



**F**ROM A DISTANCE only the light is visible, a speeding gleaming horizontal angel, trumpet out on a hard bend. The note bells. The note bells the beauty of the stretching train that pulls the light in a long gold thread. It catches in the wheels, it flashes on the doors, that open and close, that open and close, in commuter rhythm.

On the overcoats and briefcases, brooches and sighs, the light snags in rough-cut stones that stay unpolished. The man is busy, he hasn't time to see the light that burns his clothes and illuminates his face, the light pouring down his shoulders with biblical zeal. His book is a plate of glass.

I was not the first one to find the book. There were notes in the margins, stains on the pages, a rose pressed between leaves 186 and 187. Cautiously I sniffed it. La Mortola. There was a map of The Vatican, a telephone number scribbled down the blade of a sword, a letter, unopened. A feather had been used as a bookmark or perhaps the book had been used as a feather store. There was a drawing of an ugly man, face like a target, nose like a bull's-eye, and, on the corresponding page, a quick pencil sketch of a beautiful woman, the flesh braced against the bone.

The pages were thick, more like napkins than paper, more like sheets than napkins, glazed yellow by time. The cut pages had tattered edges but not all of the pages had been cut. In spite of its past, this book had not been finished, but unfinished by whom? The reader or the writer?

The book had no cover. While sleeker volumes cowered inside their jackets, this one lifted its ragged spine to the sun, a winter sun of thin beams and few hours. A sun that sank red disc of hosannas.

I untied the waxy string and the book fell over my hands in folds of light. My hands shook under the weight of the light. Those heavy yellow squares saturated my palms and spilled down on to my trouser legs. My clothes were soaked in light. I felt like an apostle. I felt like a saint, not a dirty tired traveller on a dirty tired train. It was a trick, of course, a fluke of the weak sun magnified through the thick glass. And yet my heart leapt. In the moment of the moving pool my heart leapt. I put my hand on the book, it was warm, it must have lain in the sun. I laughed; a few lines of physics had been turned into a miracle. Or: A miracle has been turned into a few lines of physics?

I turned to see my own reflection in the black window . . .

300 BC. The Ptolomies founded the great library at Alexandria.

400,000 volumes in vertiginous glory.

The Alexandrians employed climbing boys much in the same way as the Victorians employed sweeps. Unnamed bipeds, light as dust, gripping with swollen fingers and toes, the nooks and juts of sheer-faced walls.

To begin with, the shelves had been built around wide channels that easily allowed for a ladder, but, as the library expanded, the shelves contracted, until the ladders themselves splintered under the pressure of so much knowledge. Their rungs were driven into the sides of the shelves with such ferocity that all the end-books were speared in place for nine hundred years.

What was to be done? There were scribes and scholars, philosophers and kings, travellers and potentates, none of whom could now take down a book beyond the twentieth shelf. It soon became true that the only books of any interest were to be found above shelf twenty-one.

It was noticed that the marooned rungs still formed a crazy and precarious ascent between the dizzy miles of shelves. Who could climb them? Who would dare?

Every boy-slave in Alexandria was weighed. It was not enough to have limbs like threads, the unlucky few must have brains of vapour too. Each boy had to be a medium through which much must pass and yet nothing be retained.

At the start of the experiment, when a book was required, a boy would be sent up to get it. This could take as long as two weeks, and very often, the boy would fall down dead from hunger and exhaustion.

A cleverer system seemed to be to rack the boys at various levels around the library, so that they could form a human chain, and pass down any volume within a day or so.

Accordingly, the boys built themselves eyries in among the books, and were to be seen squatting and scowling at greater and greater heights around the library.

A contemporary of Pliny the Younger writes of them thus:

*Fama vero de bybliothecca illa Phariaca, opulentissima et certe inter miracula mundi numeranda, siparis ventisque mercatoriis trans mare devecta; nihil tamen de voluminibus raris ac pretiosis, de membris scriptorum disiectis fractisque, de arcanis Aegyptiacis et occultis devotis, quas merces haud dubio sperarent nostri studiosi, renuntiabant nautae, sed potius aulam esse regiam atque ingentem, tecta ardua et cum solo divorum exaequata ut dei ipsi tamquam in xysto proprio vel solario ibi gestare possent; quibus in palatiis tecto tenuis loculamenta esse exstructa et omnes disciplinas contineri, nec tamen intra manus studentium venire sublimitas causa. Maxime enim mirabantur tantam illam sublimitatem quantam nemo vel scalis vel artificiis machinarum evadere posset, nisi tantum turba*

innumera puerorum, quibus crura liciis tenuiora, quibus animus ceu fumus in auras commixtus, ut Maro noster, per quos denique multa transmittenda sed nihil retinendum. Illi enim circum bybliothecam in tabulatis semper in altiora surgentibus collocati, ratione propria quadam ac secreta inter se mandata permutare poterant et intra tam breve tempus unius diei quemlibet librum demittere.

