

JONATHAN COE

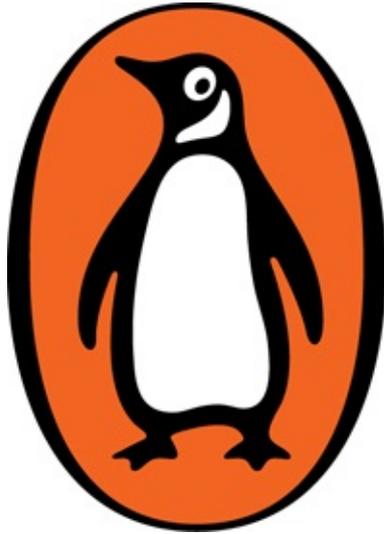
Loggerheads

and Other

Stories

'A hauntingly melancholy tale of love and loss'

Daily Mail



Jonathan Coe

loggerheads and other stories



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LOGGERHEADS AND OTHER STORIES

Jonathan Coe was born in Birmingham in 1961, and now lives in London. He has published ten novels, including *What a Carve Up!*, which won the 1995 John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, *The House of Sleep* and *The Rotters' Club*, winner of the Everyman Wodehouse Prize. His most recent novel, *Expo 58*, is published by Penguin. His biography of the novelist B. S. Johnson, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, won the 2005 Samuel Johnson Prize for best non-fiction book of the year. He is a frequent contributor to the *London Review of Books* and the *Guardian*.

9th and 13th

I live on the corner of 9th and 13th, and I promise you, it's not a good place to be. It's not a place where you'd want to linger. It's the sort of place you pass through; the sort you move on from. Or at least, that's what it is for most people. For everybody but me.

I can't believe I've been living here for more than eighteen months now. I can't believe that every morning, for the last eighteen months, I've been woken up by the rolling of shutters at the Perky Pig Diner and BBQ just across from my apartment. Shortly after that happens, the noises will start downstairs: furniture being shifted, trucks driving in and out right underneath my bedroom, the throb of their revving engines so insistent that even when I try to block it out by putting on my headphones and turning the keyboard's volume up to max, even then I can still feel it through my feet. I live above the business premises of the Watson Storage and Removal Company: which makes sense, in a way, because like I said, this is a transient place, a place for people on the move, a place for people who are getting ready to pack up and leave.

9th and 13th. Do you know what that sounds like? You can find out for yourself, if there's a piano anywhere nearby. Start with ... start with a C, if you like. Way down on the keyboard, two octaves below middle C. Hold it down with your little finger, and now stretch your fingers, really stretch them more than an octave, until your thumb is on a D. Now play the two notes, and listen to the interval. You've got your 9th. It's slightly rootless, already: those two bass notes that don't quite agree with one another. There's an audible sense of indecision. And now, with the thumb of your right hand, you play a B flat. This adds a kind of bluesy overtone, turns the ambiguous statement of those two notes into a question. It seems to ask: where are we heading? To which the next note – another D – adds nothing except emphasis. Now the question seems even more urgent, but when the F is introduced, it changes everything. All of a sudden the chord feels hopeful, aspiring. There's the hint of an upward movement, the sense that we might be about to arrive somewhere. And then, finally, we add the A, so that we have our 13th interval at last: and listen to how plangent it makes it sound, how wistful. This chord is aching to resolve, to settle on something: C major would be the most obvious place to go next, but it could be A minor, or F major 7th, or ... well, anything. It's so open. As open as a chord can get. Brimming with potential.

9th and 13th. The sound of possibility.

And how long is it since I played those chords, now? How long since *she* came into the bar and stood over the piano as I improvised, in the half-dark, after even the most hardened drinkers had finished up and gone home? I don't know. I lose track. All I remember is that for a few minutes we talked, swapped a few banalities, as my fingers wandered trance-like over the keyboard, tracing the usual patterns, the easy, familiar harmonies that I'm locked into, these days, like a series of bad habits. She

was from Franklin, Indiana, she said, and had only pitched up in New York that afternoon. She said she'd given up her job in the local record store and had come to the city to write. To write books. And that's all I ever found out about her – not even her name, just that she was from Franklin and that she was going to write and that she had dark hair, pulled severely back from her face into a short ponytail, and tiny freckles on either side of her nose, and brown-green eyes that narrowed to a smile whenever I looked at her. Which wasn't very often, I have to say, hunched as I was over the keyboard, picking my way slowly through those well-worn chords, until my hands finally gave up; faltered, and came to rest where they always did. The usual place.

9th and 13th.

At which point – at which precise point – she asked me a question.

'Listen,' she said. 'Is there anywhere ... do you know of anywhere that I can stay tonight? I don't have anywhere to stay.'

The possibilities raised by that question, like the possibilities raised by that chord, hung in the air for as long as it took the notes to decay.

Infinite possibilities.

To take just one of them, for instance. Supposing I had resolved the chord. Supposing I had resolved it in the most obvious way, with a soft – soft but insistent – C major. Perhaps with an A natural in there somewhere, to make it just a little more eloquent. And suppose I had answered her question, by saying: 'Well, it's getting pretty late, and there aren't that many places around here. There's always my couch.'

What would have happened?

Where would I be now?

This is what would have happened:

Her eyes would have narrowed again, at first, in that warm, shy, smiling way she had, and then she would have looked away, gathering her thoughts for a moment or two, before turning back to me, and saying:

'Would that be OK? I mean, that's really nice of you ...'

And I would have said: 'No problem. It's just a couple of blocks from here.'

'I don't want to put you to any trouble,' she would have said. 'It'll only be for one night.'

But it wouldn't have been only for one night. We both would have known that, even then.

I would have closed the lid of the piano and said goodnight to Andy at the bar, collecting my fee (a thin wad of dollar bills from the cash register), and then opening the door for her, warning her to mind her step on the narrow, dimly lit staircase that led up to the street. She would have had a bag with her, a black canvas holdall, and I would have offered to carry it, slinging it over my shoulder as I followed her up the stairs, admiring the sway of her back and the shapeliness of the stockinged ankle I would have glimpsed between the bottom of her jeans and her neat brown shoes.

