Writing Through

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Bath Spa University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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April 2022

Writing Through is a thesis in two parts.

Part A – the creative component – is a script for television, a work of nonfiction and a bridging piece of prose. The script, the pilot episode of a drama set in the north-west of England, is the story of a troubled forensic psychiatrist, his urgent assessment of a man accused of murdering his family and the impact this has on the psychiatrist's increasingly desperate state of mind. The nonfiction is a full-length memoir and story about what it means to be a father, a husband and a man. The prose is the story of a story of a story, or a story about a writer who falls apart and then writes, in turn, about falling apart.

Part B – the contextual component – considers the structure of writing through.

This thesis is a unique approach to the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with Part A integrated through practice and Part B providing context. The result is a deeply personal contribution to the knowledge of creative writing and, specifically, writing through.

Contents

A

Introduction and Statement of Objectives

The creative component of my PhD can be divided into three: a script for television, a self-contained work of creative nonfiction, and a bridging piece of prose.

The script – originally called OUR FATHER and later DESCENT – I started in 2016, the year I enrolled on the PhD and, more to the point, the year after my father died.

First, I imagined a man of my own age who loses his father and falls apart, destroying his family, his life, himself, in the most brutal of ways. Second, I imagined another man of my own age trying to if not help then at least understand him.

The nonfiction – a memoir eventually called *Your Father's Secrets*[1] – became about grief. I started *Your Father's Secrets* after the script, in 2017, the intention more than academic – for if DESCENT was the manifestation of a life lived in the shadow of death (as a work of fiction, fiction provided necessary distance from my grief) then *Your Father's Secrets* emerged essentially to make sense of the making sense.

I am not a counsellor. I am not a psychologist. I am a writer. I write *this* so I might next write *that* but also so I might help – help me, or help you.

I developed the script from nothing – literally, its inspiration *absence* – while the memoir was envisaged as a complementary work running right through my PhD.

The question asked at the top was answered in the bridging prose and the final integration of all three pieces.

[1] An edited extract from an earlier version of *Your Father's Secrets* was published as 'Living Without' in *We'll Never Have Paris* (2019, London: Repeater) – see Appendix

Can I write through grief to write something else?

Or write this so you can write that.

A Confession

Months after coming up with the premise for DESCENT, I fell apart too – not as written on the page but as written between the lines – and came to admit this later, the details, in *Your Father's Secrets*.

The script and the memoir are therefore connected through *confession*. What I confess between the lines of the former, through the characters, I confess in the latter through its 'I' narrator – rather, perhaps, what I leave out of DESCENT I put into *Your Father's Secrets*. And vice versa.

There are inevitable echoes, deliberate and otherwise, across the creative component. Writing, like grieving, is if nothing else an exercise in repetition – observed, completed, then observed again.

As a writer I write not simply through grief but through the rendering of my grief real, both on the page and in life. I act out in life what my actors act out on stage, as it were. I write their strengths and weaknesses, their triumphs and their mistakes. I live those same strengths and weaknesses, those same triumphs and mistakes – not word for word, so to speak, but there still.

I lose my dad. I fall apart. I then write about a man who loses his dad and falls apart. Somewhere along the way, I overtake the characters on the page.

In short, I move on.

I don't look into creative writing through trauma, classes as clinics to call on pain and conjure results like an automaton – the surrealists and their dreams, a ghost like Breton's Nadja (1928), automatic writing but instead of dreams the conscious state, awake, suffering in paralysis.

I look instead to other writers and how they render grief real on the page, or on screen, begin to try and see what this language actually looks like.

Do they create fiction where there exists only truth and masquerade? Do they co-opt grief like any other concept, a concept because they have no first-hand experience of it – to them, it might as well be space travel – and simply make it up? Nothing more or less than a journalist interviewing sources and putting words, better words, in their mouths? Can they write about their own grief with something like honesty and meet it head on? Can they, can anyone, really do that?

These are my admissions not omitted, or *Aveux non avenus* (1930), the title in French of an anti-memoir by Claude Cahun, a writer I myself write about, or else this is all art and lies, as Jeanette Winterson (2014) herself writes. Max Porter (2016) is right, though – grief really is the thing…

But these questions, why do I think anyone will care?

Because I care.

On Methodology

For the memoir I set a target of one hour a day or one thousand words a day, whichever comes first.

I make progress. I stick to the plan. On some days I find it hard to get started, my mind blank. I don't know what to spend my energy on. Like grieving, all this is tiring. For one hour, or one thousand words, I look inside, mine, search – no, this is more like digging, an excavation into self.

These words won't do.

This is like turning inside out, like going all the way round on the swings. Inside Out Boy. Visceral, yes; also pretentious – writers do good but writers do self-indulgent better – although the feeling is physical. It certainly feels like work, whatever that is. One hour, two, three – I know writers who swear they can't work longer than that, others who demand of themselves they treat it like a full-time job, a 9-5, chained to their desk. Whatever works.

What if it doesn't work?

Writing about, *writing through* – the structure, my target of one hour or one thousand words a day, is important. Writing about death isn't exactly laugh a minute stuff but I feel something like a need to get it all out.

In 2017 I don't know whether what becomes *Your Father's Secrets* will be publishable or form a section of my thesis, or both, or whether it will end up in a draw like my unfinished novel – started but not finished in 2012. How can I? I want to write something of use to someone else, something they can read when they, too, want to think about the person they lose, the person they miss – and how to handle it. Something like the books I read after my dad dies and when I start to think about

what I want to write next. Anything I can get my hands on – essays, memoirs, novels – about grief, about coping and dealing with loss, about fatherhood, about sonhood, self-help books that help me map the stages I go through, manuals, how-to guides, not because I need to know I am not alone but because I need to know what it takes to keep going and, in my case, keep writing.

Writing is writing is writing.

I write this as part of my thesis but also my therapy, my healing, my putting-myself-back-together-again. I write this as part of a process of reflecting on a subject using the tools of my discipline. This, I realise only now, is the definition of 'research'.

Writing this means one day writing that, the words on the screen now a gateway drug to something stronger, more publishable, a better high.

But how useful are my words to others – what am I, some sort of guide? Writing about grief is like sifting through old photos, the surprise you feel when you see yourself as a child, remember that holiday, that ice cream, that shell suit. Here I am scratching the surface of my happiness or unhappiness, depending on the day, resolving with each to embrace or ignore my resolve to live life this way or that – more positive, more in the moment, more thankful. I select memories like old photographs and write about them. The day my dad dies. The day of my arrest for drink-driving. The day my first daughter is born. Or the day I have nothing to write about – photos I sift through, memories I select, scratches I scratch so something, anything, comes to the surface.

The day I scratch and scratch and scratch.

On Ethics

As I write I feel lighter, dark moods descending less often, the moods anyway easier – for me, for everyone around me.

Writing is righting.

So why the pressure? Why the doubt? Why the confusion over what it is and what it isn't? Because writing is hard, like grieving itself. C. S. Lewis (1961), though profoundly moving in all the ways writing at its best can be, manages only a few notebooks. It doesn't do to dwell, not on anger, on misery, on pain.

Writing doesn't heal. Writing about pain doesn't mean that pain then goes away. Writing about pain means living that pain all over again, experiencing it and feeling it anew. It means revisiting that time and place, that headspace, with only the hindsight to know what happens next for company. If you are writing about it you are also living it. Still alive. You have that to be thankful for, at least. The pain, though, that remains. The pain is in no way lessened, no lessons learned, writing about it not a cure or a panacea. Meanwhile the whole thing is doing absolutely nothing for your well-being, whatever people – people like me, funnily enough – might tell you about writing through.

Write what you know.

Process – what process?

It turns out writing isn't therapy. Writing about trauma is trauma. Writing *is* trauma.

Think about it. You negotiate the perfect surroundings in which to work, which is in itself a (creative) process within a (creative) process. You invest in a desk, high enough to write longhand or rest a laptop. People tell you they only write

longhand and, at best, you think good for you. At worst, you sick in your mouth a bit. You buy a comfortable chair with back support, set up a speaker system, compile a playlist to write along to – classical, chillout, instrumental or rap, French, a language you can't understand or get distracted by, or else nostalgia reigns, songs from 1999 or another meaningful time in your life, inciting incident, you, now, into the woods, in search of what makes you who you are, do what you do, even if the answer to both questions is the same. You do this so, in the end, you can sit alone, by yourself, and write. On your own. Lonely, lonesome, solitary sad sack surrounded by books you haven't read, piled high on shelves or in my case the floor by my feet, the words on the screen proof you will never touch them, never get close, nowhere near, nothing compares to you the truth. You create a character, enter their mind, feel what they feel, experience what they experience, see the world through their eyes. Character and characterisation. You invent, incite and insight, action and choice. You decide – you made your trauma, you lie in it…

What could be more traumatic than that?

There are of course ethical questions, questions of self-care, to consider. Those same questions apply to the people around you, the people you write about, or both. I for my part go to meetings. I talk to people. Or I don't go to meetings. I don't talk to people.

But is it art? It is and it isn't. Try somewhere in the middle – the interval, or the space between art and life.

I live with my grief and I write my grief. I write about and through it. I find inspiration in memories and emotions I associate with loss. I draw on feelings of profound grief, depression, no-hope, to then create a world, *art*, for a living – as a scriptwriter, a novelist or, for the sake of whatever this is here, now, on the page, a

writer. How do I separate my everyday life, my restoring and just getting on with it from my grief if my grief then consumes what I do in my everyday life (as well as everyone in it)?

Write what you know, or write what? You know…

On 21st January 2018, my dad's birthday – he would have been 69 – my mum texts to say she is thinking of me.

I don't reply. I think about it. Think about the words. What I might say. *Thank you*, maybe.

The effort, I decide, is too much. I feel tight across my chest. This is what trying feels like, or perhaps doing something you really don't want to do. Visceral emotion. Effort – this feeling, here, is making an effort.

Sadness mixes with something closer to joy thinking of my dad and missing him on that day, his birthday, nearly three years since he died.

If he were still alive, I might call him first thing and ask about plans.

If he were still alive, the conversation might be short but it would be had.

If he were still alive.

Magical thinking, echoing Didion (2005), making an effort to write it all down. To find words but also to breathe, to overcome the tightness in my chest. To reply to my mum, which I do – *Thanks Mum.* To make coffee then go into the next room where my daughter is playing with my wife, to kiss them both, to meaningfully interact and show them I am there.

All that is solid melts into air, as Berman (1982) writes – it is the other way around with grief. First we melt, admiring our own hauntology, a ghost and a shell. Once removed from life through death. Spectres and spectators.

In plain language, I am not there.

But the process of overcoming, if such a process exists, means becoming again. There. Present. Solid. To make myself so takes time, patience, the stages of loss observed and re-observed perhaps too closely. It requires less from others and more, much more, from me.

Blink and three years goes by.

My mum texts but my wife, in the other room, doesn't remember the significance of the date. Why should she – why should anyone?

I might resent her. I might store this up to use later, mid-argument. I might get it off my chest.

This is an effort, the act of suppressing but also remembering, marking, significance only significant to me, or to you.

I text my mum back but don't remind my wife of the date.

An effort, too, the doing and the not doing.

To make ourselves solid again – it is this, if nothing else, the grieving must do.

An End Has a Start

By 2018 I start to see the end – an end anyway, or something like it.

This isn't about word count or the target I set to write every day for six weeks, the idea to come out with enough to start to shape and add layers and rewrite, rewrite, rewrite. A first draft or the whole thing. Finished or in the bin.

But I see an end to what I am writing and even why I am writing it. I see how writing this, whatever this is, helps me move on – move, at least, move forward or maybe just keep moving. I can see the next thing, which is surely the best I can hope for. The best any of us can hope for.

Write this so you can write that.

Conclusion

In 2019, after three years of part-time study, I prepare to finish my PhD.

This involves editing the pilot episode of DESCENT, before adding the final touches to *Your Father's Secrets* and then writing a reflection on the process – the process, such as it is. In this way I complete a triangle of creative works under the umbrella of 'writing through': a script, a memoir, and a bridging piece of prose.

By my feet as I write this line is a pile of books, the two on top *Bad News* by Edward St Aubyn (1992) and *Mortality* by Christopher Hitchens (2013) and atop this a pack of Marlboro Lights brought back from Cambodia, where my father-in-law lives.

A younger version of me might find that darkly funny, the juxtaposition – in the case of the cigarettes, cause and effect.

But what I think about is what I am trying to do here, writing this all down, bridging a script and a memoir – the latter being the longest thing I have written in years. (I want to write the sentence 'I write therefore I am not' but delete it.)

I am not a counsellor, remember.

I am not a psychologist.

I am a writer.

I set out to write a drama about the loss of my father by writing about my father. I write *to* my father. I even call what I write, at first, OUR FATHER. It is unashamedly confessionary. Although he is gone, I confess to him. Although he is not here, I talk to him. I devise a premise and the answer to that premise – i.e. a controlling idea – characters and a world for them to inhabit and beyond that story beats for the first episode of three and later the arc of the full narrative. In the writing

these beats evolve, mutate, so three hours of drama is, I hope, engaging and entertaining if not also helpful.

What am I, some sort of guide?

The two main characters come to life via snippets of real-life events, true crime stories – but also conversations overheard or remembered, imagined or reimagined. On the face of it one character is a doctor, the other his patient. One is sick, the other healthy. Both see themselves in the other. Both must confront their relationship with their own father. Both are apart and at the same time a part of me.

Forget whether or not it is art – somewhere between truth and lies is *fiction*.

After melting, conjuring and communing with the dead is how I plan to make myself solid again. Fact and fiction then diverge. I look back more solid than before, although not quite.

At the heart of the script, the second man – a mirror – is trying to understand the first.

At the heart of all three – script, memoir, prose – the writer, a reflection, is trying to make sense.

But writing and indeed living once removed can't last.

The interval between art and life is only an interval, after all.

Selected Reading

Berman, M. (1982) *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Breton, A. (1928) *Nadja*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.

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Didion, J. (2005) *The Year of Magical Thinking*. New York: Alfred. A. Knopf.

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Hitchens, C. (2013) *Mortality*. London: Atlantic.

Lewis, C. S. (1961) *A Grief Observed*. London: Faber & Faber.

Moore, M. (2003) *Complete Poems*. London: Faber & Faber.

Porter, M. (2016) *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*. London: Faber & Faber.

St Aubyn, E. (1992) *Bad News*. London: William Heinemann.

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Dad writes me a letter to open with his Will.

This is in May 2015 – my dad dies just before I become a father for the first time myself, my daughter born in the August of that same year.

I go back and look for other letters, other letters from other times.

One from August 2014 gives instructions, guidance if he ever gets dementia and all of it useless given he has a heart attack at 66.

'That's no age,' people will tell me – and people will be right.

I don't really want to end up in a home, Dad writes, it turns out, optimistically. *I don't want to be kept alive like a vegetable either – you will need to sort something if you can.* A line later, his dark sense of humour undercutting, *I won't know will I!*

In another, from years earlier and written in barely legible scrawl – something like but not quite old-fashioned cursive, nothing like my childish handwriting (dad joke, 'Call yourself a writer?') – he urges me to move on with my life after a bad break-up. This is when he orders copies of my second novel – it's 2011 here, a lifetime ago in novelist years – and makes friends buy them off him at full price, as much a sign of pride as usefulness.

My dad was proud of me, wasn't he?

He reads my books but otherwise only bothers with histories of the various towns he lives in, which my second novel sort of is, occasionally stretching to coffee-table tomes with photographs of old buses or anything about beating the Nazis. He also reads *Mein Kampf*, or so he tells me – trying to rile his politically correct son.

I find more letters but I lose the one Dad writes the night before I get married. A very different letter – a letter my dad writes when I'm still at school – I lose deliberately. This letter, though, I lose by mistake.

I look through 'The Famous Brown Briefcase', the same case Dad refers to in the letter with instructions, where he keeps his 'important paperwork' – as opposed to the 'p.w.' he brings home from his job and spreads out over the kitchen table – the same case I carry around for my own job until the buckle breaks and the same case I use now, a dad without a dad, to keep things I think need keeping.

I can't find the letter.

I can, however, remember a line – and six months after my dad's death, reading and re-reading it in my mind, this line will come to replace his last words to me.

Don't fuck it up.

I

I know before I answer.

This isn't hindsight talking. I know it, the dread physical, in my stomach, like reading the preview before opening an email and seeing the bad news, stark, ellipsis not hiding the fact.

Dear Sir – We regret to inform you…

It's Thursday 28th May 2015 and I'm not really sleeping, my phone vibrating next to me. The room bright with light, IKEA curtains purely decorative, I'm in our double bed and home alone – my wife, heavily pregnant with our first child, is in France until the Sunday.

It's my brother.

'Hello,' I say, as if a stranger's called.

He takes a deep breath – I can hear it now, although his words, Camus-esque, are less clear.

I think I remember them right.

'Dad died last night.'

Our wedding's a big one.

It starts with an engagement to get engaged. I ask my future mother-in-law's permission while in France. I'm there on holiday with my now-wife and her three sisters. I then call my (soon-to-be) father-in-law in Cambodia, where he lives full-time – first to introduce myself because we haven't met yet and second to ask for his blessing.

My father-in-law tells a good story about his own mother-in-law. She's herself telling a story about a dream she has the night before, where she happens to meet up with Shakespeare in her local pub.

'What was he drinking?' my father-in-law interrupts. His mother-in-law can't believe how imbecilic the question is – utterly idiotic – to which my father-in-law replies, 'You don't want to say because it was crème de menthe.'

I meet him face to face at his London club. I don't remember to put on a tie – there's a dress code, I'm an idiot – and he helps me with the stock jacket. I'm moving up in the world, I reckon in that moment, since the days of forgetting my P.E. kit and having to wear unwashed spares, items of varying shape and size in worryingly off-white.

He folds down the jacket collar, paternal as you like, then swiftly asks me how I'm planning on supporting his daughter.

Well, I'm a writer so…oh look here's a waiter.

In the club the waiters are all called Charles, by the members anyway – a bizarre fact of life in this equally bizarre world I'm about to enter.

When I first moved to London in 2005, I told people I was going to be a writer but instead – and I really am going there – I was working as a waiter in a

cocktail bar when I found…Pamela Anderson. There she was, practically pirouetting while I swept up cigarette butts between her red-stilettoed feet.

Yes, I used to have a poster of her on my bedroom wall.

No, I don't think she noticed me (or dropped the fags herself, to be fair).

Back to the nuptials – this is July 2014 now – and a small ceremony and party for 100 family and friends becomes, after carefully choreographed planning, a slightly larger ceremony and party in a field for 300 people. I don't know 250 of them.

This isn't a complaint. The family I'm marrying into is posh. Some posher than others, all of them posher than *one*. I love and actively want to be part of this family, even though on the face of it I don't belong – being from the North, working class, my relatives numbering about half a dozen.

For what it's worth my dad thinks we're rushing things.

'You don't even own a house, Gavin,' he says over the phone after I tell him I'm engaged. This is 2013, about a year before I get married and two before he dies. My first name for emphasis – in case I can't tell, advice is on its way. 'You don't have your life together.'

A refrain – my dad a grafter in a white collar, like his father before him. My brother's an accountant, albeit one with tattoos.

Dad even thinks about not coming – he doesn't want to cause a scene like he has in the past but finds it difficult to be around my mum and her partner. My dad's barred from a pub near our old house, where we grow up, for attacking him in the bogs. Dad leaves a scar above his eye. I notice it from time to time – a reminder of his bitterness, his jealousy, his temper.