There is no system that has not another system concealed within it. Soon the boys had tunnelled behind the huge shelves and thrown up a rookery of strange apartments where beds were books and chairs were books and dinner was eaten off books and all the stuffings, linings, sealings, floorings, openings and closings, were books. Books were put to every use to which a book can be put so long as it is never read.

‘And whilst a book is nothing to me but a box of dainty handkerchiefs to wipe myself against once off the pot,’ said Doll Sneerpiece, ‘I darken that gentleman’s merits if I call him anything less than a Walking Library.’

‘Very Right. Very True.’ said her companion, Miss Mangle, who had lived so long beneath the bells of St Paul’s that she could hear nothing at all. Having an ordinary desire to appear both sociable and wise, she answered any address to her with the words ‘Very Right. Very True.’ In this way she retained a large circle of friends, none of whom guessed that their tolerant confidante was stone deaf.

‘And if I were to say that I would care to turn the pages of that gentleman one by one, and to run my fingers down his margins, and to decipher his smooth spine, and to go on my knees to enjoy his lower titles, and to upturn that one long volume that he keeps so secret to himself, what would you say?’

‘Very Right. Very True.’ said Miss Mangle.

‘You are a broad-minded woman and a proper friend,’ said the Doll. ‘I tell you, if my clothes were vellum, and my flesh, parchment, he would take me in both his hands, he would press me against his lips. Yet, when he sees my poor silks and lace, when he smells the passing of my perfumed body, what does he say? He says, “Madam, Madam, do you not yet repent?” ’

‘Oh repent! repent! I do repent a thousand times. I repent that I was not born a book and comfortable in your library right now Sir, this very morning. Already perhaps you would have lifted me down and laid me out on your little table with a pot of coffee standing by.’

Doll Sneerpiece suddenly stoppered her flow, for the man of whom she spoke passed by the window.

‘It is his hat,’ she cried, ‘and his dear head beneath it.’ She rushed forward and flung her upper parts out of the frame so that her breasts took leave of her bodice.

‘Ruggiero!’ she cried, ‘Ruggiero!’ It was his fitted coat, his slender back, his emphatic leg.

‘Very Right. Very True.’ said Miss Mangle.

I shut the book against her cry. That was too purple and exotic for my taste. My tastes have always been austere. I prefer to be slightly cold, slightly hungry, to spend less on myself than I could, more on others than I should. I do not think of myself as a masochist, not even when I rise in the early morning dark to run my blue body through a mile of frost. Such habits, and a contemplative nature, have not fitted me for a world that knows neither restraint nor passion. The fatal combination of indulgence without feeling disgusts me. Strange to be both greedy and dead.

For myself, I prefer to hold my desires just out of reach of appetite, to keep myself honed and sharp. I want the keen edge of longing. It is so easy to be a brute and yet it has become rather fashionable.

Is that the consequence of leaving your body to science? Of assuming that another pill, another drug, another car, another pocket-sized home-movie station, a DNA transfer, or the complete freedom of choice that five hundred TV channels must bring, will make everything all right? Will soothe the nagging pain in the heart that the latest laser scan refuses to diagnose? The doctor's surgery is full of men and women who do not know why they are unhappy.

'Take this,' says the Doctor, 'you'll soon feel better.' They do feel better, because little by little, they cease to feel at all.

When I was a young medical student at Seminary, like most of the other students, I tried to use the brothels. We were vowed to chastity, of course we were, but not until we were ordained. It was a regular trip after Sunday lunch, St Agatha's Day, we called it, in honour of the wobbly brown crème caramel served with a cocktail cherry on the top. Later, as a surgeon, I wondered why only Agatha was fit to be a saint, when so many women freely lay down under me and let me cut off their breasts. I suppose that to be a martyr, one has to suffer for something in which one passionately believes, and they weren't suffering for anything in which they believed. We were the ones who believed. We were the ones in ritual gloves and masks carrying the sacred surgical steel. So passive, not a spark of resentment, they were grateful to me for throwing their tits into the incinerator.

We don't do it anymore, the treatment has changed, we regret that we did it so much, but when you tell people you know what's good for them particularly if you are a doctor, they will believe you. Having no beliefs of their own they believe. It's a truism that as faith in God has declined, belief in science, especially medical science, has increased. Yet most people know even less about science than they did about God. Science is now incomprehensible to the layman but the layman accepts it, even though one of the

arguments against God is that He doesn't make sense.