Once out in the street, she would have pulled her coat tightly around herself, and looked to me for guidance – only her eyes visible above the turned-up collar – and I would have taken her arm gently and led her off down West 4th Street, heading north towards 9th and 13th.

'Are you sure this is all right?' she would have asked. 'I hate to think I might be imposing.'

And I would have said: 'Not at all. It's good of you to trust me, really. I mean, a total stranger ...'

'Oh, but I'd been listening to you play the piano.' She would have glanced at me, now. 'I'd been in there for a couple of hours, and ... Well, anyone who plays the piano like that must be a good person. Then a nervous laugh, before offering up the compliment. 'You play very nicely.'

I would have smiled at that: a practised, rueful smile. 'You should tell that to the guy who runs the bar. He might pay me a little more.' After which, almost immediately, I would have been anxious to change the subject. 'My name's David, by the way.'

'Oh. I'm Rachel.' We would have shaken hands, a little awkwardly, a little embarrassed at our own formality, and then hurried on to my apartment, because Rachel would have been looking cold, already: her breath steaming in the frosty air, the hint of a chatter in her teeth.

'You probably want to get straight to bed,' I would have said, as soon as we got inside, and I would have helped her off with her coat and hung it up in the hallway. I would have showed her where the bed was, and changed the sheets for her while she was in the bathroom. The old sheets and blankets I would have taken with me, using them to make up some sort of bed for myself on the couch. When she had finished in the bathroom I would have gone to check that she had everything she wanted, and then I would have said goodnight, but afterwards I would have lain on the couch for ten minutes or more, waiting for the light in her bedroom to be turned off. But she wouldn't have turned it off. Instead, her bedroom door would have been pulled slowly open, and I would have felt her looking at me, trying to work out if I had gone to sleep, before she tiptoed through into the hallway, and started searching through the pockets of her coat. A few seconds later she would have found what she was looking for and would have come back; and just as she was returning to the bedroom I would have said:

'Is everything OK?'

She would have started, and paused, before saying: 'Yes, I'm fine. I hope I didn't wake you.' And then: 'I forgot my notebook. I always try to write something in it, every night, before I go to bed. Wherever I am.'

'That's very disciplined of you,' I would have said. And she would have asked me:

'Don't you practise every night? Surely you must practise.'

'In the mornings, sometimes. By the time it gets this late, I'm too tired.'

She could have turned, and gone, at this point. The silence would have been long enough to allow it. But that wouldn't have happened. I would have sensed that she wanted to stay, and would have said:

'So what are you going to write now?'

'Just a few ... thoughts, you know. Just a few thoughts about the day.'

'You mean like a diary?'

'I suppose.'

'I've never done anything like that. Never kept a diary. Have you always kept one?'

'Yes. Since I was a child. I remember, when I was about seven, or eight ...' We would have talked then, for fifteen minutes or more. Or rather, I would have listened (because that's always how it is) while she talked; talked, and came closer – sitting on the arm of the couch, at first, then sitting beside me, after I had shifted over to make room for her, her bare thighs (because she would have been wearing only a T-shirt, and panties) in contact with my hips: only the sheets and blankets intervening

I know, too, what would have happened at the end of those fifteen minutes. How she would have

leaned towards me, leaned over me, the heaviness of her body against mine. How her hair, freed now from its ponytail, would have drifted across my face until she brushed it back, and how her lips would have touched mine: her lips dry with the cold. Dry at first. How I would have followed her into the bedroom. How there would have been a rapid, almost imperceptible shedding of our last remaining clothes. How I would have learned about her by touch, first of all, and by sight only later, when the bedclothes lay dishevelled, thrust aside, strewn across the floor. How willingly she would have given herself to me. And how beautiful she would have been, by the flashes of neon through the uncurtained window. How very beautiful.

How right for me.

That's what would have happened. And this is what would have happened next:

In the morning, we would have had breakfast together at the Perky Pig, and even that would have tasted good, for once. Over refills of coffee, we would have made plans. First of all, there would have been the question of accommodation: it would have been blindingly obvious that we could afford a bigger and better place if we pooled our resources, and moved in together. But that would have presented another problem: her parents, both Christian fundamentalists, would never have countenanced this arrangement. We would have to get married. The suggestion would have been made jokingly, at first, but it would have taken only a few seconds for our eyes to make contact and to shine with the sudden, instantaneous knowledge that it was what we both wanted. Three days later, man and wife, we would have spotted an advertisement in the *New York Review of Books* for a vacant apartment in the West Village, offered at a derisory rent to suitably bohemian tenants. It would have been the property of a middle-aged academic couple, about to depart for a five-year sojourn in Europe. Arranged over three floors, it would have included an enormous studio room – at the centre of which would have stood a Steinway baby grand, sheened in winter sunshine from the skylight – and a small but adorable garret study with a view over the treetops of Washington Square. In this study, during the next few weeks, Rachel would have written the final chapters of her almost-completed novel. A novel which, after two regretful but encouraging rejections, would have been accepted for publication by Alfred A. Knopf, and would have appeared the next September, becoming the sensation of that fall. Meanwhile, as her book climbed the bestseller lists and scooped up prizes, I would have finished my long-projected piano concerto, an early performance of which (at the Merkin Concert Hall, with myself both playing and conducting) would have caught the attention of Daniel Barenboim, who would have insisted on programming it as the chief item in his recital for the 'Great Performers' series at Lincoln Center.

Our son, Thelonius, would have been born a few months later. Followed, after another couple of years, by our daughter, Emily.

Yes, by our daughter, Emily ...

Wait a minute, though: I can hear her crying. I can hear her crying downstairs.

No, it isn't her. It isn't Emily. It's the squeal of those big garage doors at the Watson Storage and Removal Company. Those rusty hinges. The first of the trucks has just arrived.

Do you want to know what I did say to her, instead? Do you want to know how I actually answered that question?