He comes round, though. Of course he'll be there.

Good thing, too, because in the first few years of a marriage it can feel a bit like staying together to save face or maybe just make a point. This point, in the end, is made to your husband or in my case wife.

But if it doesn't work out I can't look her parents in the eye, especially when they do things for me like straighten my collar when I forget to wear a tie, or pay for a wedding with 300 guests, or take out a second mortgage to cover the wine.

And I definitely can't tell my dad he was wrong.

I speak to Dad on the Tuesday, two days before he dies.

I'm in my office.

It used to belong to Nigella Lawson, or so I'm told. Someone had sex on the desk – again, or so I'm led to believe.

It's worse than my Pamela Anderson story…

My dad's not well. On the phone he sounds like he has a cold. They think it's a chest infection. He's going back to see his GP today, although apart from the lurgy – I hate hearing or saying that word but do quite like writing it – he's on good form. We don't argue.

I cling to this, weeks and months later. We talk about nothing. I can't remember – probably football.

Wishful thinking, not a word of that final conversation survives in my memory.

A few weeks earlier, Dad drops us in Manchester to get the train back down to London – we're up for the weekend visiting my side of the family.

I hug him on leaving. I linger. Again, like before I answer the phone to my brother, this isn't hindsight talking. No need for wishful thinking here. I hug him properly. Not a quick pat and a pull away. I don't think I kiss his cheek – I do this sometimes, the older I get – but I definitely linger.

This is the last time I see my dad alive.

The morning Dad dies, I find an old birthday card with a Liverpool F.C. badge on the front.

The letter with instructions comes with a cover note and p.s. just for me. *There is nothing in my Will regarding my bike or Liverpool shirt – perhaps you can agree to have one item each!!*

One of my dad's many teams, this is a split loyalty – a contradiction of what it means to be a football supporter, a genuine fan, even a man – he passes down to me.

How can you support more than one team?

Well, I come to support Manchester United on the sly growing up, singing along to a cassette single of 'Come On You Reds' by Status Quo in my bedroom and perfecting Lee Sharpe's Elvis celebration in the back garden, then out in the open after Dad takes me on Old Trafford with tickets he gets through work. (He supports United for one game only in 1999 because they're playing a German team in the Champions League final, Allies to their Nazis, latent contrarian in me almost taking against him and the whole pub – same pub he's later barred from – on principle.) I also follow Sheffield Wednesday, Sheffield the city he's from and the Owls the team he supports, although he supports the other Sheffield team, too, the Blades. And then there's Burnley, where I'm born and he eventually settles. This ends his peripatetic, only-child upbringing with polar opposite experiences in Glossop and Basingstoke. All of which explains why, on top of Sheffield Wednesday and Sheffield United and Burnley and Liverpool, a team he seems to follow for the sake of it, my dad keeps an eye on the results of Basingstoke Town but not Glossop North End – towns my granddad, working for the Co-op, moves his family to before Lancashire – because

he's bullied in Derbyshire for sounding posh, even though he's born one county over.

It's hard to keep up.

Saturdays as a kid are usually about football. One of these, I must be about 11 at the time, I'm playing with my brother in the lounge (I call it the sitting room now unless I forget who I am or remember who I was, depending on your point of view). It gets out of hand. My dad's in the kitchen making sandwiches with too much spread, crumbs destined to go 'all over the shop' in the car on the drive over to Sheffield – towards the turquoise turrets of Meadowhall if going shopping, via the Snake Pass if watching Wednesday. My brother reckons it'll be funny to explode a packet of crisps from the packed lunches on my head. As big brothers are wont to do he manages to vanish before Dad strides in and, seeing his youngest son surrounded by crisps on an otherwise immaculate carpet, boots said son into a nearby radiator. Pick that one out.

It might be my dad supports Liverpool to wind me up, you know, a United fan, or 'Man U' as non-fans like him call them, usually while holding back a gobful of spit. Having said that he later gets a tattoo on one bicep, a Celtic band, to rile (or is it *needle*) my brother.

I wouldn't put it past him.

That morning, I read the card and there's another in-joke inside – they're all in-jokes, aren't they?

Like lost letters I don't keep the card, can't share the joke, but I know I laugh then cry in bed that first day, my head buried in the pillow.

Cause of death, registered 1st June 2015, is cardiogenic shock, ischaemic cardiomyopathy, coronary artery disease.

Dad has his first heart attack a year or so earlier, this taking days for him to realise, driving back from meeting up with a mate then, later, lying prostrate in bed, just how serious it is.

He calls me in London, tears down the phone, tells me he doesn't want to die.

My dad's on tablets. The only option beyond that, with no guarantees beyond the speculative but surely appealing prospect of prolonged life, is a triple bypass. Three arteries don't work. Thinking about it now, this sounds like a lot because it is.

Various doctors don't push him to have the surgery, me reckoning he should have it but feeling like I shouldn't force him, emotionally blackmail him, my brother and my mum for that matter all feeling much the same.

Over time he convinces himself he can live like before – eating Primula cheese sandwiches for his tea, riding his beloved drop-handle bike, propped against a wall in the hall with a sheet of kitchen roll protecting the neutral paint (everything in Dad's house, from the chipboard to the carpets to the ornamental candles never lit, is neutral), even smoking Pall Mall cigarettes he asks people to get him in Duty Free. The only concession he makes, begrudgingly, is the tablets.

I hate my dad for not having the surgery, for not wanting to live after not wanting to die.

And I hate my dad for making me miss him.

I miss him so much, writing this, *I miss him* just won't do.

Dad's my first dead body.

In the chapel of rest, I'm not prepared but will be next time. I'll know what to expect, what to feel and think about and laugh at in the room, not awkward, not embarrassed.

Yeah right.

He's pale – bit predictable.

He's also small, shrunken in a suit, the coffin swallowing him up.

My dad's not there – I mean, that's obvious – but nothing of what I see in Manchester a few weeks earlier remains. No part-smile, cracked after a joke just on the right side of mean. His was a piss-taking view of the world with him at the centre, only the butt of the joke when it's his joke to make. This is a sense of humour and all round self-centredness I inherit. I like to give it, dish it out…

'He can't take it, *Gav*,' he might say, kicking a ball about on the field near our house, my brother there, maybe some other kids from the estate. 'He hates it.' I'll probably end up storming off, rehearsal for adulthood.

Or else he might pick me up at my mum's, where she later lives with her partner. Once, I get in the car carrying the whiff of home-cooked food.

'What's that smell?' he says. 'Have you been cooking?'

'They've just made some cheese toasties,' I say, fastening my seatbelt.

I can only smell Joop, the two of us going out for a drink. He'll have one pint of Guinness then switch to Coke. Somewhere nice, Range Rovers in the car park. His choice but he'll still tell me they reckon they're better than us, this lot – something, the chippiness, I like to think I don't inherit given I'm essentially a social-climber.

'Did you have one?' he asks.

‘No, he knew I was going out –’

Too late, he’s already laughing. The thought of Mum’s new partner and Dad’s old foe making himself a pile of cheese toasties – it has to be a *pile* – and not offering me any, even though I tell him I’m going out, is funny to him. He’ll remind me of this when he picks me up the next time. And the next. Not so much a recurring joke as a permanent one, this is how my dad sees the world. A perfect memory of something that never was but perfect all the same.

Back in the chapel my mum’s there with me. She’s upset. She cries, even though it’s not her dad and even though that doesn’t matter does it. She’s allowed to cry. Mum kisses his forehead. She turns to me.

‘Do you want to give him a kiss?’

I can’t help it.

‘No!’

A blurt not a shout, in that moment I’m a little boy again, 11 with twig legs, playing Sunday league football, Dad telling me I’m offside, shouting, berating from the side of the pitch and meanwhile me gormless with sleeves pulled down over my hands. Why do they make us play when it’s freezing? Some of us wear tracksuit bottoms under our shorts it’s that cold. We’re only children, we say with our eyes.

‘You’re offside!’

Next to the coffin I bring myself – force myself, more like – to touch him, first his finger, another, then his hand. It’s cold, ice cold not just a bit fresh.

A topcoat cooler, the weather taking a turn and my dad imitating his own father. I use the expression now, to my amusement and everyone else’s bemusement. Another thing I inherit along with ‘The Famous Brown Briefcase’, sense of humour and all round self-centredness – the list growing.

It’s important, though. I don’t realise it at the time but I need to see him and touch him before I go outside for air and feel the wind against my tears. I won’t see him again, except in my mind.

Perfect memories of things that never were but perfect all the same.

I'm watching the Six O'Clock News in what's then very much the lounge.

Mum's telling us, my brother and me, Dad's been having an affair. He's going to live with the other woman. My mum's doing the talking, I think. I don't actually remember if she says 'the other woman'. I don't know if either one of them uses the word 'affair'. It's possible she tells us he's been seeing someone but he's staying – then again why tell us that? No it's when they both tell us he's leaving.

This is 1997, although the whole thing initially spans two summers – the announcement and first time my dad moves out.

The summer before, 1996, a family room in a Spanish hotel, I go to sleep with the sound of Dad moving on the other bed, springs creaking just a few feet away, him trying to get closer to Mum in what must have been a belated show of affection.

In 1997 we go away again as a three and my dad loses it with me because I'm spending too much time with a couple of lads I meet by the pool. The second holiday in a row without my brother and first time I make friends of my own (I kiss a girl for what must be only the second time ever, too). One of the friends, a French boy, later sends me photos he finds in magazines of my favourite basketball player – the Orlando Magic's Anfernee 'Penny' Hardaway.

Like most boys where I'm from I grow up playing football. That's until, somewhere in my teens, I gravitate away from what I like to then pejoratively call 'the mainstream', lads in cherry Rockports shagging up the canal – silent *the* and not a euphemism, literally, engaging in sexual intercourse by the banks of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, a canal I write about in my second novel, one of its three narrators ostensibly a lot like those Rockport-wearing shaggers and not, at least in that regard, based on me.

Far from shagging myself, as it were, I take up basketball. A late developer – that one's a euphemism – at school I draw the Florida peninsula (which come to think of it looks a lot like a penis), locate Orlando by rote, colour in the Stars and Stripes. I grow up watching WWF – my brother and I had every action figure, apart from Akeem because he was rubbish – then dream of one day moving to America, moonlighting in McDonald's and starting a tag team with my best mate.

'You can't just move to America and work in McDonald's,' my dad says.

They already had their fair share of people working in McDonald's, apparently, so 1-2-3 and that was that, a shame because we even had our ring music sorted – The Eagles, 'Life in the Fast Lane', if you must know.

Basketball becomes the next best thing. I start dressing like kids my age in TV shows I like – all American, *Kenan & Kel*, even *Dawson's Creek*. Everything's oversized. Baggy jeans bunched up over boots – Timberland if you can afford them, Caterpillars if, like me, you can't – check shirts paired with white vests. I fancy myself as urban, if not quite urbane, buy CDs by Puff Daddy, Will Smith, LL Cool J. *Doin' it and doin' it and doin' it well*. Or maybe not, my copy of Eminem's first album so heavily edited it's just beats and scratch noises – it might as well be instrumentals. By the time I go to Florida with my dad in 1999 I've shaved my head, pierced both ears and popped in a pair of cubic zirconia studs for good measure.

Holiday romance aside, it's around then I first notice girls. By *notice* I mean stare at. Queuing for a ride in Universal Studios I spend the full one hour and 20 minutes making eye contact with a blonde girl, weaving this way then that, the way they make you do – the illusion of progress, which is something I might have said at the time, thinking I was clever – until she gets bored of waiting for me to say something, clever or not, and looks away. What a creep.

I come back from America with a suitcase of clothes for college – non-uniform every day at sixth form – the irony of a white working-class skinhead wearing a brand pronouncing its gear is 'for us, by us' (hence, 'FUBU') completely lost on me.

'They hate us, *Pakis*,' one boy says to me at lunchtime, first week of sixth form, between bites of pizza-cum-baguette. 'So we have to hate them.'

I say nothing and he looks at me funny – like I just said *pizza-cum-baguette*.

'Oh…I forgot you bum Penny Hardaway,' he says. 'Why don't you bum a basketball?'

Another boy, a mate, has a proper basketball post in his back garden. A few of us book part of the leisure centre in town and lower that one to dunkable height. In his garden, though, it's 10-foot and regulation. The mate, otherwise intelligent, top set like me – no excuse for being thick or at least I think so at the time, missing the point – invites us over for a barbecue. He blindsides me, claiming Asians in our town are a 'sub-culture'. I'm still not clear what this means, although I do remember taking umbrage at something his dad says next – along the lines of that 'they hate us so we have to hate them' spiel – and matey boy leaping to his defence, as sons do, thick or otherwise, telling me how Asians are 'different', which is, inherently, a bad thing.

This is 2001 now, the year of the race riots in Burnley but also Bradford and Oldham, whites and Asians facing off down the road from my house. I grow up thinking I'm quite well off, relatively speaking. It's all relative, isn't it? I then leave town, go to university and meet people who live in castles – pronounced *car-sills* – people who think a semi on an estate, well, is a semi on an estate. One of these people I meet at university turns the tables when I laugh at him for being posh,

laughs even harder when I pronounce Chopin as *choppin'*, you know, like wood. Years before this my would-be tag team partner had called my house a 'pokey hole' next to his detached four-bedder, presumably positively palatial by comparison.

He was grieving, I'd only understand later, his dad having died suddenly. The boy still played football with us that Sunday, clearly upset but not telling me why – I remember asking him, his auntie standing in for his mum and shaking her head when he turned to her for permission.

Is this where it starts, 11-year-old boys made to swallow the grief until it comes out later – the only way it can? You're allowed to play football, son, but you're not allowed to talk about your feelings.

Back in the summer of 1996 I gel my hair like Take That's Gary Barlow. This is after I ask our mobile hairdresser to copy the cover for 'Babe', cassette single again here – it must be – in fact the song came out a few years before.

Never let the truth stand in the way of a good story…

By September there's a new girl in the year below. I spot her between lessons, clock 'the one', my everything, from the other end of the corridor. I walk – no I practically teleport over, tap her on the shoulder as I think of something, anything, to say.

'Hi,' I say, a half-wave.

That was it.

'Hi,' she says.

That really *was* it – I walk away there and then, never speak to her again.

There's talk of a double-date with her mate and my mate, although my mate isn't my mate and only agrees to be my mate if her mate agrees to get off with him. He rings me up at home – landline days – and gives me the bad news. The girl

doesn't want to go on a date with me, double or otherwise. Her mate still gets off with my 'mate', though, so it isn't for nothing – the broken heart, I mean.

Dad's affair, through all this, is going on in the background. My mum only finds out for sure thanks to an anonymous call from his work. I don't know if I remember thinking that call kind or vindictive.

Around the same time, this anecdote again basketball-related, my dad spends the afternoon putting up a backboard and hoop in the back garden – not a proper post or even proper height but still. This goes against the wall next to the patio doors, three lines of slabs acting as our court. The wall won't take the rawlbolts, though, the brick not giving any purchase. It's a sight, him losing the will to live, not so much shouting as whimpering – 'for Christ's sake' – and me not helping by missing every other shot and dislodging the bolts. He begs me to try and use the hoop without actually touching it, demanding pinpoint accuracy and minimal use of the backboard.

Meantime he's in and out of the house, my brother letting me know what he manages to pick up from listening in on the landing. Mum finds a bank receipt, wrong time wrong place – he's meant to be somewhere else – that 'p.w.' and penchant for keeping every record on this occasion really letting him down. My brother and I laugh whenever Dad pays in a cheque at the bank, us in the back of the car and him sitting in the driver's seat reading out each line – 'Me, me, one-hun-dred pounds…'

There's another time, this one when he's between jobs driving vans. I get a call at home from his boss asking if there's any chance he can come in, which is a surprise to me because my dad tells everyone that morning he's driving to Scotland and staying overnight. I'm either naïve or in denial when I ring my mum at work, tell her something's wrong, before a blazing row later that night and the penny drops.

It might be the same blazing row when I find out, after the fact, the woman Dad leaves Mum for is at one point in all this mess pregnant. I don't want a little brother or sister at the time and, thanks to my dad – he never tells me what he says to her but it's clear to me even then, knowing him – I don't get one.

I can remember my mum sticking her head around the door, me lying on the settee watching telly. She's on the phone to Dad and presses a hand against the receiver, asks me if I want him to come home and I say yes. I want to scrub this memory out but there are some things I can't take back.

I can also remember him packing a bag and putting it in the boot of his car – is this the first time he leaves or another time, one of the times he comes back and leaves us again maybe? He kisses me in bed and I don't want to tell him to stay.

And I can remember one December, after he leaves then comes home, when I behave badly, say things I might on a better day keep to myself (or wait until he's dead at least). Mum tells me not to ruin Christmas.

'It's already ruined,' I say, petulant, sulky – and not unlike my dad standing there in that moment, leaning on the mantelpiece like he can do whatever he wants.

A picture of entitlement.

My dad dies with a beard.

That is, when he dies he has one. He's then cremated clean-shaven.

Looking at the plasticine corpse in the chapel of rest, it doesn't occur to me. Not immediately. Only after do I unpack everything in that room, go over it. This is really the last time I'll see him – a final time after the final time. He's properly gone a few hours later.

There are cuts on his face, the people from the funeral home sloppy. It's hard for me to look at him knowing when he dies he's so obviously in pain. He has a heart attack – the suggestion of pain makes creative sense, I can't find fault with that – but he doesn't look peaceful, not like I imagine dead people in a chapel of rest and definitely not at rest.

He looks, well, pretty fucking awful.

Dad's holding a photo of himself – he's smiling, glowing, colour in his face and, in his still strong arms, he's cradling a dog.

It's not, however, *his* dog, Spider.

A moment for Spider, the name of the dog who features in the first thing I write after my dad dies, the name Dad gives to us as small children and the name his father gives to him, sometimes 'Spider' and other times, oddly, 'Spiderbowel'.

Come again?

The thing I write, a script, I start that summer. Two men talk about their fathers and I find a way to talk to mine, say things I never said or I'll never say again.

My dad jokes for years about a conversation he has with my mum, trying to convince her to take him back after leaving a third or fourth or maybe fifth time – like I said, it was a lot. Dad does his best to explain to her just how lonely he is.

‘Get a dog,’ she says.

He laughs at the memory countless times – another permanent joke, three words said in a matter-of-fact way, a slight intonation at the end, as if final, his sarcastic reply implied.

Why didn’t I think of that?

‘Promise you won’t send Spider back when I die.’

Months later, he does. I keep my word, the dog going first to my brother’s girlfriend then to a new home a few streets over from his ex-house. Spider still goes on the same walks, I like to think, none the wiser.

Meanwhile, clasped in my dad’s dead hands just before he’s gone for good is a photo of him and *our* dog Brinkley – named after the dog in You’ve Got Mail, my favourite rom-com, nay *film*, surely an even more blatant contradiction of what it means to be a man. Add that to the list.

Dad looked after our dog while we were on honeymoon and soon after decided to rescue a cross from the RSPCA. Some company for that last year of his life, something for him to spoil, shout at and name after his two beloved sons.

Unlike Brinkley, though, this dog refused to make friends with others so had to be kept on a lead – subsequently pulling my dad around Towneley Park and, I like not to think, doing him in with every walk.

Cut to Spider in a draughty two-up, two-down wondering where Master is while Dad clutches a precious memory of a completely different animal.

I think of my dad in the photo.

Unpack everything.

Over and over.