'Come on Handel, get your rubbers on.' The rallying cry of the operating theatre was the jest of the brothel. We had to protect ourselves. We had to be careful of the body beneath. Protection always involves some sort of loss. Hold back, watch yourself, wrap up, look for cuts, mind the blood, don't exchange fluid, Now Wash Your Hands Please. The riskiest thing you can do is to be naked with another human being.

I like to look at women. That is one of the reasons why I became a doctor. As a priest my contact is necessarily limited. I like to look at women; they undress before me with a shyness I find touching. I try to keep my hands warm. I am compassionate. I do care. If a woman is particularly young or particularly beautiful, I treat her as softly as I know how. I am very clean, my cologne is sandalwood and olives, and I know that my astringent, ascetic face is reassuring, tempting even. Am I tempted? Perhaps, but I would never break my vows, professional and religious. Isn't that enough?

When a woman chooses me above my numerous atheist colleagues we have an understanding straight away. I have done well, perhaps because a man with God inside him is still preferable to a man with only his breakfast inside him. I am not a fanatic. I am too cerebral for that. The scholarly doctor, fingers long, voice musical.

I remember my first consultation. The patient and I were the same age: thirty-one. She was nervous I was calm. She was afraid and I was confident. I asked her to undress behind the thin white screen that did not quite reach the floor. I watched her slip off her shoes, lift each foot to take off her stockings. Her feet were bare then, her broad strong feet, ankles slim. Her legs were shaved. I turned to look out of the window.

'I'm ready,' she said.

'Then won't you come here?' She came out in the silly paper robe



we used to supply in those days. I was the first to offer my patients a full silk dressing-gown. Dense raw silk with my initials embroidered on the pocket. I know that women appreciate small courtesies.

‘Would you prefer the nurse to be present while I examine you?’

No, of course not, they rarely do. Another pair of prying eyes, another intrusive presence on a body too much intruded upon. And I am told that women hate to be stared at by other women.

I examined her thoroughly and took her breast in my hands. Her breast was small, dense, weighted, taut to the touch. Pale and with a single fair hair by the nipple. I ran my clean inquisitive fingers over her. She was trembling.

I would have been glad to have trembled too. Suddenly I was afraid of her Irish beauty like a tightened bow. I had my thumb on her nipple. I smiled.

‘There’s nothing to worry about. Go and get dressed.’

She looked at me. I held her breast.

‘Go and get dressed.’

I sent her for a mammogram. In those days we screened women for what we still call ‘Their Own Good’. We made them feel irresponsible if they refused. The Good doctor. The Difficult patient. It wasn’t until 1993, that the best of us admitted that for women under the age of fifty, a mammogram is notoriously unreliable, and that it might even serve to spread any few malignant cells deeper into the body. It’s the way the plates compress the breasts. We did a lot of damage but it will be impossible to prove.

She kept her breasts. I saw her with them from time to time, and too often I saw them on their own, floating towards me in a horrible mixed-up nightmare of Seminary and raucous priests and the mutilated Saint Agatha lying on a silver platter . . .

‘Come on Handel, Push it in will you? Push it IN man!’ My senior

wielding his wild syringe above the torpid body on the slab. We had to administer a muscle relaxant before we could make the first cut. I hate injections.

The patient can hear everything under general anaesthetic. The ripping, snipping, severing, squelching, dripping operation. Our Surgeon liked to listen to opera while he worked but he insisted on Madam Butterfly or La Bohème. He liked to sing the part of Mimi in a cracked falsetto.

'I get upset when she dies,' he said, cutting through the pectoral webbing.

The sun had dropped on to the roof of the train and bloodied the grey metal. They were travelling slowly to save fuel. The man twisted his head to watch the spilt sun trickle down the window. The train that had been grey was sheathed in light. The sun made a wrapping of light that gave the dead grey bullet dignity and a purpose other than its destination. The man thought of the prophet Ezekiel and his chariot of cherubim: 'Go in among the whirling wheels underneath the cherubim; fill thy hands with living coals and scatter them over the City.'

Shall I tell you something about my City? My City, and long trains leaving.

The First City is ceremonial. Ceremonies of religion, monarchy, law. There are palaces in planned proportion built by the Golden Mean. Urgent steeples, pennants, weathervanes, an upward rising of assumption and power. This is the old city and it has been the most destroyed. The churches are empty and many are ruined. When the Church of England was disestablished it was a clever way for a government to ignore the crumbling beauty of a passion no longer