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘There’s an excellent B & B near here. Just around the corner. Halliwell’s, on Bedford Street. It’s just five minutes’ walk.’ And I looked away, to avoid glimpsing the disappointment that I knew would flare in her eyes, and I played the same two chords again, over and over, and I heard her thank me, and I kept on playing them, and she left, and I played them again, and two days later I went to Halliwell’s to look for her, but they didn’t know who I meant, and I said her name was Rachel but of course it wasn’t, I made that up, I never knew her name, and I carried on playing those two chords and I’m still playing them now, this very moment, 9th and 13th, 9th and 13th, the sound of endless, infinite, unresolved possibilities. The most tantalizing sound in the world.

I don’t know what chord I should play next. I can’t decide.

V.O.

There came a point when it stopped being an interview and turned into a conversation. And there came another point, some time later, when it stopped being a conversation and turned into a flirtation. William could not have said when either of these things happened, with any certainty.

He did notice, however, that Pascale had laid aside her notebook, and was no longer writing down everything he said. And he noticed that they were no longer talking about his forthcoming film project, or his last CD, but had begun to discuss the unsatisfactory progress of her own career in journalism.

‘Even now,’ she was saying, ‘I can’t be sure that they will publish this article. And, you know, that’s annoying for you – because you have taken the trouble to talk to me – but also for myself, because it’s a lot of work, to transcribe all of this and to write it up and then to be told that they don’t want to use it after all.’

William smiled the self-deprecating smile at which he was so practised, and said: ‘You make me wish that I was more famous. I’m sure if you were interviewing Jerry Goldsmith, or Michael Nyman ...’

‘No, not at all,’ said Pascale. ‘I can assure you that your film scores are very well known in France. They are very popular. It’s just that – I don’t know ...’ She shook her head, and stared ruefully into space. ‘They are so unreliable, these people. They say one thing and they mean another.’

‘I’d enjoy talking to you,’ said William, after a pause, ‘whether you were going to write about me or not.’

Pascale turned. For a moment he was convinced that the remark had sounded too crass, too forward. Her eyes were screened: all he could see in her Ray-Bans, dimly, was his own reflection. But the smile that now flickered on to her face was pleased rather than mocking.

Instead of responding directly to the compliment, she said: ‘Are you enjoying the festival, so far?’

‘Yes,’ said William. ‘Yes, I am.’

‘It’s not exactly Cannes. Not many celebrities, not many famous names.’

‘Well, there’s Claudia Remotti: wouldn’t you say that she’s one of Italy’s biggest movie stars, these days? It’s not often I get to spend so much time with a woman like that.’

Pascale pouted. ‘So the jury spend a lot of time together?’

‘Absolutely. We watch the films together, we eat together, drink together ...’ But William was irritated, even as he said this, by the thought that he didn’t know where the other jury members were that moment. Were they socializing, somewhere, without having invited him – without even noticing that he wasn’t there? Was some other man – that self-assured Spanish director, perhaps – sitting next to Claudia and plying her with alcohol? He felt a bitter pang of jealousy and poured more beer into

Pascale's glass.

They were drinking at a seafront bar on a small promontory which jutted out from the shore, so that the ocean glimmered, turquoise and opalescent, on three sides. William's eyes were smarting from the white sunlight. He had forgotten to bring his sunglasses to France; had been on his way to buy some, in fact, when he had stopped at the bar for a drink and been waylaid by this charming journalist. She had asked him if they could meet for a short interview some time during the week, and he had said that now was as good a time as any. It meant, admittedly, that he'd been unable to call his wife, Alice, at the time they had arranged – between two and three that afternoon – but that was a small matter. She was bound to understand that an interview request should take precedence ...

'I'm sorry?' he said now, conscious that he had not been listening to Pascale as she addressed a direct question to him.

'I said, are you a fan of this kind of film? Horror films. Fantasy films. I wondered if you felt an affinity with this particular genre.'

William considered his answer carefully. His concern, as always, was not to express any firmly held opinion of his own, but to make sure that he did not give offence, or provoke disagreement; and since he had not yet learned Pascale's views on the subject, this was difficult.

'I think that serious artistic statements,' he said, pompously, 'can be made within any kind of generic restrictions. It doesn't do to be snobbish about these things. Horror films don't tend to be taken seriously by critics but if you look at many of the entries at this festival, you'll find that they are very finely crafted works of art – the works of real *auteurs*, real visionaries.'

'I'm sure you're right,' said Pascale, smiling at him with a furrowed intensity he already found endearing. 'And what film do you have to see this afternoon?'

William consulted his festival programme. '*Mutant Autopsy 3*,' he said, and signalled to the waiter for the bill.

The 14th Annual Festival of Horror and Fantasy Cinema was based in a large, modern, impersonal hotel about two miles from the centre of town. Although it housed a massive cinema auditorium, which would often be filled to capacity even for the most unpromising-sounding films, William soon realized that the hub of the festival was not here but in the bar on the ground floor. This bar was open to members of the public, as well as to the film-makers and critics, so there was always a fair smattering of goths, slasher fans and gorehounds spread around the tables in a sea of black clothing and grey, bloodless complexions. But mainly it was a place where the festival insiders could exchange gossip and do deals. William soon got into the habit of going down there every evening at around half past seven, in the hope of seeing Claudia Remotti for a drink before dinner.

On the fourth night of the festival, just before leaving his room on this errand, William sat on his balcony and flicked idly through the programme to see what delights awaited the jury members during the rest of the week. He was getting tired of rapes, mutilations, ritual slayings, decapitations and chainsaw massacres. Apart from anything else, as the only composer on the jury he was supposed to be looking out for a potential winner of the best-soundtrack award, and had been finding it hard to concentrate on the music that tended to accompany such scenes. He was ready, now, to see something a little more original, more sophisticated.