My brother's girlfriend is responsible, I work out later – not her fault, just divine punishment for being thoughtful. She sends the photo to show the funeral home how Dad has his hair. They put two and two together, shave his face, assume our dog is his dog and, as a flourish, the personal touch, slide the photo between his ice-cold fingers.

Get a dog…

Thinking about it the last time I see my dad his beard is white, like most of the hair on his head.

As I picture him now, he alternates between that last time dropping us off in Manchester and slightly earlier memories. I can't picture him as a younger man but can picture him in his fifties and sixties.

A little before that, his late forties, we're in Florida again – the four of us this time, my mum and my brother there, too. It's 1994 not 1999, so pre-midlife-crisis, Dad's attempt to get fit not-too-subtle preparation for his imminent affair. He starts cycling. He joins a friend's gym. He becomes acutely aware of his posture, standing upright and rolling his shoulders back when catching his reflection in glass. Liking what he sees.

I also roll my shoulders back when I catch my reflection in glass. First year of university, people call me 'Chicken Boy' because of the way I carry my tray in the canteen.

Incidentally, when do I start taking responsibility for and stop whinging about all the things I get from my dad?

I'm my own person, you know.

An example, back in Florida – it's 1999 here, though, the two of us because Dad's left Mum and my brother's on holiday with his mates – he wears Umbro training tops and exceedingly short shorts, comb wedged in the back pocket, white socks pulled up his shins, none of which I later seek to emulate. Even so he's 6 foot 2, 16 stone, big bloke with tree-trunk legs and flat stomach. It's no surprise he gets ideas, attention from younger women, a bit of flirting leading to a lot more than that.

The woman he repeatedly leaves my mum for – he eventually ends up with neither of them – is 30 when they get together. I'm older than that now. When I meet

her I must be about 16. I can only remember the lisp, a cruel trick of memory I might pretend is a result of unconscious loyalty to Mum but is more likely just cruel or worse.

Florida ’99 (climb on) my dad flirts outrageously – no other word for it. He gets talking to a waitress in Pizza Hut. I don’t know what’s more embarrassing, thinking back, his clumsy attempt to hug her goodbye or her disappointment he didn’t ditch me for the rest of the holiday.

Around then, he picks me up at my mum’s. We’re off to watch Blackburn Rovers versus Sheffield Wednesday, the final score 7-2 with Benito Carbone scoring a consolation cracker then getting sent off for a headbutt. Before we leave, I can’t hear what Dad’s saying but he’s laughing and joking, making to walk away from the front door – Mum just standing there, against the frame, arms folded but smiling – then taking a few steps back towards her. She’s still not moving. He’s in his element, the world at his feet. I watch him flirting with my mum and, years later, can still picture him, my dad, top of the world.

Years after all this he loses that self-confidence, both relationships now in the bin. Things become less certain. Bang out of work and down to his last £100, Dad walks for miles along train tracks to go to job interviews – taking the shortest and cheapest route. He’s single and struggling, eventually renting in Clayton-le-Moors before buying a house near the Turf, home to one of his many teams. He hates being on his own but that’s what he is now. That’s what he is until the day he dies. Apart from Spider.

Driving back from the funeral and missing my dad so much I have to swerve to avoid a car in the outside lane, forcing myself to listen to *Thin Lizzy Greatest Hits* – that CD, a set of dumbbell weights and an old but well-maintained vacuum cleaner the haul from his now empty two-up, two-down – and choking on tears and memories of how, as a kid, I say 'taking over' when I mean overtaking, Dad laughing at the mistake.

'*That's* my boy,' he says, tongue in cheek as he reminds me how his father, too, tells him if he ever pulls on the blue-and-white stripes of Sheffield Wednesday, their team not mine – keep up – he'll watch from the terraces, Hillsborough's Spion Kop, and announce to no one in particular, '*That's* my boy.'

'I'm clever at school,' I say, defensive, even then not much liking being on the wrong end.

He can't take it.

This, of course, just makes things worse.

'Do you want a *jink*?' he says. 'We could go on a bike ride, or is your bike *too heavy*?'

First up no speech impediment here, no stutter or problem with my r's, even if I do inexplicably fail to pronounce the *dr* in the word *drink* for years – and when I say years I mean *years*.

As for that heavy bicycle, well, the incident with the bike ride involves a traumatic hill climb, mountain stage of the Tour de Burnley, fairly steep and fairly constant, on a brand new machine boasting front suspension. Like my own admittedly replica Sheffield Wednesday shirt this bike, understandably given my age, I think 13 at the time, is two sizes too big. I'll grow into it.

Telling a story like this is as much about what's not said as what is – shape, structure, style and a writer's touch, the prosaic rendered anecdotal. Revisionism. A big joke. It's the way I re-tell 'em.

In this re-telling the machine manufactures itself a lead frame and wheels of granite, impossible, even for the racing hero of my childhood, the perpetually yellow-shirted Miguel Induráin.

Cycling up that hill I complain out loud, mid-pedal, the bike's too heavy before my dad and my brother, reaching the summit, look back at me and laugh.

A 20-pence piece on my desk as I write this, the year on it 1982, the year of my birth, and my dad keeping one on a chest of drawers in his bedroom, another coin, copper, with the year of my brother's, another with the year of Mum and Dad's wedding and more, for all I know, spent now the house is sold and the chest of drawers gone, a coin for every sentimentally-charged year of his life.

I have his diary, too. There's no one here to stop me so I open it to the last page, Tuesday 26th May 2015.

After a line about not seeing my mum and her being away for a few days with her partner, he writes, *Long talk to Gavin ref work/money/football/me ill. Into town – bank, B'Society/Boots/B&Q. Back on own for rest of day/evening.*

First, I was right – we talked about football. A pathetic gloat given my dad's final sentence on earth is basically him feeling sorry for himself.

Note to self and male readers, this is every middle-aged man who leaves his wife and kids *ever*.

Knowing him it's probably deliberate – I'm meant to find his diary after he dies, read it and feel bad for not ringing or popping round more often.

I wouldn't put it past him.

The bit about not seeing my mum – there's context to this. As well as leaving Mum then going back then leaving again, Dad meets with her on and off for years. Sometimes, like near the end of his life, this is by mutual arrangement, a meeting of two people with a past and plenty in common (like, say, kids). Before this, it's nothing less than harassment. He loiters near her work or outside the bank, miraculously appearing as she finishes a shift or goes to pay in a cheque.

Me, me, one-hun-dred pounds…

There's a big black asterisk opposite his last entry. I flick through and spot more of these dotting the pages. At the front is a key – literally. There's a number under each previous year, going back to 2010. This diary from 2015 is still in progress – ok not now but you know what I mean. Under the current year are all the asterisked entries listed by date.

My dad sees my mum on these days.

He counts up how many times he sees her every year.

And he writes it down in his diary.

What am I meant to do with this information? How am I supposed to feel?

I have dates and coins on a chest of drawers and bike rides and the soundtracks of car journeys, Thin Lizzy and Eric Clapton and Dire Straits, but not my dad to chide me into understanding and remembering and getting it right.

Instead I'm haunted by misleading memories, memories and gaps in memories and lost letters and 32 and a half years of my life with him in it to remember and reconcile this ghost, this sketch of a man, with something resembling the truth, or to reconcile the man I remember with the man I later become.

When my dad dies – not only before I become a father but before I start a new job, a new career, as a lecturer – he knows I'm applying for work outside London, where I live for 10 years, spending money like it's going out of fashion, most of it my own but some of it his (a deposit for a new rented flat here and there, the odd 20-pound note thrown in now and again).

Between the chiding and the piss-taking, in moments of clarity more frequent towards the end than when he's still married to my mum, when I'm no longer a child but a grown-up son, Dad repeatedly and rather grandly pronounces teaching might suit me while having a dig at my patchy C.V. – more than patchy, it's a seemingly endless list of what he calls 'Mickey Mouse jobs'.

He, too, has his fair share, a favourite bitterly recalled whenever we drive into Manchester – a city inferior in every way to his beloved Sheffield, 'all top show' and 'fur coat no knickers', hence my supporting United on the sly as a kid – and pass a warehouse where he sells plastic bags of elastic bands and pins and tacks and the kind of nonsense you ignore in off licence aisles, removable plastic strips impermanent on not-quite shelves. For a time, between working for a 'pisshead' who ruins his own father's firm and eventually finding a steady gig selling cars, my dad lands a succession of these jobs. He even sells incontinence pads, although sitting here now smiling at the thought I might be making shit up.

Dad enjoys embellishing his work-related woes with those of his friends, one, a salesman himself, who tells him at the end of a particularly lengthy session, 'If I don't sell, I don't eat.' This sort of thing really does it for my dad.

The same friend visits him from time to time – this is when Dad's on his own, living in Burnley. Before that the pair of them are one half of two couples. We spend Easters together as families, taking it in turns to drive the length of the country

– one year Up North, one year Down South. Years later my dad might call me at work, tell me about the friend's untidiness, the way he manages to get instant coffee granules everywhere – *all over the shop* – or put a hot drink down without a coaster, or splash water around the sink when deigning to do the washing up.

The friend sits next to me after the funeral.

'He wasn't taking his pills,' he tells me, half his lunch in his mouth and the rest of it strewn across the table.

I later come to see this as his conscience talking but, at the time, I'm something close to furious. I get up and order another pint.

What am I meant to do with this information? How am I supposed to feel?

After his death I question my version of the truth, uncertain, those coins on the chest of drawers next to photos of me from my short-lived modelling career – in this instance not a source of ridicule but on show where everyone can see.

I think of him saying how teaching might suit me.

I think of a letter he writes before I get married, a letter I'm still looking for.

I think of me now teaching, students to write and a little girl to swim – a father myself, holding my daughter's tiny body afloat and remembering a time when I would climb on my dad's broad back and hold him like life, all of life, depended on it.

A word about my so-called modelling ‘career’…

I don’t like to talk about it. I really don’t like bringing it up at every possible opportunity. And I really, really don’t still pin my old headshot to the fridge at home.

When I move to London to be a writer and end up a waiter I also spend my daytimes as a model. I do a shoot for a magazine where I’m working as an editorial intern and years later publish a novel about what happens next.

You know the story if you shared five minutes with me in the last decade but one obvious consequence of the experience, apart from a book, is the fact I still carry concealer with me in case I need (hang about, *need*?) to cover a blemish.

The list growing…

I become a model at a time when it’s fashionable to wear a scarf and a T-shirt but no jacket. Outside. In front of other people. That or I still don’t understand what being fashionable is, 1999 all over again only different.

This is, of course, one more thing I take from my dad – not the make-up but the need to show off. Someone asks me to sign my book after a reading and I feign embarrassment – ‘I’m not prepared, I’m *so* not prepared…’ – then I whip out a quill and an inkpot. ‘Who do I make it out to?’ It’s showing off or not-at-all-absent-mindedly mentioning that thing I used to do, that person I once stood next to while I swept up cigarette butts around their feet. And it’s yet another glaring contradiction of what it means to be a man.

But I don’t like to talk about it.

The morning my brother calls, I ring my boss and tell him the news.

I also tell him I'm coming into work, or he tells me, or neither one of us says anything and it's just left there as a thing, in abeyance, between us. A colleague brings flowers and chocolates, I think, to my desk.

I'm in a daze.

That weekend, home alone with my wife still in France, I work on a script. I have notes and the final draft to hand in on the Monday. It never occurs to me to tell them. Weeks later, I'm kicked off the episode. It happens, they say. It's no one's fault.

Except when it is.

I don't say so but I know I'm not concentrating. I count up the money Dad leaves us, how much it is, what it can do – it's a deposit for a house, not enough to retire on – and I become restless at work, convince myself I'm worth more. I ask for a payrise. Not long before I'm off the episode I email the head of the show I'm writing for and tell my agent to do the same. I want more commissions. More money. When they tell me the script's being rewritten without my name on it I feel like my insides have fallen out.

Like my dad's just died.

Dad, in life, makes it plain how everything will divide between the three of us (my mum, my brother, me). I quickly fixate on the money after he's gone. I become obsessed. I see only the money and nothing else. How much will I get?

This obsession is, I know, another form of denial.

My mother-in-law calls my getting bogged down in post-life admin, my apparent calmness, 'scary' – but what's really scary is how I begin almost immediately after my dad dies to resent my mum. This is about her share of the

money from his house, life insurance, cash in the bank, as well as the pension transferable to her now he's dead. She gives up some of this so my brother and I have more than her. She doesn't need to do this. The two of them agree how things will divvy up but the sale of our family home – two-thirds going to Mum – rankles after Dad's death. Have I always been this greedy?

I'm self-consciously, egregiously aware of my newfound status as breadwinner, which is in my mind inimical to the far less appealing status as father and husband. I focus entirely on the money.

This is the first time I lose someone close to me. I'm not ready. I don't know then what to expect – *what to feel and think about and laugh at in the room* – and the emotions I store up for later.

Is *this* where it starts?

I know the cycle starts long before, for all of us – those 11-year-old boys growing up and becoming 30-something-year-old men – but I can't admit it at the time.

Can't or won't or both.

I feel something like it after that bad break-up, 2011 and still clinging on to my twenties, although it's an absolute joke compared to this – this hatred, so constant and repetitive and tantalisingly out of reach it's almost gone before it comes right back again, a dripping tap you forget all about until it's the middle of the night and you can't sleep for the noise, now deafening and utterly, unendingly overwhelming.

Before my dad dies we have future plans to live in the country, in Somerset, close to family and friends – not my family, technically, not my friends. After my dad dies my wife feels like she has no support. I point to all the people we know in

London, our friends – my friends, technically. I don't realise she means she has no support from *me*.

This becomes a new refrain for at least the next year, my barely and often not at all concealed resentment – that word again – at the fact she forces us to move out of London rather than buy a flat in zone six, which is too small and we can't really afford anyway, to live in the country.

The house we eventually rent in Somerset has three bedrooms. I get to know the spare room well – over time, I find myself hiding away in there, stranded, isolated with what I work out much later is depression ricocheting off my office walls.

On leaving London I leave my job in publishing and begin teaching, my contract as a lecturer part-time. This means a chance to write. It also means less salaried money and more time at home, which, during this first year with my wife and my daughter still in the house, only adds to my resentment.

Textbook.

I might see this resentment, realise it at the time, as a manifestation of anger – anger I at first take out on the only person I can. It's not a justification, just a statement of fact. I'm wrong but, again, I can't see it at the time – can't or won't or both.

This is anger at my wife for not being there when my dad dies, but it's also anger at my mum for taking part of my inheritance and for not being my dad, anger at my dad for not having heart surgery and for not wanting to stay alive and for making me hate him and miss him and round it goes until I hate myself and my bloated face, rinsing my mouth out in the police station six months after his death and one of the officers telling me I've done a bad thing but I'm not a bad person.

II

Admissions not omitted – that's the measure of any story worth telling.

How much am I willing to admit? How much then am I necessarily going to omit? How much do I want you, need you, to know?

Dad tries to kill himself when I'm still at school.

Unlike the letter he writes the night before I get married, his suicide note I lose deliberately – destroyed the day his stomach's pumped and I stand there, not yet even a man, looking at my dad almost folded in half, his shirt off in that hospital bed, thinking this is as bad as it gets.

Police knock on our door one morning. I'm at home. I see the car, jam butty, through the opaque glass before I see the two policemen. I think there are two – it's possible there's only one.

I don't know if it's after I see my dad then go back home but I'm handed his note, the letter I lose deliberately. He writes this thinking he'll be successful. I destroy it that day.

When exactly? Can I remember? Do I want to?

Dad comes to our house the day before. He has a vague notion to do something with either my brother or me, maybe both – but we've made other plans. It's obvious he's in a bad mood. He's aggressive, confrontational, squaring up to my brother. He can be intimidating but my brother doesn't back down. He's in our house. This is not your house. Get out of our house. Words to that effect.

A memory, two hands around a throat, a different time – a time I remember and at the same time don't remember. It's not my memory. I'm in the next room, sleeping or pretending to.

Admissions not omitted or, in this case, absolutely and necessarily the opposite.

*

On 9/11 I tell a friend about it.

We go off to different universities, lose touch, a couple of weeks after this – but I still know I need to talk to someone.

Why do I see the need then and not later?

It's only recently become normal – *relatively speaking* – for men to talk about their feelings but I write it all down here after hurting the people I love while my dad counts up all the days he sees my mum in a diary long after he leaves her for the last time.

That year, 2001, I sleep over at the friend's quite a bit. One night we end up egging another boy's house, a mutual mate joining in. He's on to us, though – we spend the week leading up to it making egg puns in his presence – and his dad threatens to have a friend in the police dust the recovered shells for prints. I come clean, although when the three of us wash his windows the boy's mum singles me out.

'You're a clean cut lad,' she says, 'but you're poison inside.'

Admissions not omitted.

The day Dad comes to our house he has an argument with the woman he keeps leaving Mum for. She kicks him out, hence his mood when he turns up on our doorstep. He's also been sacked from his job in Blackburn, where the affair started, for fighting with her outside.

Is this where it ends?

A pattern I choose not to notice while he's alive then find myself retracing when he's gone – concealer in your pocket, otherwise just a regular guy drinking yourself to oblivion because you're sensitive but only to the way you feel because it's *your* entitlement…and the next thing you know you're punching women in the street?

And is this why I claim my dad's old dumbbells, later take up boxing in the shed – practice for when I lose it completely and can finally do some real damage?

The cycle starts not with a death but a life of entitlement, learned and observed, although that's only half the story.

Two weeks after I move in with my second girlfriend, the day before we're meant to go to a wedding – 2010 here – she tells me living together is a mistake and packs a bag. I later pinpoint this as the moment it all turns, the relationship over there and then.

For a year I use this as an excuse. She doesn't trust me and as it happens she can't, one night screaming at each other in our bathroom, her fists clenched and my face bruised the next morning.

Nearer the end, I get drunk and go on Twitter. A friend texts me, reminds me my second novel's being reviewed in tomorrow's paper. *Take your dick off the internet*, she says. *Take *your* dick off the internet,* I reply.

Before coming to ours that day, Dad moves all his stuff into a green Austin Metro – his clothes, everything he has apart from the house my mum, my brother and I then still live in, the house he later pushes Mum to sell so he can buy his own place. This opens the final chapter of his life, a job selling cars and an income to pay a mortgage rather than throw away on rent.

On our doorstep, though, he's newly jobless, homeless and about to try and top himself.

He decides to park around the corner from our house, right up the street – the route my mum takes to the bus stop every day. He swallows a pack, maybe more, of anti-depressants. His body resists, puts up a fight he's not able to put up himself.

My dad's clinically depressed, the illness reducing him to fits of tears and the foetal position – balled up in the driver's seat of his car with me next to him – because he can't get his own way or have his say or just escape the voice in his head. It's horrible, horrifying, watching him becoming that. There's no rational way out, no talking him round. It's too much for a qualified professional let alone a teenage boy.

The years before his depression really takes hold are our best, our closest, me trying to understand why he cheats on Mum, why he leaves her, why he comes back then leaves us again. We go to football matches, shopping, or we just drive about.

'I'm in love with two women,' he tells me, unapologetic.

The years of his depression are our worst. At university I wait for the call to say he's thrown himself in front of a train. A Friday night, Indian restaurant near my student house, we argue and I walk out – leaving him with three sides, two mains and one bill. He doesn't throw himself in front of a train. He does make the same joke later whenever one of us suggests going for a curry.

Dad learns to cope with his depression, or maybe just hide it. I start to think he's better, again, relatively speaking. I also know he's lonely and resigned to that loneliness.

Back on own for rest of day/evening.

