could not wait to start my quest.

"Huzza," he cried. "What an adventure you will have."

Of course I did not depart until I had made complete arrangements for his proper care. That is, acquitted myself with character, although my wife, being a Lyall, would not accept her victory graciously. She refused to understand why, if I was so keen on M. Vaucanson's invention, I would not travel to the nation of which Vaucanson had been a citizen—there was no question in her new friend's minds that the French were in every way superior to the Germans—but I had had enough of them and their opinions. Quite sensibly, my chosen destination was in the Schwarzwald or Black Forest south of Karlsruhe, where the cuckoo clock had been invented. Deep in the Breg Valley there nestled tiny farms—or so I learned in the encyclopedia—for all the world like dolls' houses set in children's plantations and apparently inaccessible save by climbing down rope ladders from the heights above. Here lived a mighty race of clockmakers, notorious not only for their physical strength but for the dexterity of their fingers and the unexpected ingenuity of their peasant minds. Here were enough brains and fingers, an embarrassment of riches, any set of which might make my duck.

In Karlsruhe I took rooms at the Gasthaus an der Kaiser Straße knowing I would need some time to practise my grammar. Also, having left Low Hall in an awful rush, I needed time to still my injured heart, to sit myself down and understand the situation I had arrived in.

To that end I bought a child's exercise book from the printer Herr Froehlich who must have been, by my brother's calculation, a peasant—that is, he had no English. It was my intention that I should make an "adventure" of my sad situation and that Percy should feel himself a constant partner. I would keep a day journal to serve as raw material for a continual stream of letters that would place me always by his side.

ONE CANNOT CLAIM THAT sanity has been, so to speak, one's *birthright*. There were several aunts who proved a little wobbly and my uncle Edward, an exceptional athlete, returned to his bed for three years after rescuing a young boy from the German Sea at Aldeburgh. If we Brandlings have sometimes lost our wits or our fortunes on the horses we have also—this is the other side of the coin—known that the impossible was possible nine times out of ten. That was the basis of our fortune. If the pater had not believed that the steam engine was possible he would not have plunged so much on Stephenson. He therefore ruined himself, or so it was said for a number of years. But of course the impossible was possible and because of that there was now a Brandling Railway and a Brandling Junction, and as a result of that triumph he could order the draughtsman to conjure up that extraordinary spectacle, of the swift trains rolling sweetly through the glass tunnels in the middle of Fortnum & Mason's.

In this sense I was, if only in a modest sense, a Brandling.

Of course no one in Karlsruhe knew what a Brandling was or how he should be treated. Certainly no English soldier would dream of ordering me to vacate a park bench so he might occupy it, and when a German did so, my dictionary was no use at all. Likewise the town's clockmakers did not seem to know how they should treat me. After some four or five unsatisfactory encounters I was cheered enormously to spy, through green panes of ancient glass, a very clever music box made in the form of a merry-go-round. The horses were moving up and down and the riders themselves responding in the

most original and lifelike manner, raising an arm high, or slipping sideways in a saddle. Entering door so low I had to stoop, I beheld the watchmaker himself scuttling out of the shadows of his workroom still buttoning his frock coat. In the light he revealed himself to be slight and very fair, with those pale watery eyes so common in those who spend their days peering into complex engines. He was not a young man and suggested, by his general manner, someone who had found the life of solitude he sought.

At first everything seemed very promising, and he examined my plans with interest. Would he accept them? His feelings were not clear. Yet he was a watchmaker with an ingenious automaton in his window. I had brought him a project worthy of his peculiar intelligence.

“You wait,” he said in English. I thought, thank God, but he spoke no more, using mime to indicate that he would leave the shop, but not for long. Far from being offended when he locked the door behind him, I was encouraged.

While I waited I contented myself with the queer facsimile of life, so dead and not dead it would give a man goose-bumps. All its details I would remember for my son. There were perhaps twenty riders and each one must have, at the heart of its magic, a series of brass cams of the most ingenious construction. It is no small thing to be able to turn these curiously shaped parts, but that is not the heart of it for the watchmaker must be an artist who can observe the natural movement of the human figure and then know what cams he must cut to achieve his counterfeit.

So there I was, the Second Friend—all knees and moustache, happily crouched beside the door observing the wonderful machine like a tail-flicking cat—when my man returned. Behind him was a very homely-looking fellow, a policeman in fact.

He had been conscripted to translate, and began his service by telling me I was a Respected Sir, and as Karlsruhe seemed to be a place where one must be a Respected Sir, I was very pleased to hear him say so.

I told the policeman that M. Vaucanson’s original no longer existed. His countryman Goethe had seen it, did he know of Goethe?

“But of course Sir, we are Germans.”

“Yes,” I said. “Then you will understand Goethe saw the duck after Vaucanson’s death. He said it was in the most deplorable condition. The duck was like a skeleton and had digestive problems.”

I thought, they have never heard of Vaucanson.

The policeman told me, “I will take you.”

What was happening was not clear, except this clockmaker would no longer meet my eye. There were no farewells, whatever that might mean. My interpreter and I passed Herr Froehlich’s lean long-sided printery and then entered a street of medieval gables, thence into a narrow laneway. Here, at a door I had never entered, my guide ushered me inside my own inn.

What was one to think? What could I do but wait while the policeman took my plans and explained the workings of the Duck to one Frau Beck, the rake-thin inn-keeper. This service done, he clicked his heels and bade me farewell. Then seeing my confusion he went so far as to shake my hand which he seemed to imagine was the custom for constabulary in their dealings with gentlemen.

Frau Beck, meanwhile, was rolling up my plans and shaking her head in a most severe manner. I thought, Lord help her children if she has any.

“No,” she said, and waved a bony finger at me. “No, Herr Brandling. You must not. You do not show this to Herr Hartmann.”

“Who is Herr Hartmann? The watchmaker?”

She clicked her tongue in such a way as to suggest I could not be more wildly wrong. I should have been home in Low Hall taking German lessons.

“Then who?”

“Then no one! Not one! You are very fortunate that this is all.”

“Why?”

“You have been noticed by everyone,” she whispered. “Why did you not give up your seat to the Captain?”

I was appalled that all of Karlsruhe seemed to know my business.

“Herr Brandling I must ask you to behave yourself politely. Here,” and with this she delivered me my rolled-up plans and stood to one side to make it clear I should go up to my room. I fancied I chuckled to myself as I obeyed her, but it was not at all funny, and the people of Karlsruhe were clearly not a congenial lot.

I returned to my room. I threw down my plans on the dresser and myself on the peculiar German bed. Then of course the housemaid arrived, accompanied by a boy of perhaps ten. He was hard when Percy was soft, and very fierce and blond, but he was a boy of an age and I felt I knew him.

I greeted him *Guten Tag*, and gave him a pfennig. How I missed my friend.

The boy’s mother—and she could only be his mother—placed her hand upon his shoulder and whispered in his ear. She was telling him to thank me, obviously, but it was the hand on the shoulder that moved me.

“*Danke*,” the boy said and when I saw he was partly lame I was suddenly, unexpectedly, affected. Childhood is so cruel.

It was still only a little after nine o’clock and I could no longer avoid the first meal of the day which had evidently been conceived with the firm belief that a man should stuff himself like a pig before he left the house.

I could find no kipper in my dictionary.

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