He did not hold out much hope for tomorrow's offering, a Spanish movie billed as a 'hilarious

necrophiliac comedy' called *One Corpse at a Time, Please!*; nor for the American film they would be seeing the day after that, *Vampire Brainsuckers Get Naked*. The last entry in the festival, however, looked marginally more interesting. It was a German film, a supernatural love story involving ghosts and out-of-body experiences, the title of which translated as *The Haunted Heart*. He looked down the credits to see who had written the music, and found a name that he didn't recognize. Then he looked at the other credits and suddenly saw, in a spasm of wild astonishment, a name that he knew only too well.

Gertrud. Gertrud Keller. It was her screenplay. *She* had written this film.

William laid the programme aside, not quite sure how to digest this information. Well, she had made it, anyway – she had written something for the movies, just as she always said that she would. That was a cheering thought, wasn't it?

He realized at once that he needed a drink.

Fortune favoured him, on this occasion, and upon entering the bar the first person he saw was Claudia, sitting at a corner table and sipping champagne, with no more serious rival for his attentions than Michel, the festival administrator. Michel was a small, dapper man, his hair slicked neatly into place, his body giving off a permanent and overpowering aroma of sweet cologne. He was pleased to see William, having some important information to convey to all of the jury members.

'Tomorrow's film is from Spain,' he said, 'and as you will be aware from the programme, it is being shown in its V.O. format, or "Version Originale". This means that the print will be in the Spanish language, with French subtitles. So, naturally, we have had to make an arrangement for our non-French-speaking judges.'

This arrangement, it transpired, involved assigning to each of the judges their own personal translator, who would sit beside them in the dark and whisper a rough-and-ready English version of the French subtitles into their ears, while trying not to disturb the members of the paying public seated throughout the rest of the auditorium. It didn't sound the most satisfactory solution, and Claudia was, as usual, full of complaints as soon as Michel had left.

'Really,' she said, 'this festival is the most badly organized I have ever attended. I don't think I have ever been treated like this in my life. They put us up in this dreadful hotel, and make us watch these terrible movies all day. The food is shocking, quite shocking. And now they are even going to show us these crappy movies in a language we don't understand!'

William let her talk on, while his thoughts roamed elsewhere – heading back, against his will, to the news he had just learned from the festival programme, and all the painful recollections that came in its wake. Recently, he had given as little thought as possible to his trip to Berlin, four years ago, when he had been asked to write the incidental music for a new play by a then-unknown dramatist called Gertrud Keller. Almost at once he had struck up an intense, intimate friendship with her, and it continued, by letter and phone, for several months after William's return to England. He had been so flattered by her attentions, his self-esteem so enhanced by the thought that this beautiful, stimulating and intelligent woman should take an interest in him, that he completely failed to see where the relationship was heading: failed to notice that he had allowed Gertrud – even encouraged her – to fall in love with him. By the time that he did notice, it was too late. Their final letters crossed in the post, his suggesting that they should break off contact, hers announcing that she had left her husband,

Jakob, and was ready to start a new life with him either in Germany or England. William had not replied; and they had not seen, spoken or written to each other since.

But supposing – the possibility suddenly exploded in his mind, like a flash insert popping up on screen – supposing Gertrud was going to be attending the festival herself? It was normal for the stars, the director or other members of the production team to be invited when they had a film in competition. Had Michel asked her to come? William would have to find out, immediately. Michel had muttered something about going to the festival office. He would follow him there. There was no time to lose.

‘William!’ Claudia called after him, baffled, as he abandoned her in mid-flow, leaving his glass of champagne almost untouched. But he didn’t seem to hear.

Michel proved elusive. William was unable to track him down until the next morning, when they met in the lobby of the hotel shortly before the screening of *One Corpse at a Time, Please!* Michel was at pains to assure him – rather impatiently – that Gertrud Keller would not be attending the festival, and swiftly moved on to the more pressing business of introducing him to Henri – the man who would be working as his personal translator.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ said William.

‘What ho, old chap,’ said Henri. ‘Ripping weather we’re having today, what?’

Henri, it seemed, was a local translator who was busily engaged upon an as yet unpublished French edition of the complete works of P. G. Wodehouse. While everyone else at the festival sported shorts, plimsolls and brightly coloured T-shirts, he was wearing a three-piece, double-breasted tweed suit and was smoking a shockingly pungent meerschaum pipe. He shook William warmly by the hand and said ‘Tell me, old bean, what news from Blighty?’ in an accent that would once have guaranteed him a lifetime’s employment on the BBC Home Service.

Today’s film turned out to be a black comedy in the amoral, nihilistic mould popularized by Quentin Tarantino and his followers, and concerned a gang of necrophiliac bank robbers with a penchant not simply for killing their victims but for having sex with them afterwards. Most of the dialogue was not really germane to the plot at all, but consisted of cynical wisecracks traded by the characters while they indulged absent-mindedly in the most grotesque and appalling acts of violence. During an early scene, for instance, there was an argument over the distribution of some loot, prompting one of the crooks to shove a pistol into his colleague’s mouth and snarl a few words in rasping Spanish. William could catch little of what he was saying even from the French subtitles, and it was left to Henri to furnish him with an adequate translation.

‘The gentleman with the scar,’ he explained, in his plummy English drawl, ‘says, “Suck on this, you tight-arsed motherfucker.” Then he adds, “I don’t know how the fuck you got involved in this shit-brained scheme, but the closest you’re ever going to get to that fucking money is when I shove it up your bony fucking arse.”’ He sighed at the infelicities of this version. ‘I’m giving you the merest gist of it, I’m afraid. Do forgive me, old fellow. It’s a jolly poor show on my part.’