He stops trying to win my mum back. He stops trying to meet anyone else. By the end of his life, he stops trying. It's not exactly a second suicide attempt – the Primula cheese sandwiches, the smoking – but you can't deny it's more successful than the first. He even tells me, when I ask him why he won't have the heart surgery, he doesn't want to live and live and live.

'I could stick around, stay alive long enough to see her go to school,' he says, referring to my daughter before she's born. 'But do I stay alive until she finishes school, or gets married, or has her own children?'

I want to shout 'yes', or at least tell him to give it a go – I think I want to shout this, I might actually shout it – but the whole conversation in my head is rhetorical. He doesn't want my opinion. He knows best.

All those years earlier – after he tries to kill himself – he moves from a hospital bed, stomach now pumped, to a ward. Then comes a referral to a mental health unit, which he thinks he's too good for. He goes to see a counsellor a few times but soon decides it's not for him. On the ward, though, he does his best to explain. A life insurance policy. Some money via a pension.

I don't know if I tell him how I feel or he just knows. I don't know if we talk about it after either, go over what he did and why. A void, a blind spot we know exists but don't want to acknowledge. An abyss we daren't stare into directly. Like dilated pupils, my dad not there for the first time before the last time.

But in the hospital, he's the same man who squares up to my brother. Aggressive. Confrontational. And self-pitying.

Sound familiar?

'I couldn't even get that right…' he says, rueful as ever.

He then demands some stuff from his car, a change of clothes. My mum washes it for him – can you imagine? – and I run it back down to the hospital. It's still damp, not quite dry. He's fuming.

I think I drop the carrier bag on the end of the bed and leave him there, practice for that Indian restaurant and every time I storm off after – yet more rehearsal.

It might be then, when I get home, Dad still on the ward, I bring myself to read his note.

I can't remember a word.

I'm drinking but don't yet know it's a problem.

We still live in London and my daughter's about to be born.

It's possible she's asleep in the next room.

No it's June, it must be, a few weeks after my dad dies. I'm not about to interview for the job I later take, the job that allows us to move to Somerset. That happens in August.

Am I being honest?

We talk about using the money I inherit – sorry *we* inherit – for a bigger flat either rented or bought. My wife's unhappy in London with no friends going through what she's going through – pregnant, or off work with a newborn.

I'm oblivious. Either that or I don't care. And it's probably later, September maybe.

Does it matter?

I pick a fight so I can storm off and go to the pub. A few doors down I buy some Marlboro Lights and a lighter. Back in the pub I order a pale ale – the first of four I down in the next two hours, staring at my phone or at other punters, thinking dark thoughts, adamant I'm in the right. Like life's a straitjacket and another pint's the key.

I'm now convinced I can drink my way out of anything without talking about how I feel or caring a jot about anyone else.

Sound familiar?

Of course it does.

I really don't know what the argument's about. Again, though, does it matter? It might be about my wife not coming home after my dad dies, when she's in France – but we're months off me saying it out loud so there's plenty more mileage

in that one, even if she does offer to fly back when I tell her the news over the phone and I use the fact she doesn't insist against her anyway. Because I can.

A picture of entitlement.

Admissions not omitted.

My brother tells me Dad's in hospital – this is the night before he dies. How I know before I answer the phone the next morning. It's not a sixth sense.

Bruce Willis is dead all the way through.

Let me tell it again. My dad goes back to the doctor, after we speak on the Tuesday, collapses in the surgery and is then taken to hospital. My brother rings me on the Wednesday to say Dad's under observation.

Does he tell me he's fine? It's ok? Everything's going to be all right? I can't remember, or I can but choose not to.

Can't or won't or both.

I text my dad rather than ring his mobile or the hospital, thinking he might be asleep. I don't call him, speak to him one last time. Why?

Because I don't know he's about to die.

I try to imagine an escape.

Dad might laugh at the thought of divorced parents taking their kids for McDonald's meet-ups and I might convince myself it isn't so bad.

I can't bring myself to do it, though, to not see my daughter getting bigger, stronger, every day.

I'm so selfish I think sticking around because I want to is enough – for her, for my wife, even for me.

I tell my wife more than once I'll leave.

Big man, your father's son – why don't you leave then come back then leave then come back again? Or just leave and don't bother.

I know at the time I can't keep doing this.

I know there's no future in it.

I know I have to change.

‘Omissions,’ Marianne Moore says, ‘are not accidents.’

This is about revisiting a place I don’t want to revisit, re-telling stories but also re-feeling feelings I don’t want to feel again.

Choosing to write things down, or not.

Like the time my dad drives me home from a weekend in London. It’s 2008 and I’m indulging in an interlude from adult life, between jobs and girlfriends and flats – in a word, hopeless. I spend the night before doing poppers in Soho, the skin between my nostrils scorched red.

‘Don’t piss around with those, lad,’ he tells me, pulling into the service station on the M1 (Woodall, near Sheffield, of course).

Does he know what they’re for?

I don’t ask while he tells me about some kids in his local – obviously kids, definitely underage – all doing poppers and other stuff and, one time, setting fire to a bloke who makes the mistake of nodding off in the corner of the pub.

Years earlier he makes a point of saying he’s ok with it (and this time I know without asking what he means by *it*). This is well after my first experience with a boy. In fact apart from a holiday romance and the odd washing-machine kiss in a ginnel – you know, your mouths just going round and round and round – my first sexual experience full-stop is with boys, or rather one boy specifically.

A game of truth or dare all too knowingly descends into the same dare again and again, which is let’s take off all our clothes and touch each other for a bit. Mum and Dad out for the night, the game – ok the sex – is usually in the lounge (ahem, sitting room). Only once does it happen in the bedroom. I forget to make my bed after and my dad, who comes back from the pub early – although not quite early enough – loses his temper at the state of my room.

He hates mess. Muddy football boots left by the patio doors, PlayStation still plugged into the telly – he'd threaten to throw whatever it was in the back garden. This absurdist flair for an over-reaction I later mimic, faffing and fussing and generally making everyone's life a misery, my moods dictating theirs.

Is this – the response to my suspiciously unmade bed – why he says what he says all those years later? And when he warns me off poppers does he think I'm gay or bi or 'just' experimenting? Or might he really be ok with it – whatever *it* really means?

This is the first time I write about it. Do I know what *that* means?

Years before, I rub my arse against another boy's – in the loo, I forget whose – an even earlier game again leading to taking off all our clothes and touching each other for a bit. This, I then think, is what they call 'bumming'.

Why don't you bum a basketball?

The same boy, his parents family friends, later tells some other lads at our secondary school I'm gay – and I'm nicknamed 'Gay-vin' for the foreseeable. This is after I stay over at his one night. The next morning I go into his mum's bedroom to ask her something. What's for breakfast? When's my dad picking me up? Who knows? All I know is she talks to me with the duvet down by her waist, breasts and nipples staring at me or me staring at them. No wonder I'm confused.

Gay-vin…decent pun, mind.

That said, my only real fight at school is with a lad who calls me 'queer'. I'm playing basketball in the yard and he's sitting down, watching, leaning back against a wall. I drop the ball, run down the grass slope and kick him in the head. People say, 'I don't know what came over me' – but I knew and so did he.

Soho 2008, I'm out with a friend – a flatmate – and two girls. Tail end of the night he tries to kiss me in front of a sex shop, shutters down. I make a joke about it but push him away. The four of us then night bus back to the flat and drink more, sniff more, kiss and more. A bottle gets smashed and someone cuts a foot. Blood on the sheets.

I'm off and on with one of the two girls. After we stop sleeping together she confides in me she's been raped. All I can remember thinking at the time is why won't she sleep with me again, her reluctance to get close, to be intimate, taking me too long to accept. This is more entitlement, the same thing I feel when I go home and get into bed with someone and they change their mind and I just sulk. My wife tells me I should've offered to make them a cup of tea in the morning – you know, been kind and thoughtful – and they would've probably slept with me anyway. She finds this funny. I find it disturbing.

The friend, the flatmate, isn't out or in – much like me. The two of us are close, Northerners in London and both creatively inclined. Some euphemism, that. The next morning I show him pages from what becomes my second novel and he pulls me towards him, my writing turning him on.

'I don't normally get that reaction,' I tell him, this time not joking.

I can't dismiss what I do with him as a game of truth or dare going too far, even if day-drinking helps. He offers me half an ecstasy tablet after we spend a Tuesday afternoon on Hampstead Heath, a shortish walk from our flat. I let him kiss me on the grass.

I let him – I present myself as passive but the choice, I can see now, is active. So, too, is the way I write around the truth.

This feels raw rather than honest, something like confessing, even though there's nothing to confess.

That's not true either – I'm careless with his feelings.

I don't talk to Dad about my sexuality. For his part he laughs at wearing a pink shirt one night, walking from his house into town. He's almost at the pub when a couple of lads pass him in the street.

'*Pink*…' one of them mutters, loud enough for him to hear.

He goes home to change.

I also don't talk to a housemate at university when she asks, middle of a busy bar, 'Have you ever done anything with a boy?' I shake my head, the tiniest of shakes, perhaps reluctant self-denial but a negation nevertheless.

A memory of making a list in the university library of everything I hate, including the colour yellow…

I finally have the conversation with my first girlfriend. I'm 19 when I tell her, I've experimented. This, I believe at the time, is about as honest as I can be.

I don't tell her, I've never fallen in love with a man but I've never said I couldn't, or I shouldn't, or I wouldn't. This is close – although not quite close enough – here, on the page, what William Zinsser calls 'the art of inventing the truth'.

Omissions, after all, are not accidents.

That night in the pub, after I storm off – when I'm drinking but don't yet know it's a problem – I watch United on TV.

Brinkley's by my feet as Carl, a West Ham fan, comes over.

'My dad was a villain,' he tells me.

Carl rides a bike everywhere and works in graphic design. He brings his own pint glass and lives across the street, Upper Clapton – a place I didn't know existed when I moved to London a decade earlier.

'You've got him in a choker,' he says, the dog jumping up at him.

He's talking about the makeshift lead. We live less than five minutes from the pub. I can't find it before I slam the door but I don't want to miss kick-off, meaning I loop his old puppy one around his neck and clip over a knot in the rope. I think it'll do but Carl's not so sure. I'm also a bit pissed. Luke Shaw's just broken his leg. Carl picks up on this.

'I'll leave you to it,' he says. 'Hope Man U win.'

I go for a smoke outside after United (not *Man U*) score a goal that, as things stand, sends them through to the knockout stages. Before I finish the cigarette another team in another game score another goal, meaning they go through at United's expense, then United concede anyway.

I misremember. This is actually November. Another game, another night – another one.

I choose to remember then misremember this night and not others. I choose to write about this night and not others. I don't write about other nights, other thoughts. I don't write these things down. Not yet.

I take a photo of my gurning face in the beer garden and post it to Instagram. A friend leaves a comment. *U ok hun?* Over time this comment eats away. In my

head it seems to sum up how no one else cares about me or what I'm going through. My resentment, which starts long before my dad dies – *I can see now* – builds until it explodes a few weeks later. It doesn't go away that night or the next or even the next.

It gets worse.

III

On Tuesday 29th December 2015 I record 87 microgrammes of alcohol in 100 millilitres of breath, exceeding the prescribed limit contrary to section 5(1)(a) of the Road Traffic Act 1988 and Schedule 2 to the Road Traffic Offenders Act 1988.

I'm arrested then charged at 3.27am, granted unconditional bail and ordered to surrender to the custody of my local magistrates' court at 9.15am on Thursday 14th January 2016.

Until then – and before being released from the police station – I need to sober up.

My car's parked, not by me but an arresting officer, outside a Tesco garage in the town centre – and I'm only allowed to return to it below the legal limit of 35 microgrammes of alcohol in 100 millilitres of breath.

Given I arrive well over twice that limit, I wait.

This is in a large cell on a raised concrete bed. I cover myself with a big blue mat – the kind we had in P.E., football in the gym, the mats used by 'keepers, inch-thick lip so anything hit hard, on the deck, would loop up over the benches stacked as makeshift goals and miss the target.

I sleep it off. There's a loo in the corner, which I use once. My shit's black and there's no flush.

Serves me right.

Twice I try and fail to blow low enough to walk out of here. I call my wife after the second but decide not to earlier, despite being offered the chance – meaning she wakes up at 6am to no sign of me. She's not alone. My daughter's upstairs, then four months old. We also have guests – two friends and their partners, with an extra small child between them. A full house.

It's around 8am when I get through. My wife's about to call the police herself, thinking I might be dead or, only slightly more preferable, under arrest.

'You can stay there,' she says.

I ask her to tell our friends to go home, to which they reasonably reply – I hear them in the background – 'What does he expect, a welcome home party?'

I eventually leave the station at 10.43am, a good eight hours after being stopped near Tesco. First thing that morning, though, the two friends realise my car's also missing.

I mention finding a hotel the night before during a game of Cards Against Humanity – my wife's in bed and I'm drinks ahead and determined to stay that way – so they check car parks and anywhere else they pass for an electric blue Suzuki Grand Vitara.

When we move from London to Somerset, a few weeks before this, I buy a 4WD, drive it to dinner and someone there portentously calls me a 'wanker'.

I let myself out just after 12, the rest of the house asleep. Brinkley follows me through the front door and I walk away from the house and on to the main road, leaving him to spend the next six hours wondering where I am and why he's not either with me or at least in bed like everyone else. I stagger – I know I stagger because I can still visualise walking in the middle of the road, the edges melting – then get in my car. What I do for the next two hours, before being stopped, I'm not sure. Even now.

I must loop town at least once, possibly as many as three times on account of how long it is between leaving home and being stopped. I then park up somewhere, go into a pub – what time this is I don't know but the place is open anyway – and order a pint I don't touch.

Here, have a gold star…

I stare at a rough couple, man and woman, my eyes fixed, burning with desire. I want to join them – doing what, I don't know.

Do I want to fuck her? Him? Them?

I get back in my car and drive aimlessly, ending up on the other side of town. A car pulls up in front. I'm not, I don't think at the time, followed or told to stop, the headlights of the police car two bright beams ahead of me.

I record 87 at the third time of asking, thinking in the station, criminal mastermind that I am, I might cheat the system by not blowing hard enough to incriminate myself. This despite the fact I'm not even breathalysed at the scene.

'You can smell it on him,' one of the officers says as I step out of the car.

I'm put in handcuffs then the back of a police car.

Another officer, a woman, leads me to the front desk later that morning to sign out and ring for a taxi. I'm more than 10 miles away from the Tesco – this station's the nearest one open so late, it being Christmas.

'You've done a bad thing but you're not a bad person,' she says.

Hours earlier, somewhere between the first breath test and having my fingerprints taken, I'm swaying on my feet and shaking my head at my own stupidity, ashamed, thinking about my dad. Not so much if he could see me now – more, what would he say?

'Why aren't you out there catching real criminals?' I offer to the room, before mumbling an apology.

You've done a bad thing but you're not a bad person.

Leaving the police station later that morning, I want to believe she's right.

I don't plan it.

People like me – people who drink and drive, people with a drinking problem, people with problems – sometimes they say that. Sometimes they mean it.

I have my keys because they're my keys. They have everything on there, my house keys, my car keys, myWaitrose card. I plan to go out – out where exactly, somewhere, anywhere, just out. I want to find trouble.

I'm literally looking for trouble.

What I don't realise or even care at the time is what that means. The trouble, obviously to everyone but me, is getting in the car in the first place.

On the drink-drive rehabilitation course I go on three months after my conviction, half a dozen of us sitting in a circle, I'll see this clearly.

No judgement in the room, everyone's story is equal parts different and sacrosanct. Some are so dependent on alcohol they blackout regularly. Others relax in front of the TV with nothing but cans for company. A few go out the night before then drive to work the next morning, unaware, no defence in law but fair enough when you see the look on their faces. One man, sixties, is stopped by the car behind him, the other driver reaching in through the window and snatching his keys. The man's eyes fill up as he tells us this part, shaken up and the epitome of sorry.

I've stopped drinking, sober since leaving the police station. I tell anyone who'll listen I'm giving up completely for six months. After that, I'll see how I feel.

I spend the first few negotiating with myself how I might drink again and not, much like everyone else in the room, end up back there. I'll drink on special occasions, I say. Birthdays. Christmas. My daughter's wedding, even though she's only eight months old here.

The course, therapy, sitting in circles and talking about yourself, is about putting a system in place. I say I don't drink and I'm asked, 'Is that realistic for you?' I genuinely don't know, standing up in that room. Like my 'social' smoking, I barter – make a deal with myself, as I say – but alcohol, I do know, is different. Whereas with fags it's the side-effects I'm scared of, consequences to cutting down (or not), with booze it's the drug. What it does to me. Who I become. Scared is the right word, too.

I'm scared of me.

I self-diagnose the way you self-diagnose sucrose-intolerance, the way I swear I don't, or won't, Google my symptoms when I feel unwell.

It's a long time before I accept I have a problem, important, like seeing my dad in the chapel of rest – but not then anything like a resolution. There's no closure in looking at a dead body. A circle both can and can't be closed.

Somewhere between abuse and dependence, that's me. I'm not a trope. I don't binge. Sometimes I drink a few beers and leave it at that. I don't drink every time I'm stressed. Not at first, anyway.

I give up alcohol when I'm 18 and don't drink again until after university.

Another contradiction, I really am breaking the rules of being a man here – one more and I might get kicked out of the man club.

It occurs to me at the time. I grow up in a town where one wrong look and it's a glassing but drinking's expected of you, especially if you're a bloke. I accumulate a few too many bad experiences, though, the worst after talking to someone's girlfriend and that someone sucker-punching me in a club. I pull on the girl's tie, over-step the mark and blame it on the drink – rehearsal again,

foreshadowing the morning after and the man I later become. A friend of hers calls me a creep.

Asterisks in the diary of a future me, tally at the front counting up every day I do or say something that makes me a creep…

This should matter more but it's enough, even then, to make me stop drinking. I start up again in my twenties, progressively more and more with the only problem years, before the most recent, during that break-up. Second girlfriend. This is at the end of 2011, beginning of 2012.

I run away to Paris – hang on, am I sure I'm not a trope?

You can walk across Paris in two hours and for two months, February and March, I do nothing but walk around and write bad poetry as well as letters telling her it's over. She tells me the same. We fight to have the final say, like when we're together.

By August, she says she wants to try again. By then and only then, I'm over it.

I'm over it because of walking in the snow, the bitter cold of Paris. I'm not a father, not married, not engaged, not in a relationship with anyone or anything but me. Not any more and not yet. My misery. My pain. My solitude.

My self-indulgence, more like.

I walk for miles from where I'm staying in the 5th arrondissement. Writing about it all now I want to be back there – but I can see it so perfectly from here. Shopping on the rue Mouffetard, exotic cereal and cheap red wine. Or the other way – Saint-Jacques – smoking 30-packs through gloves in the Jardin du Luxembourg then on to the rue de Tournon, ghosts of Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, and into Saint-Germain-des-prés. I watch United beat Liverpool near Mabillon – this is

in a ‘Frogpub’, made for a *rosbif* like me, where a pint costs a tenner. From there it’s down the rue de Seine and Adam Gopnik’s favourite walk in the city, a straight line under the Institut de France and over the Pont des Arts. Before you know it you’re on the Right Bank so you might as well keep going, walk from the 1st to the 4th then up through the 3rd and on and on and on to the 10th. And Paris is so cold you keep walking, keep smoking, keep listening with your headphones in and the music turned up loud – it’s all of this, remember, about distraction – walking in the snow but always moving you’re so desperate to stay out there in the cold.

This is my first experience of grief as I come to know it years later, mourning a failed relationship, lost romance, in a city that’s nothing if not a mausoleum for Love.

‘I’ve lost that part of you,’ she says, just before it’s finally over, ‘the part that was mine.’

I miss her when she leaves. To admit it, the sentiment somehow distorts – an abstraction hollow now by confession. ‘There is no such thing as autobiography,’ Jeanette Winterson says. ‘There is only art and lies.’

Then the confession of a lost love’s the greatest deception of all.

I want to move on. People tell me I have to, like my dad in his letter – one of the letters I don’t lose – urging me to move on with my life.

In Paris, a sublet from a friend, I lean out of the window – unbelievable cold that winter, single heater on wheels positioned wherever I am in the apartment – and smoke (Gauloises, like you even needed to ask). I think of her, the way we are or, rather, were. She isn’t with me.

And there it is. There, in that ephemeral place, transient space.

Life goes on, people say, as if the suffering of loss can be ignored simply because, for everyone else, it doesn't matter.

I fill a notebook I'll later destroy, like a different letter from my dad – the letter I lose deliberately. I fill the book's pages with my fears, fears I'll never be able to love again when in fact I'll never be able to love her again.

A perfect sentence, I think at the time – I'm still yet to set fire to the notebook (nothing surprises me about me but I might just chuck it away).

I will never be able to love her again.

I feel empty, grieving a dead relationship, although before Paris I discover a self-destructive side of me that never really goes away. That side can only, I think, be suppressed – my not drinking years from then meaning my lack of inhibitions has to take on an altogether different shape. I don't go with near-strangers, take my turn, follow them into cubicles, or wander down alleyways and hidden corners of city streets after dark, my battery dead and my head spinning – no idea how I got here. But with practice, I manage to get to the same level as friends who drink. I get progressively looser over the night.

I can't fake the chemical, though.

The one I've got a problem with.

The one I can't live with but can just about live without.

I lose weight.

At least, that's what people tell me. I'm so 'thin', they say, so 'skinny' – then there's my favourite, 'You look gaunt.' Someone sees me at lunch and asks, guessing, 'What are you, 10 stone?'

Most people who say these things aren't all that close but my wife insists I look better than ever. I can't look sexy *and* like I'm dying, of course, although it's possible I lose weight, look ok, then lose even more weight and look not ok.

I see my face in photos from Christmas 2016, a full year after I'm arrested. I look drawn, lines either side of my smile – not exactly forced but strained. It's my age, I tell myself. My thirties. When I lose weight I weigh the same as I do when I first move to London.

The modelling again…

I don't have an issue either losing or gaining weight as a model – the issue's with my skin, my booker in Milan recommending concealer, hence the habit, my other booker, in Paris, telling me to get some sun. I do as they say and two weeks later, the most glamorous day of my life, I get a phone call on the beach in the South of France – I'm with my first girlfriend, a week in her parents' apartment – asking me to fly back to Paris for the John Galliano show.

'I told you – you just needed some sun,' my Paris booker says, conveniently leaving out the fact I book the job based on a casting two weeks earlier, before getting some sun, pale as a sheet and shivering in my underpants. Not so glamorous, after all. The commission's two-thirds of my fee, by the way. Dad, exemplary salesman, is turning in his grave. So to speak. He's cremated, remember.

My skin clears up eventually, a perk of the ageing process.

‘Hot water and an abrasive towel,’ he might say, sharing in his opinion the only cure for spots.

Back to my alarming weight loss and one person, a mate – ok acquaintance – bumps into me at a mutual friend’s wedding. I tell him I only had a banana and a Red Bull before the church – just before, not all day, but maybe he misunderstands me.

‘I think you need to put on weight,’ he says, munching canapés.

I snatch a salmon thingy from a passing tray, eat it then help myself to a second. He moves off, mingles, my mouth full as if to contradict.

The suit I’m wearing, tailor-made by a close friend for my wedding a few years before this, hangs off me. Boxy, I notice it in the loos downstairs – we’re in a Mayfair members’ club, rooms and levels partitioned, easy to get lost. Apt given I’ve dropped going on two stone and two inches off my waist since that wedding – my wedding – so it’s no shock I look a bit off.

Still, I’m offended.

Sensitive…

I follow my wife around the reception and ask her to tell me if I look too thin. Not thin, *too* thin. Would you rather be too hot or too cold – *too* the keyword there, neither preferable – but then that’s not the game, is it?

‘Play the game,’ my dad might joke. ‘Head the ball.’

On a football match – I’m in my early twenties, I think, the stand behind the goal – Dad can’t stop himself from laughing at the bloke next to us. It becomes another permanent joke. The centre-forward conspires to cock-up a cross and the bloke pleads with him from all the way up here. ‘Back post,’ he says, head in hands, ‘have you learned nothing from this game?’

Or the time an elderly fan complains to a steward about the condition of the gents, the team losing surely a contributory factor, 'It's like a *damned* opium den.'

Or the time watching Burnley, Chris Waddle player-manager, some ne'er-do-well – my dad's voice – down from the back of the stand to yell from the front, 'Get back to Marseille!' Waddle had played all over the place – Newcastle United, Tottenham Hotspur, Sheffield Wednesday (would you credit it?) – so to send him back to the South of France as punishment seemed funny to us at the time. Maybe he thought Waddle just needed some sun.

'People don't tell you you're fat, do they,' I say to my wife, still following her around the reception and wondering if she's even listening.

She turns to me – it's possible she glares.

'I don't mean you're fat,' I correct myself. 'I mean, if you're fat people don't tell you you're fat. It's the same with bad breath…'

Where once I might scan the room for eye contact on occasions like this, alcohol in my system, glint of wickedness in my eye, fidelity fidgety, I'm now drinking fizzy water. The voice in my head, my own personal Mephistopheles, isn't banished but shushed.

Things are made worse by the fact there's not one best man but two at this particular wedding, meaning more speeches than usual and even longer to wait until the real food arrives.

I'm going to need another Red Bull.

I'm in the same members' club but on a different night.

It's December 2015 again, the month we leave London and I'm arrested. A book launch, the publishers I'm about to stop working for throwing a party.

I leave on time but by then I'm already half-gone, following others with fewer cares, fewer troubles, to a nearby pub where I drink more. And more. I want some coke. I say this.

'Let's get some *gak*,' I actually say – I sick-out the word, a retch.

My wife, tired and lonely and miserable, is at home with my daughter. She's expecting me. I tell her I'm staying out then ignore her calls. I text her, tell her she's a nag. I mean it. I'm sure, sitting in the back of a stranger's car and watching another stranger buying coke from a different stranger who meets us on a bridge to somewhere, climbs in the back, talks for a minute then hands it over, money exchanging hands – I have no idea how much or what it even costs – I'm sure she's a *nag*.

I'm disgusting. I'm not exactly fat but I'm overweight, out of shape, no tone on my arms, chest or stomach. My skin's blotchy, puffy. I have dark circles under my eyes. I smell. I stink, let's be real. When I crawl in at 5 the next morning my wife, understandably, is not best pleased.

Instead of dwelling on my behaviour, here I am describing what I look like and how I must feel that morning.

My headache.

My hangover.

Or is it my fear I'll be a bad father, without my dad to help me?

The acquaintance at the mutual friend's wedding, the one who says I need to put on weight, talks to me about not boozing on the stag-do a few weeks before.

'Surely the aim is to drink responsibly,' he says. 'Not give up drinking completely.'

That night, his false teeth fall out in a karaoke booth during a grunt-perfect rendition of Edwin Starr's 'War'.

Earlier on the stag I ask absent-mindedly – I say absent-mindedly but as usual for me it's quite the opposite – whether it makes sense to still do mind-altering drugs.

'I don't see the logic of doing coke if you're trying to stay in control,' he says.

I'm off alcohol because the drug does something to me it doesn't necessarily do to you, I think. I'm off cigarettes because they're bad for me and for you – that's the same thing and not the same thing.

Let's get some *gak*.

Another football match – so much happens there, doesn't it, like off-stage in a play it's all about what goes on in the stands – the same acquaintance listens to me patiently, sympathetically, suggests he hides experiences like mine of his own. A dark side, regrets, memories of poor choices made and the knowledge that after a few drinks, a few lines, those same poor choices might be made again.

Forget alcoholics, how many men do you know who fit that description?

He tells me not to infantilise myself, deprivation out of mistrust. I can't proselytise but I know I can't drink either. I know what I become, who I become, what and who takes over. I know I don't want to give that side of me freedom over everything else in my life. Lobotomise that part of me and I take back control.

Really…

I think the acquaintance sees this in himself, though, a problem saying no, drawing the line, more than a handful of nights where control's been lost, a trail of mistakes like debris after a plane crash. Beers then mixers then shots. Have another bump. Blackout. And repeat.

I get to know the feeling the longer I stay sober, the feeling of being interrogated, under attack, my decision no longer mine to make.

Why are you not drinking? This means they want to know the dirty little secret, which then means airing in public, again and again, something you know you have to feel comfortable talking about and sharing, even admitting – but at the same time wish you didn't have to talk about at all.

When are you back drinking? This means they think you're doing Dry January or on a detox, the choice silly and your whole life reduced to a gimmick you read about in a weekend supplement.

The best one's when people want to know if you're an *alcoholic* alcoholic because to most people an alcoholic needs a liver transplant. Anything less than cirrhosis and you can have a top up.

Someone I know who lost a parent to alcoholism thinks I'm just doing it to be 'cool'. If I don't get a sponsor, I'm not doing it right. I say I don't need a sponsor because I give up and am still on the wagon, even if I also understand a sponsor might help me stay on rather than exist only to help as and when I fall off. It amazes me but I choose my words carefully, not wanting to be flippant or glib about something that, for some – for this person in fact – is life and death.

Some people make you feel like you can't *not* drink. You can't just quit, just stop. What if instead of alcohol, though, it's car mints – what if you quit car mints?

I don't eat car mints.

The last time I had car mints I got arrested.

The time before that was worse – I put three car mints in my mouth and six hours later I shat myself.

Sometimes it's ok, I've had fun eating car mints, good times, but there was that one time when I shat myself.

At the end of the day it's just not for me.

I don't eat car mints.

People would be fine with it, generally. They might think it's weird but they wouldn't care.

Edward St Aubyn talks about giving up drugs then, over time, learning to do it all over again – only this time responsibly. Like the acquaintance who tells me I need to put on weight and not infantilise myself.

On some level I know this is right. It gnaws away, makes me question my decision to go cold turkey and chain myself to the wagon and other clichés of abstention. Once an aesthete now ascetic – I catch myself thinking, am I really that bad?

'Self-destruction is obviously a defeat,' St Aubyn says. 'But terrorised abstinence is also a defeat.'

Then again, a generation of men scared to be the worst version of themselves has to be better than the same men not changing, not trying, not giving a shit…

'Men are trash,' my wife tells me – it needs an exaggerated New York accent to land.

This is a game she likes to play with friends. The object of the exercise, as my dad might say – bat and ball in the sea, holiday abroad, me trying to win and him

insisting we rally – is to think of an exception. The only rule is the man can't be a member of your immediate family. Try it.

He left you for a woman half your age? Trash.

He wants to know who you're with and why at all times? Definitely trash.

He went out every night when you had postnatal depression, told you he didn't care about you – 'I don't care about you,' he said after one all-dayer, you standing on the front street in your pyjamas and begging him not to leave – and eventually got himself arrested for being more than twice the legal limit while his friends (not yours) were down for the weekend? Most definitely, inarguably and indisputably, trash, *honey*.

I'm told by one alcoholic I meet not to give other people that power over you – the power to control your drinking or not drinking.

'Never say never,' she says. 'I start the day 99 per cent sure I won't have a drink. No matter how bad it gets, no matter how bad my day is, when I go to bed that night I can at least say I didn't have a drink.'

I'm not drinking today. Never say never. Every day I don't drink is a good day, even if it's been a shite day.

But while I derive pleasure from not drinking this pleasure pales compared to the joy I feel when I'm pissed, even if I can see my cheekbones for the first time in a decade. (Even if I do look like I'm about to die.)

Perhaps I just feel better, or I don't and wonder why.

I'm outside looking on, to borrow the words of a writer and good friend, like so many people in my life, still there for me. In that sense, I'm watching myself watching other people live their lives.

The person who thinks I'm doing all this to be cool tells me I've dropped out of society and she eyes my kind with suspicion, although for me she'll make an exception. I know what she means. We're the ones at parties who notice when people just help themselves, bored with the etiquette of waiting for the host to oblige. Go on, get stuck in. Glance up at us, though, sipping our Elderflower or talk to any non-drinker at dinner and become sloppier and sloppier, the teetotaller looking back and thinking the same thing.

Another friend wants to stop drinking completely to deal with personal problems – deep-rooted, abuse-related problems. Drinking itself has become a problem but the friend feels powerless, turning to alcohol when angry. Alcohol can then become not a problem but *the* problem.

Go too far.

Have too much fun.

In a word, fuck it for yourself.

I know my experience isn't their experience. I also know I'm not qualified to help someone, anyone – least of all me.

So who am I to judge and, more to the point, how do I solve all this? How do I work through it, make choices that will in turn make me happy? How do I know the choices won't make things worse? I stop to face up to, confront, my grief – and all I have to show for it is my health. That doesn't feel like a defeat.

It doesn't feel much like a victory either.

When I get in my car, I don't care what happens – to me or to anyone else.

Only later do I think of this as suicidal, not cerebrally so but still deliberate. I want to find trouble, remember.

I'm literally looking for trouble.

Whereas my dad plans it all out I'm reckless – but I don't care what happens to me. I don't care if I hit something or someone. I don't care enough to ask the question. I'm more than twice the legal limit and I don't even think.

I think, I'm going to find trouble.

I drive for hours before I'm pulled over. What if I'm not? Will I hit something, or someone, before I stop? I have everything to live for but I get in the car with no responsibilities and I'm ashamed afterwards.

While I feel that shame others, both close to me and not so close, tell me how 'unlucky' I am. Unlucky to have been caught doing something others think common. That I'm in fact lucky, to still be alive – or not be in prison, or not have someone else's blood on my hands or another death weighing me down – escapes their notice but not mine.

My car weighs two tonnes.

I drive my two-tonne car around in the dark for hours, pissed out of my head, and I can't say for certain exactly where I go – apart from a pub, parking in a bay over the road before leaving again and driving around some more.

Two tonnes.

After shame guilt comes from the abnegation of responsibility, the look my wife gives me when I return home, before I break into sobs – sobs of guilt, shame, as I say, but also grief. I miss my dad and this, the day I'm arrested, is a terrible thing to admit. This is my way of telling people I'm in pain. Like an 11-year-old boy who's

not allowed to tell a friend his dad's just died, picking a fight with him later and it taking years for either of them to understand why – if they ever understand.

The cycle.

I sit on a sofa across from my wife, imagine being her for the first time in months if only to wonder how dreadful I must look.

My wife, well after all this, challenges me to play a song for her – a song that sums her up. I can't think of one but she takes about three seconds before she picks 'Mr Vain' by Culture Beat.

I know what I want and I want it now…

No, I misremember – she picks 'You're So Vain' by Carly Simon.

Same as mecks no difference, Dad again imitating his.

I don't at the time think of what I do that night as a suicide attempt and in a sense it isn't – in a sense it isn't even a cry for help. It is what it is, an expression I learn like a mantra on the drink-drive rehabilitation course and still say now (probably too often).

But I resent – resentment again and again and again, I know – my closest friends and family for not helping me through the hardest time of my life, my becoming a father while losing my own, taking on a new career, moving from the city to the country where I don't know anyone.

Later, I resent them for not congratulating me on doing better, or for not remembering the milestones, like the anniversary of my dad's death, the anniversary of the day I give up drinking (or I'm arrested, again, depending on your point of view).

And round it goes.

*

My daughter locks herself in her bedroom.

She's one and a half here, so I can only assume it's by accident.

Wakes up around 7am, chats to the stuffed animals in her bed then, eventually, calls out for 'Mama' or 'Dada'. This is how every day starts, for a while.

One of us changes her and the other gets milk, a small cup rather than the bottle with a teat she has before bed. She calls again – 'Wake up!' – as we try, unsuccessfully, to slip back under the covers then finds her way back across the landing and shuts her bedroom door. It's actually, I seem to recall, more of a slam than a shut. Either way she can play in her room until one of us gets up – it's babyproof, we think.

This is when my wife has a full-time job again. I work from home a lot so my morning routine stretches on without requiring me to shower (or get dressed).

As arguments go – which of us fetches what from downstairs or the bedroom drawers or the bathroom, depending on the stage we're at – it's nothing compared to the early days. With my wife on maternity leave, I assume I'm the only one going to or doing any work.

The more I look after my daughter over those first 12 months or so, the more I see how thick-headedly wrong I am. It's much harder than going to work. Twice as hard, easily – probably even harder than that. No other human interaction let alone adult interaction and a colleague with three times your energy reserves, a bad temper and no grasp of irony whatsoever who wants to read the same book, a Christmas pop-up, over and over again, even though we're in March.

After the door slams, my wife crosses the landing to open it.

It's stuck.

'She's locked it,' my wife says to me, resigned then panicked.

Each bedroom has its own lock. We remember to remove ours when the door jams a few months after we move in. We don't remember to do the same in the other bedrooms.

The door's cheap MDF, two panels. I want to resist the urge to smash through until I'm sure my daughter can't simply lift up and slide the lock across. It sounds simple but at her age she speaks as much English as I do French, despite or perhaps because of how pretentious I am – two months in Paris and all I know is *un petit peu* – and after 10 minutes of escalating frustration on our side of the door she gets scared on the other.

She's crying, asking for Mama and for help, only able to pull on the handle repeatedly and without success. It must be confusing, the handle not doing what a handle's patently meant to do. What the handle's done so many times before. All the while we tell her to look at the lock above the handle but she just hears 'handle'.

Our real concern is, if we smash through like it's The Shining and not just a Monday morning – 'Heeerrre's Dada!' – she's standing right behind the door. My wife tries to persuade her to sit on a chair in the corner of the room. She's too upset, though, crying too hard to understand.

We remove the handle on our side, not quite grasping how locks work – the door's still locked but now handle-less. After hammering around the lock area a few times (what am I doing?) I slip my fingers under the gap at the bottom of the door, a half-centimetre, wedge the tips in then pull.

The panel starts to come away and it's not long before I see daylight, as well as my daughter, watching me and wondering what on earth her dad's doing to her door. A few more cries and she can see how easy it'll be to crawl through, which she does, first into my arms then my wife's.

Seconds later, she's playing with blank Christmas cards in our room as if the last 15 minutes never happened. Remember it's Spring – I still don't know why we have all this Christmas stuff around the house.

I break and enter the rest of the way through, lift and slide the lock back across – easy, once you know how – and open the half-door, toddler's bedroom turned saloon bar in a Western.

Standing alone in my daughter's bedroom that morning, upright with the remnants of her door at my feet, I'm aware of something – a question, if not yet an answer.

Is this what it feels like to be on the other side?

IV

I make plans to go away and write in a friend's cabin by the sea.

Earlier, at dinner – the friend there, a few others too – we talk about pills, drugs of choice for flights or nights out. I tease myself with the idea of taking something, anything, downers with a line, uppers to stay awake.

What am I looking for? My daughter's in the next room. Now I'm thinking of becoming addicted to over-the-counter painkillers. Valium by the pool, like I'm stuck in a Bret Easton Ellis novel.