As the week went by, William became more and more aware of the presence of Pascale. She had developed an unerring knack for turning up at his elbow when he was least expecting it: at the bar, at the hotel’s buffet lunches, on his daily promenades through the town and along the seafront. She told

him about a small, little-visited beach she had discovered, ten minutes' walk from the hotel along a rocky cliff path, and for the last three mornings they had gone there together for a swim before breakfast. He liked her, there was no denying that. He liked her solemn eyes and her almost comical earnestness; he liked (of course) the fact that she considered him famous, and was so clearly in awe of him; he liked her doleful eyebrows and thick black hair; and he liked her body, or what he had seen of it on their swimming trips. But it was an odd feature of their blossoming friendship that they talked so little about their lives back home. Once or twice Pascale would bring up the subject of her feckless boyfriend in Paris, who had been seeing her for more than five years but still refused to move into her apartment; yet William did not return these confidences. He never once mentioned Alice's name – or, for that matter, ever referred to himself in anything but the first-person singular. After all, it would be a mistake to let himself get too close to Pascale; to offer her anything like the intimacy that had proved so disastrous when he had shared it with Gertrud Keller. That, at any rate, was how he justified his reticence to himself.

On Thursday night, the penultimate night of the festival, someone suggested dinner away from the hotel, at a small restaurant down by the marina, and William found himself joining a party which also included Henri, Pascale and Claudia Remotti. Claudia was accompanied, on this occasion, by Stephen Manners, the young American star of *Vampire Brainsuckers Get Naked* – a film which, earlier that day, had been greeted with a standing ovation by the largely teenage audience. Stephen was muscular and over-tanned, with a mane of shoulder-length blond hair which gave him something of the look of a high-class male stripper. Buoyed up by the success of his film, he proved to be noisy, cheerful company, and his exhilaration soon infected the other diners. But a slight pall was cast over the meal when Henri hastily excused himself, just before dessert, and disappeared off to the toilets clutching his stomach. He had been the only person to order *moules*, and when he returned to the table his face was pale and sweaty.

'Frightfully sorry,' he explained. 'This is a blasted nuisance, but I'm having a spot of gyp with the old tummy, wouldn't you know. I think I'd better be popping off to bed – best place for me, eh what? Toodle-pip, old beans.'

Not long after he'd gone, Stephen also looked at his watch and started to yawn ostentatiously.

'Press conference first thing in the morning,' he said. 'Perhaps I'd better be turning in.'

'Oh, is that the time?' said Claudia. 'I didn't realize it was so late already.'

It was half past nine.

'I'll walk you back to the hotel if you like,' said Stephen.

'Thank you,' said Claudia; whereupon they both rose to their feet with startling abruptness, said a cursory 'Goodnight' and promptly set off together at a resolute pace, the white of his shirt and the cream of her dress finally blurring into one bobbing dot of light, far in the distance.

'Hmm,' said William, once they had gone.

'Not exactly subtle,' Pascale agreed.

William tried to meet her eyes for a few seconds, then looked away. He found their steadiness unnerving.

'And then there were two,' he murmured, half to himself.

The night was alive with a delicate soundtrack of creaks and tinkles from the huddle of yachts

moored at the marina, while the ocean itself lapped gently at the seaboard only a few yards from the table. Otherwise, all was quiet.

‘Perhaps we should be getting back as well,’ said William. But Stephen and Claudia had left them with a full bottle of white wine, and they could not let it go to waste.

It was almost midnight when they returned to the hotel, and curious things appeared to have happened along the way. There must have come a point when they stopped walking separately, and linked arms, leaning heavily into each other. And there must have come another point, shortly afterwards, when it seemed like a good idea to kiss, open-mouthed and at some length, beneath the whispering leaves of a restless palm tree. Once again, William could not have said when either of these things happened, with any certainty.

His mind fuzzy with alcohol, he could scarcely remember how they skirted the hotel bar – still throbbing with activity at this hour – and rode up to the third floor together in the glass-bottomed lift. His next moment of clarity came inside his room, when he realized that he was sitting on the bed and Pascale was kneeling in front of him, between his legs, her body pressed tightly against his. She had taken off her blouse and was naked from the waist up.

‘I’m glad,’ she was saying. ‘I’m glad we decided not to do it that way.’

William frowned, even as he caressed the smoothness of her back.

‘What way?’

‘Like Stephen and Claudia. Going to bed together the moment they met. This way is better.’ She kissed him tenderly. ‘I can’t separate sex from emotion. Can you?’

‘You mean –’ he drew away from her, very slightly ‘– you mean that you have to be in love with someone, before you can sleep with them?’

‘Maybe not in love ...’ She kissed him again, and reached her hands beneath his T-shirt. ‘But there has to be trust. Don’t you agree?’

Panic – a sudden sense of dread – began to seize him.

‘Pascale, have you –?’ He took hold of her arms and stilled their motion. ‘Why ... Why haven’t you asked anything about me, all week? About my ... home life?’

She looked at him gravely now, confusion in her eyes.

‘Because – well, because from the way you’ve been behaving, it’s obvious that ... there’s nothing to say.’

The silence between them, at this point, seemed endless, and immense.

‘I’m right, aren’t I?’ Pascale said at last, louder now, and with a catch in her voice.

‘I’m married,’ William told her. ‘I’m married and I have a child.’

He buried his face in his hands, partly out of remorse, partly to shield her now-shameful nudity from his gaze. He sat there for a minute or more, not moving, not saying anything; and in that time, he heard her slip on her clothes, and go.

As it turned out, he did not have to wait long before seeing Pascale again. At the entrance to the cinema the next morning Michel was looking out for him, and Pascale was standing by his side. They both welcomed him with a smile: hers enigmatic, his pleased and self-congratulatory.

‘We had quite a little crisis this morning,’ Michel explained, ‘when your translator phoned to say that he was sick in bed with food poisoning, and would not be able to attend the screening of today’s

film. But as it turns out, this delightful young lady – who tells me that you are already well acquainted – has kindly volunteered to step into the breach.’

‘That’s very good of her,’ said William, and shook the hand that Pascale, rather dumbfoundingly, held out to him.

They took their seats together in the half-empty auditorium: it seemed that if anything could keep the festival’s horror enthusiasts at bay, it was the prospect of a romantic German ghost story, shown in its original language, shot partly in black and white and targeted firmly at an art-house audience. William was disappointed, and hoped that this didn’t provide an omen for the commercial fortunes of Gertrud’s first venture into the cinema.

Then the lights went down, and the film began.