Have you read my first book? I'm being unkind (maybe).

I'm nearer to a midlife crisis than teenage rebellion, some impossibly tan, blond boy driving his dad's Porsche down Sunset Boulevard. If anything I look like the dad. No Porsche, though.

The idea of the cabin appeals – distant, removed. It's the same attraction I feel when I run away to Paris all those years ago and hide from life. I think it'll be good for me in a way but I sometimes find it harder to write, in my head, thoughts rattling away with no one there to bounce them off, balance me out.

Where are my pills?

It's on a cliff, south coast, nothing else for miles, stretch of sand and sea and emptiness. Vast expanse of blank page and plenty of time to get cabin fever.

Suppose I'll be in the right place.

I email the author of a recent book about grief, the subject of my message, unsurprisingly, *Grief*.

I read his book in one sitting.

Annoying when people say they love a book so much they read it in one sitting. It's 4,000 pages of miniscule type but they read it in one sitting. They don't move all day, all weekend, all week.

'I read it in one sitting.'

I'm a slow reader – perhaps they do read it in one sitting – but the book's 100 pages, generously spaced. I read it in the café in Waterstones Piccadilly. Someone opposite me has a Skype meeting, his headphones in. I put my own headphones in and drown him out.

It makes me think maybe I can write about grief. Most things I pick up make me think I can write whatever it is I'm reading. I think that's really what being a writer is – the ultimate *I can do that*, the pinnacle of *gi' us a job*.

Then I don't think anyone wants to read about my life.

And what makes me think I can write something as good as that?

Kick me when I'm down, why don't I…

I remember the novel I started but didn't finish in Paris. I set out to write about anti-capitalism, homelessness, ketamine. I called it *K*.

I end up in a k-hole while watching highlights of the 2010 World Cup with my then-girlfriend's brother – this is my second girlfriend again. I can't move from the sofa but I feel like I'm trapped in the walls, calling to the other people in the room, pleading with them to hear, thinking I'll never get out. An hour passes, probably not even that.

I do ketamine in one sitting.

K – it's not the greatest idea, I'll admit. My problem is I don't have a better one. This goes on for years.

My other two novels come quite naturally, the first the result of years of making notes with the protagonist in my head – his observations, overheard conversations from his perspective. I hand-on-heart print off and post myself a copy because of something I hear about copyright. I don't know if I still have it (the print-out, not the copyright). The second book's much the same only quicker. I don't post myself a copy of that. I write it between getting the offer on my debut and signing the contract. Re-writing takes longer than the first, there being three protagonists and, for me, a fair bit of plot. They both come out around the same word length, a glass ceiling.

A writer friend I later meet in Paris calls this 'minimalism', our euphemistic reply to 'well, it could be longer'. I don't know if I can write more but they both feel finished.

After K, though, I don't have another idea for a novel. I tell some people I might not write another. I tell other people I definitely won't write another. I write about Claude Cahun instead.

I start by reading everything there is to read on her in English – I think I do anyway – and use going away to Paris, shadow of that break-up, to write a first draft. I leave London thinking I might stay in Paris.

Think it through, lad – my dad's voice again. I don't even speak French, remember. I also still have my job in publishing at the time, which I need to pay my rent in the sublet apartment.

When I come home a few months later I feel better thanks, I reckon, to my first dose of group-of-one therapy – walking in the snow and crying in the snow, allowing myself just to feel and be sad.

But when it comes to Cahun I can't separate the work from what comes before, the heartache, that first experience of grief, it all becoming about the pain and not the healing.

Another writer friend tells me not to regret anything I write.

'It's art,' he says. 'Put it out there and move on.'

Other people don't think that and leave one-star reviews on Amazon.

After a reading I give before leaving for Paris, a different writer friend – writers are regrettably destined to make friends with other writers, leading to a lifetime of petty professional jealousies and crippling bouts of self-loathing – tells me he's never seen me looking so nervous. Years later I hear about a footballer playing through alcoholism and a gambling addiction and I think about performing under pressure. Imagine comparing yourself to a professional athlete when all you're doing, really, is standing up on stage in front of 20 people, pub basement, reading a few pages from your book.

I think about who I'm trying to be and how far I fall short.

I later start to write screenplays more seriously than before, not just adapting my novels but thinking of new ideas, even if I stumble into writing for television after developing an idea based on my first book. I become a scriptwriter by accident.

I don't know if I need to persist with prose, even with fiction, push through making it insofar as getting published itself is making it then push through it all getting a bit difficult – aspire to greatness rather than being-published-ness. I don't know if I need to stick to scripts. Maybe I'm better at that, notes telling me my ear

for dialogue is an advantage whereas with novels, according to my editor at the publishers I also end up working for, before leaving London for Somerset, a lack of landscape holds me back and (it gets better) I don't suffer enough for it.

Define irony – look at all this beautiful suffering!

Is that my problem, though, or is it my elliptical style…perhaps writing tangentially – a writer wrapped up in an em-dash.

When we move to the country I effectively take a paycut but my freelance work keeps us going. When things get quieter, after I briefly earn more because of some temporary maternity cover I add to the lecturing, life become more difficult financially.

There's a feeling of moving on. No way back. Finality.

I try and look forward – to my daughter growing up, for instance – the way parents do. This isn't a like-for-like replacement. No one tells you that or, if they do, no one listens. Looking forward on someone else's behalf, or looking forward to someone else doing something with their life, isn't quite the same.

I'm close to giving up, feeling like the next thing I write, if it doesn't go, will be my last. It's possible, of course, I'm just not that good. I end up a writer – there's no rule I'll be any more than that. Get published. Get paid. Get something on TV. Who says I'll keep getting?

Entitlement again…

These are things surely no one else can be interested in, all this by now a few self-indulgent pages too far – *I'm close to giving up*, 'get on with it' I hear echoing around my head – but the next idea, the next step feels somehow more vital than before.

Second-guessing. Too many years working in publishing, counting up the sales of brand new books on one hand and questioning my place, how many someone like me can shift, moaning about the cliques while maintaining my own. In TV it doesn't feel any easier. The opposite of how I feel in Paris, a city I love without expecting anything in return.

Grief really is the thing.

I don't have a problem deciding what to write before grief. I do have a problem coming up with an idea for a novel and doubt whether I want to write one but I don't second-guess the next step in my career. Not before grief. Before grief, I never feel like giving up.

How do I write this down – people, people like me, tell other writers to write what they know, write about what they're going through. What if they're too close to what they're going through or still going through it?

What then.

I don't seriously consider writing through trauma, classes as clinics to call on pain and conjure results like an automaton – the surrealists and their dreams, automatic writing but instead of dreams the conscious state, awake, suffering in paralysis. I look to other writers, how they render grief on the page, screen or stage, try and understand what this language looks like. Do they, too, write once removed, fiction through creative masquerade? Do they co-opt grief like any other concept, a concept because they themselves have no first-hand experience of it – to them, it might as well be space travel – and simply make it up? Or do they write about their own grief with something like honesty, confront it head on? Can they, can anyone, really do that? These questions – why do I think you care?

Because I care.

Confidence is the thing, too – and I'm low on confidence, not just in my professional life but more than that.

I know, writing it down here, this is an excuse. I know I have the confidence to write. I'm doing it right now.

Look, no hands…

It hurts to write because it has to be that way. Talk about suffering. It's why the words escape me and my confidence is low – because this is a tightrope and below me just the oblivion of loss, living the rest of my life without my dad, and whether I write it well or not won't make up for that fact but at least I'll have something to say and something to show for it.

Something to show for it – like a limp or shrapnel in my hip, like I'm lost in a Hemingway story or maybe just sulking in La Closerie des Lilas.

'I don't want to die without any scars,' I'll say, borrowing.

'You wear it well,' people will say, not getting it.

This isn't writing as therapy but writing as art – art and lies again – and if not that then writing as writing, no different to anything else I write either before or after.

So why the pressure? Why the doubt? Because writing is hard and writing about grief even harder.

Talking about grief isn't any easier. It doesn't do to dwell, not on misery, on anger, on pain. It's like crying for too long. Tears are all well and good but lose control and you're depressed – and who wants that?

Denial.

Anger.

It's toxic.

‘I think you should talk to someone’ – my wife says it and I flinch. It’s like being stabbed.

I say that but I’ve never been stabbed.

It’s like being mugged.

I say that, too – a man once crossed the road outside Brixton Tube Station and asked me for money, told me he’d take out his gun if I didn’t give in, and I asked him if I handed over the change in my pocket would he leave me alone and he did. Does that count?

I’m sick of people telling me I need to talk to someone after I start talking to them. It feels like a cop out. You’re boring me, they say – go bore someone else.

I tell my wife I think the last two years have been the worst two years of my life. She takes offence.

I both do and don’t know why.

Talking about this leads me into thinking about how I feel, grieving for Dad but also our old life.

I’m suffering a fear of missing out, fear of dropping out, fear of failure, fear of mediocrity, fear of not making it, fear of not being good enough, fear of not being a success, fear of not knowing what it takes to be a success.

I conflate this with my drinking and my doubts about everything I do and don’t do and I feel the weight on my shoulders and sometimes I can’t help but snap in two.

I want to change something in my life. I want to start again. I want to write something new, spend a month getting excited about an idea until I finish it then hit a wall. I want to write a third novel. I want to write a film. I want to write a play.

I know I need to write something and I think it somehow needs to be brilliant but my negativity makes me think that's impossible – a different cycle.

I'm scared I'm wasting my life. I'm scared I'm placing too much importance on my life and I'm nothing special – what gives me the right? I'm scared I'm descending into bitterness and envy, not just aimed at friends (mainly other, more successful writers) but people who do completely different jobs and seem to have it all worked out, even though I never at any time expect to feel this way when I make the choices I make.

I'm scared of me.

I'm 19 again, my first girlfriend, a bar in Sheffield. We're at university, a few months together.

'I don't care about money,' I say.

She looks at me and, after a beat, tells me it's important I have ambition.

A few years later, I'm modelling, miserable in Milan and missing home. She talks to me for over an hour while I'm at the airport, the call costing me £100 I don't have. Like my booker there, the one who recommends make-up, she tries to convince me to stay. I get on the plane.

A few years later still, her dad dies and we come apart, this particular break-up probable before but by then inevitable. He's only 49 – a heart attack, his second and, looking back, an omen. He never warms to me in life, believing she can do better.

I don't get a chance to prove him right.

It's true I don't care about money. It's also a lie. I crave it. Actually, is it the money or the success I crave? Or is it about proving everyone wrong as well as right,

about getting over that wall of negativity I'm building, about repaying the trust of people, people like my wife, who tell me I'll make it?

Talking about this makes me angry. More anger – great. Writing about it, too. I can't find the words. I just need to write something brilliant. How hard can it be? I second-guess what that brilliant thing is. I doubt I'll be able to write it. Then, somehow, I believe again – the other cycle again.

I think you should talk to someone.

I always want to reply by saying, 'I'm talking to you now.' Why do I need to talk to someone else? And who, a therapist? And what kind? Grief counsellor? Professional-frustration counsellor? Dilettante, common-or-garden counsellor?

On the bus, my daughter has a temper tantrum and a nice lady calms her down by showing her a bag with pictures of elephants all over it. She points to the bag then her bracelet, tells me her own daughter sent them to her from Thailand where she's teaching English.

'She must miss me if she buys me all these presents,' she says, eyes watering.

It's good to let it out but don't fall to pieces. I still have to do the big shop and fill up the car and nip into town for a new door to replace the one I just smashed right through.

That's what being a man looks like.

That's what being a husband means.

That's what being a father's all about.

Back on the bus again, a few weeks later, we see the same woman. She's hugging a girl in the street, the girl about the age of her daughter at a guess. They look like they miss each other.

In my email to the author – my *Grief* message – I ask in the body, ‘Some subject, eh?’

He later replies, ‘The only subject.’

Writing doesn't heal.

Writing about pain doesn't mean that pain then goes away either. Writing about pain means living that pain all over again, experiencing it, feeling it anew. It means revisiting that time and place, that headspace, with only the certainty of it never going away for company. If you're writing about it, though, you're at least living it. Still alive. You have that to be thankful for.

The pain itself remains, in no way lessened, no lessons learned, writing about it not a panacea. There's no processing here. No methodology. Writing isn't therapy. Writing about trauma is trauma.

Writing *is* trauma.

Think about it. You negotiate the perfect situation in which to work, a creative process within a creative process. You invest in a desk, high enough to write longhand or rest a laptop. People tell you they write longhand and, at best, you'll think good for you. At worst, you'll sick in your mouth a bit.

I'm just jealous.

After all, I buy a comfortable chair with back support, set up a speaker system, compile a playlist to write along to – classical, chillout, instrumental or rap, something French, a language I don't speak, or else nostalgia reigns, songs from 1999 or some other sentimentally-charged year of my life, like my dad and his coins, inciting incident, me, now, into the woods, in search of what makes me who I am, do what I do, even if the answer to both questions is the same.

I do all this so I can sit alone, by myself, and write. On my own. Lonely, lonesome, solitary sad sack surrounded by books I haven't read, piled high on shelves or in my case the floor by my feet, the words in front of me proof I'll never touch them, never get close, nowhere near – nothing compares to you the truth.

I create a character, enter their mind, feel what they feel, experience what they experience, see the world through their eyes. Character and characterisation. I invent, incite and insight, action and choice. I decide. You made your trauma, you lie in it…

What could be more traumatic than that?

Writing isn't righting. I write because I can't not write, right – it's not a question. I have to write. No choice. I can't do anything else, not as well anyway. Not instead anyway. Everyone's got a book in them. Is it any good, though? How about two? Three? A career's worth?

Writing is writing.

I write through my healing, though, my putting-myself-back-together-again. Writing this means one day writing that, the words here now a gateway drug to something stronger, a better high.

Where are my pills?

Reading back, I think it's crap.

I hate what I write, which makes me think I might be better off trusting my instincts. Maybe it *is* crap.

I write in the present tense to show I'm in it, living – yes, writing through. Present tense. The tension is present. At least I'm present.

There's a difference between trying and just being there, even if grieving, or my experience of it, is parenthetical to living. Grief in parenthesis, an afterthought. Aftertaste. Or parentheses with what I do either side of or separate to what, or who, I grieve for. The time and energy spent mourning their loss.

Come again?

Parenthesis – an interruption in thought, an idea in apposition to or placed, juxtaposed or bracketed, alongside another – is the perfect complement to grief. The singular means qualifying or explaining while the plural suggests a continuation, a regaining of your train of thought or line of inquiry. The singular parenthesis is much better, I reckon, much more accurate when it comes to grief.

Let's give it a try.

I'm an alcoholic – well, I've got a problem with drink – I say problem, it only really becomes a problem after my dad dies and my daughter's born…

Again, I'm depressed – I don't mean *depressed* depressed, I can get out of it, I can get over it, I don't need to talk to someone – I probably should, though.

Writing's no different – writing about or through grief, that is. Every line, every sentence, every dash preferred to bracket affected by doubt, my flow stopped, progress checked, internal cries, the reader on my shoulder bemoaning each word, each choice, each step along the way, this pause, that beat, confidence shot, purposeless and purpose less and less clear the more I go on – and do I go on.

I live with my grief and I write with my grief. I write about and through it. I find inspiration in memories, emotions, draw on feelings of no-hope to then create a world, art, for a living – as a 'writer', no more and no less than that.

The distance from pain isn't there. Some writers choose to wait, allow time to pass, before entering into a dialogue with trauma. Some writers have no choice but to face it.

Write what you know…

All of this treading water because the word 'parenthesis' is a pun – for me, at least – the words *parent* and *thesis*, in my head, when I start a PhD the year after my dad dies. This comes to me as I read a novel in which the author uses a forward slash

to separate sections within a chapter. I think about how '/' might be a good title for something, how the slash might suggest moving on, leaning against an unknowable future but a future nonetheless. I think of using a reverse slash to denote leaning, or looking, back.

I think not.

I can see an end, though. I can see how writing is helping me to move on – move, at least, move forward or maybe just keep moving. I can see the next thing, which is surely the best I can hope for.

The best any of us can hope for.

Before setting off for the cabin I take my daughter up Cothelstone Hill on the Quantocks, a 20-minute drive from our house.

She doesn't nap at nursery all week, which means she sleeps in the car there and again on the way back. She's so exhausted she cries out for me to carry her. I promise her donkeys, wild, on top of the hill.

It takes us half an hour to climb it, even though it's a short walk. I don't mind. I hug her, kiss her, tell her I love her and ask her to tell me what she sees. We can't go too close to the donkeys because of Brinkley. I feel like I'm letting her down, promising something then snatching it away. Carrot and stick, as it were.

My wife later corrects me, points out this part of the world – you know, where we've lived for quite a while now – is known for ponies not donkeys.

What do donkeys on Blackpool beach get for their dinner?

Half an hour.

The time we share brings with it pressure, pressure on me to do something with her rather than sit at home watching TV.

Parenting, I begin to understand in these few hours, falls somewhere between willing the time to pass and wishing it might slow down a bit. Every chunk, every single hour, can be hell if a child's not in the mood. It can also be amazing and exciting and unique, each new word said, new face pulled, new game invented colouring in this doodle of a human being until she's not just your daughter but her own person. Asking her dad to carry her up a mountain so she can see the donkeys / ponies while letting him hug her and kiss her and tell her he loves her and ask her to tell him what she sees.

Radio 2's on while I drive home, my daughter asleep.

‘Coming up next,’ Jeremy Vine says, ‘we’ll be talking about something called chem-sex.’

Good job she’s asleep, I think. Listening to Jay-Z the other day she looks at me, waits, then drops the n-bomb.

People say they’re like a sponge at this age but you don’t expect that.

Getting out of the car she has something on her face, which I wipe off with spit and my thumb. I think of my dad, him licking his handkerchief and wiping my face – how much I hate it, the feeling, the salt-and-vinegary smell of saliva but also what I’d give to have him here again, just this once, wiping my face with a lick and his handkerchief, ironed and folded away in his pocket, one thing, one habit, at least, he doesn’t pass down to me (sorry big bro).

A few weeks before all this, my daughter learns to frown and wag a finger – handy, she now knows how to tell me off. She starts doing it again after I wipe her face.

I know I need to remember this. Writing it down helps and so does taking photos, whether I bother with Instagram or not.

U ok hun?

Writing for me might mean writing about losing.

It also means, on days like these, writing about winning.

The last time I disappear to the coast for a few days, I'm in Jersey researching my book about Claude Cahun.

This takes me to St Brelade's Bay, where she lived after leaving Paris on the outbreak of the Second World War and where she remained until her death.

I shave my head for the first time in a decade – not, I don't think at the time, to look like Claude. I might retrospectively call it getting into character, even if it's more likely to do with what I'm feeling inside.

In any case I look a prat.

I visit her grave, the house with its blue plaque. I buy an ice cream. A sea gull swoops down and lobs the top off. On the beach, headphones in, I listen to songs I know will make me cry, the bird nudging things along nicely thank you very much and no one around to see or hear me half-sing, half-mime the lyrics. I'm aiming for catharsis. It doesn't feel that way.

It feels embarrassing.

But boys do cry (and boy is it about time I realise that's a lot better than the alternative).

I worry I'll be the same on the cliff face, though. I'm now married and long beyond a time when I might go away for a weekend and cry on a beach with no one to explain myself to.

This time, I ask permission. People rely on me. I'm responsible for more than just me, more than just my feelings.

Just my feelings – like that ever stopped me.

Careful, the beverage you're about to enjoy is extremely hot.