The following ninety minutes were among the strangest and most disconcerting of William’s life.

The Haunted Heart told the story of a love triangle. The story of a married couple – both working in the theatre – who enjoy a quarrelsome but stable home life, until one day, a young painter encounters the woman in a café, and becomes her lover. Their affair, which consumes the woman entirely, comes to an end only when the painter dies in a boating accident while on holiday with his own wife and daughter. After a period of intense, almost unbearable mourning, the woman returns to her forgiving husband; and finally, having lived through months of terrible distress, she discovers that she is, at heart, relieved that her lover is gone. The affair had brought much unhappiness in its wake, and she now realizes that she is married to a kind and understanding man. All is well, until one day the painter’s ghost appears at her home, and it dawns on her that, even now, the relationship is not quite over ...

In many ways it was a clumsy and humourless film, and most of the audience were unimpressed. Often they would laugh at scenes which were meant to be taken seriously. But William was blind to both its merits and its defects. A myriad of tiny details – from the exterior shots of the Berlin theatre to the private language of jokes and catchphrases that the lovers invented for themselves – instantly stirred up his memories of Gertrud. Every aspect of the film seemed to hold some special significance for him. Even the musical score (which would eventually, at his instigation, win the best-soundtrack award) had sprung from their shared vocabulary, being based upon themes by Francis Poulenc – mainly the Clarinet Sonata, a recording of which he had once sent her as a gift. William sat through the film in a kind of trance, numb with shock. He would not have believed that any film, any narrative, any work of art, could have transported him so suddenly and irresistibly into the past.

But that was not all. This film may have reawakened him to the past, but it also never allowed him to forget the present. It never allowed him to forget for a moment that Pascale was sitting beside him, closer than ever before but at the same time more distant, with a new tone in her voice and a new meaning in her actions: teasing, now, and reproachful. She faithfully translated every word of the subtitles. All the endearments he had once exchanged with Gertrud were now replayed, and given back to him. All the messages she had encoded for him in this film now reached him through Pascale’s voice. There were a number of sex scenes, and here it seemed that Pascale took an even greater satisfaction in the fullness and literalism of her translation. She repeated every word, every gasp, every broken phrase, her lips almost brushing against his ear but then pulling back, in a mocking parody of physical contact. She leaned into him, her leg against his thigh. He could feel the rise and

fall of her breathing. He could smell her body in the pressing heat of the auditorium.

In the very last scene of the film, he could no longer be sure whether it was Gertrud or Pascale that was speaking to him.

Du hast mir nichts zu bieten, said the woman to her ghostly lover. *Das sehe ich nun. Es wäre freundlicher, wenn du mich in Ruhe ließt.*

The French subtitles said: *Tu n'as rien à m'offrir. Je peux le voir maintenant. Ce serait plus gentil de me laisser seule.*

And Pascale whispered in his ear: 'You have nothing to offer me. I see that now. It would be kinder if you left me alone.'

Für dich ist vorsichtiges Benehmen zugleich ein Freundliches. Du glaubst, daß du dich harmlos benimmst. Aber, meiner Meinung nach, bist du ein gefährlicher Mensch.

Pour toi, être prudent et être bon, c'est la même chose. Tu crois que ce que tu fais sera sans conséquence. Mais je crois que tu es dangereux.

'You believe that by being cautious, you are being kind. You believe that what you do is safe. But think you are a dangerous person.'

Damals hast du mir beinache das Herz gebrochen.

Tu as failli me briser le coeur.

'You came close to breaking my heart.'

Bitte, kehr in deine Heimat zurück. Dort wirst du glücklicher sein. Manfred, kehr zurück.

S'il te plaît, retournes d'où tu viens. Tu y seras plus heureux. Retournes-y, Manfred.

'Please go back to where you belong. You will be happier there. Go back, William.'

He turned towards her abruptly, and said: 'The character's name is Manfred, isn't it?' But Pascale did not answer. All he could see were her eyes, shining in the dark.

William sat alone in the cinema for some time after the audience had left. He could not collect himself, or will himself into motion. When he was at last able to leave, he drifted around the hotel in a daze, not noticing the people around him, not responding when they spoke to him.

He felt better after some lunch and a siesta. In the middle of the afternoon he went down to the reception desk and asked if he could leave a note for Pascale. He was told that she had checked out shortly after one o'clock. After that he could think of nothing else to do but walk into town, to look once again for the sunglasses he had been meaning to buy all week.

Loggerheads

Sometimes the sun just glares down at you, almost too much to bear, and sometimes the mist will roll in so thick and fast that you can't even see down to the shed, and it's only the sound of the waves against the shingle that tells you where you are at all. It's a lonely spot, really, not what I imagined, but at least you know there's the neighbours, always someone next door. And of course we've got each other.

The road runs straight for miles and miles, along the edge of the beach, straight as a Roman road, and all the bungalows sit side by side and face out across the shingle, and in the distance you can just about see the water, if the tide isn't low. Sometimes you'll get silence for half an hour or more, complete silence, not even a car going by, and all you'll hear is him rustling his paper or flushing the toilet or rummaging around in that cupboard of his. When the mist comes in you get the sound of foghorns from the lighthouse, I don't know how they make them so loud, it was dark the first time I heard it and it made me think of the all-clear but it doesn't remind me of that any more, it just sounds like itself.

We both like the silence. We've got used to it. There's no need to talk much any more, we've said all we've got to say. He knows I don't like the way he runs the hot water then puts the plates in the sink and just leaves it to go cold, but he does it anyway, so what's the point. I've told him a thousand times and I'm not going to tell him again. There are things that used to get on your nerves, things you thought you'd strangle him for, and in the end it doesn't matter. What it comes down to in the end is you and him, him and you. Like it or leave it. And we're neither of us going to leave it, now.