My coffee's steaming. First thing this morning I use a stovetop pot, which comes with the chalet. Uncle Tom's Cabin – that's its name.

I text the friend who owns the place after that dinner, the one where we talk about pills, ask if I can use it to write this weekend. It's generous – he's generous – but when I get here I have trouble finding the place.

My wife convinces me, rightly in the end, to leave and preferably arrive before it gets dark. It's the first day of summer holidays. I hit traffic on the M5 and immediately think this is it – this is literally the first day of summer holidays right here. It eases quickly, the rest of the drive straightforward.

The sun's still up when I arrive but my sat nav thinks I'm in the right place when, really, I'm two hundred yards up the hill. I drive in and out of someone else's holiday home then park along the road. I'm given an aerial view with a route drawn in red as well as a photo essay with each twist and turn.

It quickly becomes apparent I don't know how to follow even the simplest instructions but, luck on my side, I meet a middle-aged couple in Lycra with a cabin nearby and the man offers to walk me down the hill to the first twist, the first turn – a cabin with an extension he recognises by name. We get there, a few minutes later, and he walks me to another fork. Here I'm to turn right. He leaves me to it.

I see the next day, in daylight, I'm actually two minutes from Uncle Tom's Cabin when the surprisingly lithe man walks away. The two minutes is down a cliff face, slabs of stone guiding the way along zig-zags and a sheer drop to rocks and sea below.

The night before, though – the sun still up so technically day before – I obviously go wrong somewhere after the man leaves me and end up too far down. I

meet another man with a bushy beard and a different cabin. He looks at my map, says to go down one more zig or zag, turn left and I'll be on top of it.

He's wrong.

I'm on the beach next thing I know, stepping across jagged rocks – the adrenaline meaning I jump two then three at a time – my bag, too heavy before setting off, now killing me. It's like I'm carrying a body.

I might be carrying a body – it has the feel of a place you go to die or at least dispose of someone.

I'm now well beyond where I think the cabin is on my aerial map. Up the cliff I climb again, meeting another couple – tourists – then I see a light on. The sun nearly down, things a bit fraught, no one answers but in the next one along two very friendly women invite me in, one even offering to walk me back to that first fork, which she knows, and help me find it from there.

It begins well, the route in reverse making sense despite the fact we've still not found the cabin. When we get back to the fork we start again, our phone torches the only light left now.

I'm sweating, the bag on my shoulder digging in – I see the next morning, when I go to the outside loo, the bruising and red marks – then the woman slips and slides down the hill. I reach out to help her and instantly feel remorse as my hand snatches under her armpit. We've only just met. She's ok, though. No dead body. Not here anyway.

The next fork I read on my photo essay says to turn left and follow a wooden handrail. We pass it a minute earlier so know it's there on the way back. Next is a zig-zag down the hill, although the directions must mean cliff because I've not seen a hill since parking the car what feels like a week ago. Back along that coast it's

rolling hills then sea – the last time I'm in Cornwall I'm a child, Newquay my dad's resort of choice – but what I'm walking on now is a hill with its teeth kicked in.

We try one cabin, futile, the name nothing like Uncle Tom's then zig-zag some more, down and down and, as I discover in the morning, still nowhere near the foot.

Next in the directions is a picture of a cabin. It says to go back up the hill, around 10 feet, and on the other side is Uncle Tom's. We try it and at last find the right place, the next one along, a sign proving it.

I'm here.

I'm going back.

I'm not spending another night away thinking about how they're better off without me, my unhappiness theirs.

I miss my family – I want to say this out loud and not wait 24 hours before driving home.

I know it's only been one night. I know it's better I stay longer and leave tomorrow. I know they're at my mother-in-law's anyway, not at home, but I think about the gesture of packing up and driving the two hours to get back tonight. Surprising my wife. Showing her what she means to me. Being romantic, something she tells me I never am and I know, when she does, she's right – like the time I write 'Love from Gavin' in a Christmas card, both sides of hers crammed with how much she loves me.

It's not a competition…luckily.

I spend the rest of the day trying to get to the end of what I'm writing. If that's just so I can stop writing it and write something else, think something else, live and breathe and piss something else then that's fine by me.

After I'm done I expect to walk on the beach, down below where I'm sitting, and end up in tears. Like I do in Jersey, searching for Claude Cahun's grave, before I go to Paris, the city sub-zero, a walking cliché within a cliché, a writer wrapped up in an em-dash (smoking a Gauloise).

I expect to feel like it's a defeat, too much and too sad for words.

It's not.

I think of a friend's advice to us, years earlier, on hearing my wife's pregnant with my daughter.

'Go to therapy now,' he says, 'before it's too late.'

We knew better, of course.

Then again – we're still here.

I don't know better but I do know I won't drink today and I'm fairly sure I won't drink tomorrow either. It's that simple. It doesn't have to be more complicated than that.

So I'm going back.

I don't convince myself I'm fine. I know what I am. I also know what I see when I look in the mirror.

Entitled prick?

Yes that – that and a bit of magical thinking.

I'm my father's son and I have the bum-chin to prove it, which, funnily enough, is pretty much the only thing I pass down to my daughter – a good thing maybe, once again, depending on your point of view.

Today starts out bright before the rain comes then clears, the day a jumble. I meet my neighbour, next cabin over. She tells me the best time to go running tomorrow, pointless knowledge given my mind's made up.

I'm going back.

I just need to finish this thought.

Ahead of me now a boat crosses, runs parallel to the horizon, a few light blues resting above the darkness of the sea, where it meets sky, then hard blue and the thinnest of strips to my eye, from here, then below that the greens of water and waves, crashing my way, as if I'm pulling the sea towards me.

An end has a start and for so long I think mine is losing my dad. I lose my dad and I'm angry with everyone – for not being there when he dies, for taking his

money, for not understanding how it feels to lose a parent then become a parent, for making me leave London, for not telling me I'm drinking too much.

Or for not helping me be a better man, for not helping me be a better husband, for not helping me be a better father and instead leaving me behind to work it out for myself.

I'm at the end of going back.

V

We cry when we find out.

My wife's pregnant and my daughter's going to have a little brother or sister.

More than anything, more than ever, this is what we want.

I love my wife like the moment before the moment I say 'I love you' to her for the first time, the two of us close again – after everything.

A week on from the positive, my wife has some bleeding.

We cry again – we thought we knew – but that same day a doctor says the signs are good and tests confirm the pregnancy's still, in his words, 'viable'.

Another week on, the pair of us talking each other out of fearing the worst and into thinking nothing but more positives, we go for a scan.

We hear a heartbeat. More than *viable* this is our baby, alive, there on the screen.

Two weeks later, the heartbeat's gone.

We cry again together – we did know, we did know – more tears and more loss and more death. More nothing.

After everything.

My wife talks in her sleep, asks me, next to her in bed, if the baby's here.

The weeks turn to months and drag on with only the feeling of desolation to show.

Except it's a dialogue – the two of us, once separated by grief, now sharing this singularly devastating pain. We become, in turn, closer.

This is by no means inevitable. Every argument, every disagreement, every perceived slight – we're both of us living on the edge, even if I still find my own brand of sensitivity, anxieties and neuroses, cranked up.

This is what it's like to be in my head.

Push me on it and I'll say I don't look forward to anything in life, not after this.

Push me harder and I'll say I'm still trying to confront my problems and do something about it – all of it.

Push me even harder and I'll say once again it's about failing, the no-hope I'm feeling, living with loss on top of loss.

The fact I don't look forward to anything – it's crystal to me I'm depressed as well as grieving, still and afresh. I choose not to see anyone or get help because I remain convinced I can fight my way out of it. Think I'm too good for it, more like.

Remind you of anyone…

When I stop drinking for six months it seems like a manageable but also significant amount of time, six months another refrain but also enough to come off something clearly doing me harm and deal with whatever it is I'm going through. When I pass the six-month mark I know I'm better off not drinking.

What I don't know is how much I'm not coping with everything else – what makes me drink to excess and, with or without booze, want to self-destruct. It's by

then an almost unimaginable leap for me to look for coke or follow someone into a cubicle or on some days even just get up and walk out of the front door – but the voice is still there.

This time, though, I'm not on my own.

Before all this – before we try again, before we lose again – we drive into the countryside to meet some friends for lunch.

Two of the four at home the night I'm arrested, the friends have two kids now and their own way of doing things but from the outside at least they look happy. I know them – I know the husband well – and I know it's difficult for everyone.

What I really think is, it's more difficult for me than anyone. I can't help it. How can I empathise when I've always got it worse than everyone else?

It's here, on this day, we make plans to try for another baby. We make other plans, too.

We make plans to find another house to rent or buy one nearby. We even table an offer and it's accepted. We fill in the paperwork, pay mortgage fees and solicitor fees. My heart's not in it.

We make plans to move closer to where I work, make my commute and my being the only driver in the family and my everything else easier. My heart's not in it.

We make plans to give it all up, take time off and travel. My heart's not in it.

You leave London and can't go back – I finally realise this but by then it's too late. The city changes, moves on. Friends are getting married or married already, children on the way. Some are gone, to other cities, countries. I'm replaced at the publishers, my job no longer my job. Do I think I can get another one? Maybe – so what's stopping me?

I think I don't want to do it together.

A friend tells me this is classic fight or flight. I feel isolated. My response is to isolate myself further, to imagine new scenarios, better scenarios, where I'm still alone – only, happy.

I tell myself I don't love my wife any more. I love her – she's the mother of my daughter – but I tell myself I'm not *in love* with her. I tell her this, at my worst.

I tell myself this is marriage, the first year, second year, sometimes year after year – but this is marriage and it gets better. It's just what it's like. It's a long game. Some good years, some bad, some somewhere in between.

I tell myself this is what depression feels like.

I tell another friend my fire's gone out – I use those exact words – my spark, my joy, whatever it is that makes me look forward to things and plan for the future. I tell the friend I don't want a life without lust. I'm having a midlife crisis without the fun bit, although where Dad unravels in his forties I fall apart in my thirties, his affair with a younger woman going sideways while my flirtation, more than anything else, is with self-destruction. And I'm no closer to understanding what makes me turn to it.

I later tell my wife it might be easier if I'd met someone else then at least I'd have that to look forward to, a silver lining to the inevitable carnage and its corollary – the quiet despair of us, divorced parents and small child, meeting up at McDonald's together.

My dad would love that.

Loss on loss on loss, I go through the motions of intimacy. I allow her to hug me, kiss me. Sometimes I respond. Mostly I watch myself, once removed, out of body experience. My wife picks up on it. The resentment builds in her, too.

And round it goes.

We watch a crime drama on TV and the detective keeps drinking, staying up all night poring over evidence while (ahem) pouring shot after shot.

'She'd solve it quicker if she stopped getting pissed,' my wife says.

Write with a drink in your hand and see what a mess you make. Have a look the next morning. Now tell me you're a genius and try not to slur your words.

What do I know, teetotal and no more able to write through it than anyone else.

Look at how circumspect this is, here on the page. It's sometimes necessary to write around, though, to tiptoe. Tread carefully. It's the same when it comes to talking. Being lost for words is par, in this case being at a loss more than mere cliché – it's also literal. You lose the person who dies and leaves you as well as the right words to describe how this feels, the precise tone, the suitable imagery to render it as real on the page as in, yes, real life. It doesn't matter if this is at eight weeks, eight years or eighty-eight years.

Words escape me – the words, like the person I lose, they don't exist.

I look inside, mine, no it's more like an excavation into self.

These words still won't do…

It's like turning inside out, like going all the way over on the swings. Inside Out Boy. That's right, it's visceral.

It's also pretentious – here we go again. Writers do good but writers do that better. I definitely do.

The arguing doesn't help. Every time it's the end of the world. Every cross word means breaking up. It's exhausting.

In the kitchen before my wife leaves for work one morning, I summon up as much vitriol as I can, be as mean as I can – not mean, hateful – and tell her if she doesn't like her badly-paid job that's her fault.

The blame game again. How about I blame her for staying off work and at home with my daughter until she's 12 months old rather than six, like we originally agreed, for taking time to find a job, for working part-time at first, for working full-time after that, for resenting me, for hating her job and hating her life almost as much as I hate mine, for not learning how to drive, for us not having any savings left, for me not getting another commission, for me not being able to leave. How about I blame her for us being here instead of in London, for me going off to teach and coming home to chaos, for going out to work and leaving me to write in peace, for everything, even when it makes absolutely no sense and we're both feeling the same pain anyway and why can't I see that. How about I just go ahead and blame her for what I'm feeling right now.

I don't blame her for that.

My daughter hears my voice. She starts to sob. I'm not looking at her – I turn away on purpose – but it's no use. I'm shouting. My wife just looks at me and takes it. Why does she take it – she doesn't want this any more than I do.

Why can't I see that?

There's a young family on the estate near our house. Four, five, six kids – I don't know. What kind of a life, I think. At my worst. Judgemental. Or jealous again. They don't have much but everything they have, I reason at my most unreasonable, is given to them. Everything we have is taken.

I don't mean this but I write it down anyway.

It can't all be about loss, surely. The things I want to fix can be fixed. If not fixed then made better or worse or just different.

But there isn't always a solution, a compromise let alone a happy ending.

Living where you want to live, doing what you want to do, these things I take for granted. I take them for granted until I no longer want to live where I live, do what I do.

Feel how I feel.

So I just write it all down, like I'm actually in one of those automatic writing classes, writing through trauma, summoning it. Seamus Heaney. Digging. It's that looking inside thing. Maybe I'll go to my happy place – wait, where's that again?

This is like sifting through old photos, the shock of seeing yourself as a child, remembering that holiday, that ice cream, that shell suit.

I'm scratching the surface of my happiness or unhappiness, depending on the day, resolving with each to embrace or ignore my resolve to live life this way or that – more positive, more in the moment, more thankful.

Las Vegas. Another holiday. Ticket stub for Cirque du Soleil in that suitcase, the famous one, broken buckle, reminding me. The month before I sign a contract for my debut novel. Four days away with my dad as part of a treat for sales staff – he asks my brother first but I don't hold it against him.

Doesn't sound like me?

We stalk the Strip, listen to snatches of conversations – sharing in the joke, creating in-jokes. There's a barman in our hotel, working through his tips for the new NFL season with a customer.

'I like the Giants…I like the Patriots…I like the Steelers…' he drones on.

Or the day we're due to leave, hours before breakfast and even longer before we have to be at the airport, Dad up and ready in the corner of our shared room, light on in his half, encouraging me to catch some zeds but all the while coughing and sniffing and 'for Christ's sake'ing' in his chair, the least restful lie-in I have before or since.

'I feel terribly, terribly and deeply sorry for people who do not drink because when you get up in a morning that's as good as you're going to feel for the rest of the day,' Sinatra jokes from another Vegas, another time.

I select memories like old photos, like lost letters from my dad – am I still looking? – and I write about them.

The day he dies.

The day our baby dies.

The day I have nothing to write about and I scratch, scratch, scratch until something, anything, comes to the surface.

On my dad's birthday – he would've been 69 – I invent The Hug Monster, a high-stepping tactile beast with a guttural growl who just wants a hug.

He'll hug anything (empty plastic bottle, multi-pack of loo roll) but what he really wants to hug is his daughter who today wants nothing to do with him.

'Go away, Dada,' she says.

My daughter only wants me when my wife tells her off.

Still counts.

The Hug Monster lasts a few minutes, if that. When I try it again upstairs not even my wife laughs along. It's like in *Liar, Liar* when Jim Carrey's character comes up with 'The Claw' and the new guy his ex is seeing tries to do the same – one finger hooked, 'Ooh, you're scared of The Claw…'

The night before, I read a Fitzgerald story called 'I'd Die for You'. It makes me think of Paris and suicide and how as a man I invariably, no matter what, end up feeling sorry for myself.

I'm being unkind again (maybe) but I know what it's like to stop caring.

I've lived with depression.

Oh, and I can't enjoy a drink without turning into a dickhead.

'What people are ashamed of usually makes a good story,' Fitzgerald says – he knew.

I wake up in a better mood than yesterday, though, which is something, my daughter climbing on the bed and letting me tease her, briefly, until she wants her mum's affection instead. My daughter's growing, learning new words and sentences we can understand.

'I can hear the river and it's singing,' she says, out on a walk with my wife.

She can also walk into my office now and watch me as I work. She's becoming stronger, braver. She's already strong, already brave – but each day even more so.

In her first Christmas card, my daughter then only a few months old, I tell her just how brave she is. Not long after that I spend the night in a police cell and return home to tears – my tears – and promise to do better.

My mum texts to say she's thinking of me. I don't reply straight away. I think about it. Think about the words. What I might say. Thank you, maybe.

The effort, I decide, is too much. I feel tight across my chest. Effort – this feeling, here, is making an effort. Making an effort to write it all down. To find words but also to breathe. To overcome the tightness in my chest. To reply to my mum. To make coffee then go into the next room where my daughter's playing with my wife. To meaningfully interact and show them I'm here.

All that is solid melts into air – it's the other way with loss. First we melt, admiring our own hauntology, a ghost and a shell. Once removed from life through death. Spectres and spectators.

In plain language, I am not there.

To make myself solid again takes time, patience, the stages observed a bit too closely. It requires less from others and more, much more, from me.

Blink and the years just fly by…

I might resent the people around me. I might store things up to use later, mid-argument. I might get it off my chest.

Now there's a thought.

This in itself is an effort, the act of forgetting but also remembering, marking, the significance of time passing, perhaps, only significant to me.

I text my mum.

I go into the next room.

I make myself solid again.

VI

We'll always have Paris – I will anyway.

It's 2018, though, not 2012. Practically six years to the day. Six years ago, I leave London for Paris to move on with my life. Here I am, six years later thinking about being a father, losing a father and everything in between.

Before, during and after.

A cycle.

It's exactly five years to the day I tell my wife I love her for the first time. We say it more lately, or we try to anyway.

She says it again this morning, in a text and in a card she hides at the bottom of my bag when I set off a few days earlier – *Strictly only to be opened today*, she writes on the envelope.

When I leave I'm still low and have been for days. I don't know if this, being in Paris, is going to make things worse.

I think about being somewhere else, about being a version of happy or at least happier than I think I am now. I get stuck. Denial. Anger. Bargaining. Depression. I know them all well but whatever happened to acceptance?

Acceptance might be in knowing this is the end while knowing, too, this is nothing of the sort. There is no end. My dad's dead. I'll never not miss him. I'll never not think of things I want to say to him, things I want him to say to me.

Acceptance might even be short-lived.

Now there's a thought.

I can be angry all the time or I can be thankful for a wife who crams two sides of card with how much she loves me, even if she is being a tiny bit competitive. For a daughter who tells me she wants to 'rescue' me from wherever

I’ve gone away to this time and who says to her mum, ‘Dada can’t see Granddad Dada miss him yeah or no?’ And for a dog who doesn’t hold a grudge.

I put on weight.

This is by making a conscious effort, deliberately *not* not eating. Not abstaining. Not going without. Not going hungry.

More bread after I eat bread earlier in the day. Two helpings of pudding when I normally don't even have a pudding. A snack or three between lunch and dinner.

I still look lean, lines on my face where there were none before – but I don't look drawn or, I think, ill.

It's my age, I tell myself.

Skinny but not *too* skinny.

I know, I know…

In Paris I meet up with a writer friend here – the fan of minimalism – and for two hours talk about all this, whatever this is.

He talks to me about why marriage is meant to be inviolable, why men think they have to sow their seed, why we actually have to negotiate the boundaries between adventure (what he calls 'being a man') and responsibility. And what happens when a father leaves his family.