We don't even argue about the name any more, though we used to, all the time. Ours is the only house without one, but we couldn't decide. He used to sit at the front table all day, looking out at the beach, and then he'd give me lists of things like Sea Symphony and Saltaire and Plain Sailing and Stone's Throw. It's nice to give a house a name, if it's something you've been waiting for all your life, it shouldn't just be a number, but I didn't want any of that flowery stuff. Why don't we call it Loggerheads, I said once, because we've been living at Loggerheads ever since you retired, but he didn't see the joke. I still think it was quite a good name.

We do laugh about it sometimes, though, and that's the important thing. Just the other day the mist was worse than it had ever been, but we went out for a stroll anyway and we were halfway across the beach and we couldn't see more than a yard ahead of us, it was like the whole world had just upped and disappeared and I said, it's a good job we didn't call it Sea View, isn't it. And we both had a laugh at that, but that was the day I heard the foghorns again and then out in the distance, it must have been miles away, there was an answer from one of the ships and it took me back, made me think of something, it sounded like the pedal on a church organ and I could remember crouching there, tiny I

must have been, and her legs, it must have been Mum's legs, her legs in stockings when she played, I'd forgotten all about that, hadn't given those days a thought, not for years, but that sound made me think of them, brought it all back, and for a moment what with all the mist and greyness I had quite a turn, didn't know where I was, thought I might have died or something, but then I heard him breathing next to me and I remembered and it was all right.

Leiden

‘Have you ever been to Leiden in the winter?’ he said. ‘I don’t think I’ll ever see anything as beautiful as that frost on the roofs of the buildings along the Rapenburg; and the stillness you get there, any morning, as you stand and look down the canal. We used to take breakfast earlier than any of the others and then walk, sometimes to the Hortus Botanicus, where the lawns would be white, really white, the cleanest thing you’ve ever seen, or sometimes we’d walk into town, making for where the Nieuwe Rijn is crossed by the Korenbeursbrug, and we’d stand on that lovely old bridge for an hour or more, not even talking. There was so much just to look at. I don’t mean landmarks or anything, I just mean the bareness of the trees, and the way the buildings faced each other, friendly and handsome, across the water. There’s a gentleness there, and a calm. And then sometimes in the evening we’d go drinking at a place near the Burcht, and we’d try to sit outside even though it was so cold – she’d have that coat, emerald green, wrapped around her – and one evening it even started to snow, and we watched the snowflakes dancing in front of the lantern-light ...’

He stopped, as the doors of the lift slid open and we stepped out into the grey corridor.

‘Well –’ he fumbled for his key ‘– here we are.’

I said, ‘This isn’t at all bad. I was expecting something much worse.’

He thanked me and said that after a while you got used to the graffiti, the steel and bare concrete, the peeling paint, the broken security locks, the dark, the fear, the smell of piss in the lifts, the walk up the stairs, the voices shouting at each other behind closed doors, the grime and the litter, the cold and the damp, the draughts, the noise of the wind in the lift shafts, the useless light switches, the echo of hurried footsteps. After he had been there a while he got used to all these, and he was just grateful to have somewhere to sleep, a roof over his head. And grateful that the rent was so cheap. He took me inside and straight out on to the balcony and we stood shivering, looking out at the lights and pointing to areas we knew. We had both got to know Birmingham quite well by then. From up there we could see as far as the Bristol Road, a carnival of amber lights sweeping down out of the city, out of view. Over to our left the city centre was glittering, with its tower blocks and flyovers and giant multi-storey car parks. The sight made us feel something, I think, touched us in some way, but it was not exhilaration. He came and stood close beside me.

‘Sometimes,’ he said, ‘I feel happy here, and sometimes I wonder whatever drew me to this city and what am I doing here at all.’

I said, rather stupidly, that there were beautiful places and places which were not so beautiful and the funny thing was that not everybody chose to live in the beautiful ones.

‘I’ve been here for five years,’ I said, ‘and I think I will be leaving soon. I don’t know where. I’ve no plans. But I can feel the beginnings of another change.’

I was being honest when I said this, although I'm not sure that he realized it; probably he just thought it was one of those things that women say.

We had not known each other for long, and it was a strange friendship. Neither of us had given very much away. It had not been difficult, though, after he had been into the shop a few times, to start talking. I found I had grown used to watching the customers, gauging them, remembering the faces of those who came regularly and sorting out where their interests lay, their particular obsessions. Some are fascinated by the Egyptian mysteries, others are drawn to witchcraft and the esoteric arts, some wish to learn the secrets of divination, astrology, the Tarot and the I Ching, others devote themselves to the purely spiritual aspects of Eastern philosophy. With him, I could tell, it was none of these. This young man – he was less than thirty, I was sure – always made for a certain section on a shelf at the back of the shop, in its darkest corner. It was here that we kept a small number of books concerning the work of the Renaissance magi, the alchemists and the great philosopher magicians. It was my favourite section, this, I had ordered most of the books myself, and so it was only natural that, eventually, we should strike up a conversation. He had obviously applied himself to the study of the subject with some energy. He knew the works of Zoroaster, Pico, Trithemius, Ficino and Giambattista della Porta; he was familiar with the Cabala, and with the principles of numerology and mystical geometry. He understood the importance of the writings of Hermes Trismegistus, and knew of Chaldean-Ptolemaic magic and Lullism. And, like myself, he had a particular curiosity about the life and the work of John Dee. That was how we began. He was on the point of buying a book about Dee, a new one, something written by an academic, and I advised him against it, telling him that I thought it was wrong-headed. He started complimenting me on our selection, enthusing about it, saying that he had not expected to find anything so good, here of all places.

‘I wish it were better,’ I said. ‘So many of the books we’d like to have can’t be found any more. Some of them, of course, have not been reprinted for centuries.’

He asked me whether I had contact with anyone who dealt in the older and more obscure items.

‘Yes, occasionally,’ I answered. ‘Why, is there something which you’d particularly like to find?’

‘For some years now,’ he said, ‘I’ve been hoping to find a copy, an original copy, of the *Monas Hieroglyphica*.’

It was as soon as I heard him speak these words, the peculiar, restrained fervour he imparted to them, that my suspicions began. But I bought time by saying, casually:

‘There are translations available. We had one here, not long ago.’

‘No. It must be the Antwerp edition.’

I looked steadily into his eyes. He had very large, dark brown eyes.

‘You won’t find one in any shop,’ I said.

He returned my gaze, but did not answer. Finally, the words were drawn out of me.

‘I know of a copy.’

Almost without expression, and after several seconds’ silence, he said: ‘Where is it? Would it be possible for me to see it?’

There was something about him which I trusted, something which made me certain, in an unthinking way, that I was doing the right thing. So I told him to come back the next day, just before we closed.

It was almost dark when he arrived, and there were no other customers by then. I wasted no time in locking up the shop and pulling down the shutters. Then, with only the reading lamp on the counter for light, I reached into a drawer and fetched out the book. It was in a plastic carrier bag.

‘Go on,’ I said. ‘Open it.’

He removed the bag, and laid the book carefully on the counter.

And he stared, not in surprise exactly, but in a kind of wonder: the awe of recognition. I watched him, watched the steadiness of his eyes in that half-light; and despite the sound of the homeward-bound traffic, outside in the High Street, it felt like silence that I was breaking when I said:

‘The binding – it’s not original. It was done much later. Probably early in the eighteenth century.’

‘I know.’ He turned to the title page, where you can see the hieroglyph itself, but he seemed not to be looking at it.

‘It’s the same,’ he said. ‘The very same.’ His voice was low, not quite a whisper; perhaps to hide his agitation. ‘I have seen this copy before. This same copy. Does it belong to you?’

I nodded. ‘When have you seen it before?’

‘Several years ago, and not in this country. I would recognize it anywhere, though. Tell me, how do you come by it?’

‘It was given to me,’ I said, ‘by a friend.’

He asked quietly, ‘What was her name?’, and I smiled.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘It was Thea.’

He closed the book, and picked it up, and held it to his chest. He was hugging it, with a sort of gentle passion. His eyes were closed. He took a few steps around the shop, and then stopped, quite hidden by shadow. I don’t know how long he stood there, probably no more than a minute; but when he turned and approached me, there was already something new in his expression. A revival had taken place.

‘Where is she now?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Did you know her well? Were you close friends?’

‘Yes.’

‘She mentioned someone once: a woman. She used to talk about someone called Jennifer.’

‘Yes. That was me.’

He put out his hand impulsively, and then could think of nothing to do with it except lay it briefly on my shoulder. I did not move; it was not a gesture that invited either welcome or resistance. He laughed nervously, released me from his touch, and opened the book again.

‘Somewhere in here,’ he said, ‘there is a page with a mark on it.’ It did not take him long to locate it. ‘There.’

He pointed to the corner of an even-numbered page, near the beginning of the book; it was disfigured with a small, rust-coloured stain.

‘What do you suppose that is?’ he asked.

I peered.

‘It looks a bit like ink,’ I said. ‘Or possibly ... is it blood?’

He smiled, his first smile, and shook his head.

‘No, not blood. It’s barbecue sauce.’

It was his idea that we should go out and eat. I protested that there were no very good restaurants in the area, but he said that he already had somewhere in mind. It turned out to be McDonald’s.

‘Surely we’re not going in here?’

‘Don’t you normally use this place?’ He pushed open the glass door, and I followed him in. ‘You really should. It’s quite clean, and very quick.’

There were few other people there – just two groups of noisy teenagers, with their bright jackets and their ceaseless, edgy cheerfulness. They did not seem happy, and I wished there was somewhere better for them to be. I don’t eat meat so I was unable to order anything other than a cup of tea and a wedge of hot apple pie in a cardboard packet. He bought himself a huge bun with two thick slices of meat and a lot of salad in it. We did not talk at first, he was too busy eating and I was watching the cars go past outside, their headlights tracing patterns on the wet road. The rush-hour traffic was starting to abate. When he had nearly finished his meal, he began to tell me about Thea.

‘We were there for two weeks, the six of us, staying at a guest house on the Witte Singel. It was to the south of the town, one of its most beautiful quarters. A short walk down the Kaiserstraat brought you to the Rapenburg and straight into the heart of old Leiden. I find it hard to remember how I spent my time, that first week. You see, I didn’t really know any of the people, apart from Thomas, who had organized it all. Part of the idea was that we should all do some work – most of us had exams to go back to at the beginning of term – but it was too cold to read outside and too nice to stay indoors. I suppose I did the usual things, looking around the university and the museums. I know I went to the Rijksmuseum, because she was there, on the first floor, looking at the Egyptian collection. We didn’t talk much though.

‘That was on the second day. Nobody seemed to know her very well; in fact I was never even sure who had invited her along. She was older than the rest of us, she belonged to a different college and a different faculty and I don’t think any of us really knew what she was meant to be researching. She was talkative and friendly, but there was also this – reserve, I suppose. No, that’s not the right word. She was as if she enjoyed our company, but the things which most interested her, or which she considered most important, were things that she couldn’t share with us. That was the impression I had. So I’ll never know why she chose me. Perhaps just because I was the one she ran into.

‘It was in the afternoon, about two or three o’clock. There was a pale sun and I had just been into the Pieterskerk. I used to go in there every day – not because I’m religious, you understand, but because it seemed pointless to walk past something so lovely and not go inside. Inside, the brick, it has the colour and the texture of a rose. I don’t know how long I stayed sitting in there. Now I was walking back and I had stopped on the Nonnenbrug to look at the canal again. It was a view you could never grow tired of. And I was about to move on when I saw her approaching in the distance. I knew it was her, long before I saw her face. It wasn’t just the emerald green, or the blackness of her hair – which she wore quite long, in those days: I saw a photograph of her once where it was much shorter. She had a whole way of moving, of making her progress through the world, which was quite distinctive. I had only known her a few days, but I could have picked her out of any crowd. It had to do with determination – but diffidence, too. Humility. You could see it in the way she carried herself. Anyway, you must know what I mean. She hadn’t come much closer before she spotted me and started

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