'It doesn't matter whether the kids are kids or 35,' he says.

We meet in an Irish pub on the quai de Jemmapes, the Canal St Martin just outside.

I come here a lot six years ago. I have a picnic with friends on the edge of the water. Some of my best memories revolve around this place and when I travel back to Paris I travel back to 'The Irish'.

'You're looking well,' he says, patting me on the shoulder when he arrives.

By now I don't know whether to contradict but I mumble something about my age, which he waves away.

'Give us a hug.'

I do – I'm glad to see him.

'I never had you pinned,' he says, IPA already waiting for him – he's known in these parts – and alluding to me not drinking or, more specifically, me having a drinking problem.

At his request I give him the 'timeline', from my dad dying to us moving to the country to me getting arrested, giving up alcohol and what follows – the years since.

Then I talk to him about tracing everything back, long before that, the questions I have answers to and the questions I don't.

The start and the end of the cycle.

‘I love my wife,’ I add.

He senses a ‘but’.

I tell him about not wanting to live where we live, about fearing the damage I’m doing by sticking around and being the way I am, the damage I’ll do if I leave and how much I don’t want that.

‘That’s marriage,’ he says, ‘it’s just like the weather.’

I slurp my Perrier, maybe frown – a little one.

‘If it’s cold it’s cold,’ he carries on, ‘that’s just the weather where you live. It’s winter…’ He sups his pint. ‘I hate my wife and it’s only been two months since I married her. Except you don’t hate her. That’s just the way it is.’

I tell myself this is marriage, the first year, second year, sometimes year after year – but this is marriage and it gets better.

As writers, we tap into something when we work. Words have meaning but also weight to us. We don’t unwrite or unsay easily.

Whatever I might sometimes think I write to fix myself. And I reach, strive, to say something to help others, to move, to fix them, too. To reach inside like that – it’s an enervating and invigorating experience. It breaks down and builds back up again. It’s all of life itself, good and bad. Entropy. Like defeat this is the same for everyone but we create order from disorder, meaning from the meaningless, living from – naturally – dying.

That’s what this is.

That’s what it’s all about.

That’s what matters.

I text my wife from the pub. At the same time, before the message sends – I forget to sort roaming when I get off the train at Gare du Nord – she rings me.

'Did you get my message?'

She says no but I can hear my daughter in the background, splashing around in the bath.

'Are you in Lon-don?' my daughter says.

'I'm in Paris.'

The line's bad but I think I hear my daughter groan, 'Ohhh…'

'She's saying, "I love you,"' my wife says.

'I love you too.'

'Yeeeyyy!'

My daughter says 'I love you' to hear 'I love you too' and vice versa, learning requited love verbatim.

I tell my wife I'll FaceTime when I get back to the apartment where I'm staying, sublet from the same friend as six years ago – another Paris, another time, a time when I feel what I need to feel to feel better – but it's now in Belleville rather than the 5th.

After my friend finishes his IPA we say our farewells. He doesn't know – he can't – but what he says to me in these few hours is everything.

I'm wearing a jumper, cashmere cardigan purloined from my mother-in-law who purloined it first technically and a coat, scarf, buttoned and zipped. All those years ago only different.

A new winter.

That's marriage.

It's just like the weather.

I leave the pub and walk up the rue du Faubourg-du-Temple, fast as I can, headphones in but no music, no need for distraction now, just listening to the sound of my own thoughts, eventually running up that hill on the rue de Belleville I'm so desperate to get out of the cold.

‘When my auntie died,’ my barber tells me, the day after I get back from Paris, ‘I took it out on my mum.’

He’s the only one in, the shop quiet.

It turns out a barbershop really is a place for men to talk about being men – for all the nonsense spewed, casual misogyny and homophobia, all the banter, it’s true. It’s not just TalkSport and ‘birds’.

As proof, I tell him about what I’m writing. I don’t launch into it just like that, of course. Instead I look into the mirror and ask him if he thinks men can empathise. One theory is, *in extremis* – grief, depression, alcoholism – our apex of trauma trumps all others. The apotheosis of having a shit time, we look out for number one. Survival. Fight or flight again. More than that, I go on, men can’t walk in your shoes. Men can’t out-of-body-experience another person’s struggle. Men can’t see your side.

I used to get a point-five, longer than a skin fade but shorter than a number one. My wife didn’t like it.

At some angles, I see what she means. From behind, my head quite flat – flat but not too flat, or so I tell myself – the break between hair and no hair blatant, I don’t think I can pull it off.

Let’s face it, the haircut’s the haircut of a plonker.

I get this for a time because I like how short it is, how it feels, how extreme it looks. I give up trying to be hard years ago but that word, *extreme*, resonates. Like my daughter I look for control over the areas of my life I can control. She can say no to having her teeth brushed – until we get fed up – and I can have my hair shaved short.

But I'm beginning to appreciate something – something I only begin to appreciate at all after my daughter's born.

Well after, I know, not straight after.

Still counts?

My wife carries her for the best part of a year then gives birth, all the time sacrificing her comfort, her health, her well-being, for someone else.

There's no getting away from it. Women put their bodies, their lives, on the line for their children in a way we men just don't. They do this physically, not in the way I say I'll do anything for my daughter. I will – I believe, if it comes down to it, I'll step in front of a lorry for her but that's not the same thing. That's not a physical knowing, a literal bond, chemical and emotional, between one person and another.

When my wife's in labour, last push, the midwife says she can't hear the heartbeat. It's common, the baby too far down. My wife panics, stands and pushes with everything she's got.

She's in agony later but in that single moment she gives life and saves it at the same time. She does this with and without thinking. She does this with her own body. Her choice. The bond's complicated, developed over months and tested emphatically to breaking after a baby's born – but it's a real thing, undeniable, which men don't have.

When we lose our baby, though, the sound my wife makes after the bleeding echoing in the bathroom, this stays with me. I can still hear it now. I can still see her face crumpling in on itself like our future, the two of us close again after so long – *after everything* – and I can still feel the uncertainty, all of life itself, if only I shut my eyes.

Male empathy – we *can* empathise, of course, we just don't more often than not. Some men (classic, 'Not all men…') play the modern parent, split the feeds, carry the changing bag around like it's nothing, tilt the head when their wife's talking, rub their partner's back in the middle of the night. Some are better at it than others. Some make it look easy, like it's no effort.

I think I'll be better than I am but I don't force myself to even try and understand what my wife's going through, how hard it is for her, the ways in which it must be harder for her than it is for me.

The dads I talk to after becoming a father myself admit how hard it is to bond in the first few months of a baby's life. The baby, generally speaking, doesn't need you. The baby needs warmth and shelter and milk – and, if being breastfed, a breast. Most of the dads I talk to don't admit how this makes them feel.

I'm not pulling my weight, though. When my daughter's still a baby I tell a friend I get up one day on the weekend so my wife can have a lie-in.

'How magnanimous of you,' he says.

My wife tells me he's being unfair but then, if I'm not pulling my weight and she doesn't feel like she can tell me, she will say that won't she. When she does tell me I don't listen anyway.

I miss my dad and I hate my dad for not being there to help me, even if he went to work when I was a baby and left my mum at home to work it out for herself.

We all did that then, apparently…

While my wife's pregnant with my daughter, I buy a maternity pillow set from Argos. It's the first and last thing I do to help, the only gesture I appear capable of. I think working full-time and writing on top, saving up money and protecting what Dad leaves us, buying a car I only have a licence to drive for three months

before losing it – I think all of this is enough, more than enough in fact. I can do more but don't. She deserves better.

I have no excuse.

The theory about male empathy – that's an excuse, too.

I have to do better, not just promise or try but do (do or do not, there is no try).

Sometimes I feel like I'm on low battery, like I don't have the energy. Sometimes I wonder if I can carry my daughter around she's getting so big. Maybe I'm just feeling some of what my wife's been feeling all this time. If I'm tired, on low battery, what's it like for her?

We share a fresh feeling of loss but she also suffers alone, that feeling uniquely hers. It's bad for me but I know it's worse for her. And I know I have to – somehow – remember this.

So how do you break the cycle? If a life of entitlement, learned and observed, is only half the story then the other half has to be about empathy.

'I've only just started to understand,' my barber says, switching the guard on the clippers to a number two, 'if I talk to my mum about something, about someone I can't get on with, she'll always look at it from their point of view.'

I think about something my mum says, the last time she comes to stay. I'm walking the dog with her, public footpath through fields and a nature reserve near our house – the route, for a while, I walk most days.

She's telling a story about leaving school at 15, top of her class, the headmaster pleading with her to stay on. He says she can go to university. When she stands her ground he sets her up with an interview at a solicitors. She doesn't go to the interview and finds herself a job in a shoe factory instead.

‘I could’ve been an Oxford don…’ she says, once wry smile now just sad as the years pass, her world becoming smaller, the way it does for all of us sooner or later.

I’m one of about five in our year, taken out of class during A-levels – not my first time being removed from the classroom, a ‘chatterbox’, ‘arrogant’, once even likened to boxing promoter Frank Warren for stirring things between two other lads in the yard.

I like to give it, remember, dish it out.

My history teacher says if we want to apply for Oxford or Cambridge we’ll have help. It’s never mentioned again, I don’t think, either at school or at home. I’ll later say Oxbridge isn’t for me, grumble about it being too far away, even though I’m only 15 – Mum’s age leaving school – when I decide I want to move to London as soon as I possibly can. I apply for and get into Sheffield, my brother four years ahead and the first in the family to go to university – my dad proud.

That’s my boy.

I have a panic attack in the second year, suddenly aware of my own mortality, which feels like something to note.

Is this the beginning of all the finger-pointing, though, the anyone but myself recrimination I go through later on?

Do I at the time blame my teachers, my parents, for not encouraging me to apply – wonder why my mum, of all people, doesn’t push me to just go for it?

What makes me think I even get in?

Arrogant…

I’m still a teenager and already blaming women for my shortcomings, my lack of courage, my simply not being good enough.

This is the little prince, my little man, my perfect boy, can't do no wrong, doesn't need to apologise for pushing your kid over in the playground – don't worry, I'll apologise for him, secretly congratulate him on being a tough guy, relieved he wants to kick a ball not talk about his feelings, play with guns and soldiers not dolls, maybe one day he'll marry a nice girl but not yet, not just yet.

And there I go blaming women for how they raise their sons, creating imperfect men from imperfect boys.

Mum changes the subject – she wants to talk about her sister, who died of emphysema on 13th June 2015, two weeks after Dad and, incredibly, right on my mum's partner's birthday.

My auntie was the closest thing she had to a mother. Theirs died when Mum was 13 and she moved in with her big sister, eight years older and married with a little girl of her own. She left school to help pay her way.

'Sometimes I sit on my own at home and I just weep and weep.' She laughs – not much of one. 'I used to tell her things, text her a joke or something about what I was watching on telly. But I know she's not there. She's gone.'

No one person can replace another – my dad or my mum's sister.

'I feel like I'm not really here,' she adds, an echo of my thoughts. 'I go out for a coffee by myself and I watch these women, all together, laughing and joking.'

Outside looking on.

I want to ring up Dad and talk to him about Sheffield Wednesday, his team but ours, too, my brother and mine, growing up (until I chose Manchester United, or Manchester United chose me). I want to hear him say something dark and mean-spirited but still funny, trying to rile me again, his politically correct son who forgets who he is and moves to London and has sex with boys and becomes a model and a

waiter and a writer. I want to organise meeting up, no I want to organise organising meeting up, arrangements made and remade in advance – something else he passes down to me, a planner, nothing like him but also, inevitably, just like him.

I look up as the next customer comes into the barber's wearing a neck-brace. He's broken his back in three places and the brace, for pain relief, helps when he turns his head. He still takes it off for the haircut.

'I run out of talent and I'm spat off the bike,' he says.

The man and a mate have gone biking, downhill – a camera mounted to his helmet.

'The helmet's fucked –'

My barber interrupts, mentions I'm a writer.

'I'll write about this,' I say, 'if that's all right?'

'Yeah, course,' he says. 'You can call it broken-back mountain-biking.'

I laugh.

'Me and my mate didn't snog or anything…' he adds, smiling.

I smile back at him.

'I can just make that bit up.'

Coda

For the first Father's Day after my dad dies, my wife makes a montage – our daughter with me, month by month, the morning of her birth right up to that day.

When my wife writes for her in the card ('Dear Dada') I don't feel whatever it is I'm expecting to feel.

I don't feel what I expect to feel and I don't want to look at the photos, especially the early ones.

I don't want to look at the one of us on the beach in Weston-super-Mare, a couple of months after I'm arrested, even though the original sits in a frame on my office windowsill.

We spend our first Christmas as a three at a friend's house, another photo in the montage. I'm cradling our daughter in front of a giant Christmas tree. What the photo doesn't show is I'm swaying, dancing with her gently, our four-month-old baby half-awake, French music playing through the house speakers, 'Hier encore' by Charles Aznavour.

Like photos from Christmas 2016, my smile strained, I can barely bring myself to look at it now – tree behind us, knowing what comes after. I'm smiling in the photo.

How can that smile be real?

I read the letter my dad writes to open with his Will. This is one of the letters I keep, the letter he writes the night before I get married and other letters from other times either lost or destroyed but, like my dad, gone for good – I really can see that now. The truth is, I'm no longer looking.

I look at us in Weston-super-Mare. A weekday. It's bright and sunny but cool, two figures otherwise alone on a beach. In the photo I'm lifting our daughter up

in the air, some distance between her and my open hands, a little face looking down at me, smiling, hopeful, expectant.

When I look at the photo I might see how my jeans sag in the seat, how I must already be losing weight, or rather the jeans losing elasticity, or both.

Again, though, that's only half the story.

I see her, too. I see a girl who's learning to sit up, begin to crawl. I see a girl then only months off standing and, a few months after that, walking. Nine months old and walking.

One morning after she learns to walk our daughter takes my hand in the bathroom and asks me to dance. A film soundtrack plays through my wife's iPhone. I sway, like the photo of me cradling her in front of a giant Christmas tree. This time, she sways with me.

We sway.

I write to fix myself but she's also fixing me, putting me back together, day by day, moment by moment, piece by piece.

I turn to the other photo – *tree behind us, knowing what comes after* – the letter my dad writes to open with his Will still in my hand.

I'm smiling.

And the smile – like a teardrop on that letter, light blue ink of my dad's last words to me beginning to run – is real.

Gavin

You have come a long way Gavin since the days when you were made to ride a very heavy bike round Burnley & the day when we were all going out – you were sat on your own in the lounge when your brother thought it would be great fun to explode a bag of crisps over your head – just as I came back into the room to find you covered in broken crisps & your brother disappearing behind a door into the kitchen!!

You have come through family problems to become a strong & determined young man – confident in everything you do & positive in what you want.

You always were determined to do well at all sports & school, get your GCSE's, 'A' levels & go to University to receive your degree.

You made a success of your modelling career & were also determined to write, have your own books published & develop a career in publishing, writing & now script writing as well – All of which you have succeeded in achieving.

But more importantly than all this, because of the qualities shown to you by your Mother, you are also a caring & thoughtful person who listens to other people & cares about their feelings.

You have now met a girl & family with the same qualities who you can share your life with & I hope you will both have a long & very happy life together.

I am proud to have you as a Son, proud of everything you have achieved & very proud of the person you are.

Have a great future

Dad.

DESCENT

FADE IN:

1 EXT. ADAM AND LAURA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

On black and white - and a fire engulfing, no, swallowing up a detached.

The roof caving in, hose on it from all angles, N/S FIREFIGHTERS down below losing the fight.

Flames spitting into the evening sky as we -

CUT TO:

2 INT. SAUNA - NIGHT

Skin and steam - and in the middle of it all, EDWARD (37, full beard).

Up in one corner, his legs slightly apart, the room around him a square - intimate, you might say, there's space for a dozen but it's more like a baker's in here so a bit of touching's inevitable, if not exactly invited, shoulder to shoulder, thigh to thigh.

The edge - banks of wooden slats, like terraces, stacked one then two on three of four sides, adult N/S patrons above, like EDWARD, resting feet below, glass doors opening in and out.

Coming and going are all shapes and sizes.

Mostly men, mind you, only one woman and she's with a bloke - DANI and ANDY (both 30-something), fit pair, look like they yoga together, lean, shaved, matching tans and tats.

Next to them an older man (STEVE, 40), big fucker, hairy chest, tree-trunk legs - he lifts but it could be buses from the size of him.

STEVE shuffles over and the couple steal a kiss, aware of the unit next to them.

EDWARD watching - doesn't look away, doesn't even blink.

Then STEVE rubs himself through his towel, slow and steady, protracted motion.

Surely not...

No mistake - STEVE’s touching his penis.

The couple are getting off with each other now, full on latch.

EDWARD still watching.

DANI, mid-snog, reaches behind her and strokes the back of STEVE’s leg, slender hand running up and under his towel.

He removes it for her, the gent.

First time?

Don’t be squeamish - like EDWARD we’re invested now, can’t look away, can’t unsee anyway.

Let’s leave them to it, though, because it’s only polite and now’s a good time for TITLES - DESCENT - before we –

CUT TO:

3 INT. MEETING ROOM - DAY - PART I

12 MONTHS EARLIER on screen and ADAM (36, eyes two dots enveloped in dark circles) leaning back in a chair, bare table and identical seat in front of him.

The room plain but stuffy, no windows apart from a single pane in the door.

EDWARD - clean-shaven here, noticeably and literally younger than before - opens it, walks in looking fresh-faced compared to ADAM - compared to the sauna - pulls it to with a reassuringly mechanical clunk, rests a brown leather briefcase, buckle fastener, by the empty chair.

A beat, ADAM closing those dark eyes - not a blink, more like he’ll never open them again.

And we're outside the room - one look through the glass - then -

CUT TO:

4 EXT. ADAM AND LAURA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

That fire raging in black and white.

Now a fire engine and an ambulance and a lawn, lovely edge on it, dotted with the N/S FIREFIGHTERS.

Through the front door a stretcher, man with a mask covering his face - ADAM, shirtless, his hair wet - and the N/S AMBULANCE CREW about to load him up.

ADAM screams, through the mask, louder when he pulls it down.

ADAM
The boys-

A crew member puts the mask back on.

Then we get ADAM's POV, stretcher lifting us up the step and safely on board, one last look at the house - the doors closing as we -

CUT TO:

5 INT. EDWARD'S HOUSE. SITTING ROOM - NIGHT

A cigarette ablaze and in full colour - EDWARD, beard again here, smoking in an armchair.

The back room of the house sparse, all beige everything. The word's 'neutral'. Three-piece, carpets - everything. There's a coffee table with a pile of coasters and an unlit candle, ornamental, the television - off - over in the corner, facing the chair EDWARD's currently in, ash tray on the armrest. From the looks of it he lives alone and likes it that way. Apart from the dog, proud-looking mongrel by his feet.

EDWARD inhaling - before we -

CUT TO:

6 INT. ADAM AND LAURA'S HOUSE. BATHROOM - NIGHT

ADAM, B&W, running a bath.

He's naked - but there's no commotion, no screaming, no firefighters or ambulance crew.

Things almost serene, unwinding, a typical evening at the end of a typical day.

Apart from the smoke alarm sounding O/S.

Glass of water and two bottles of pills - the label, clear to us, says Zopiclone - by the edge of the sink.

A beat, before he empties one into his mouth and swallows half the water.

Another beat, before he repeats.

Doesn't look at himself in the mirror - splash his face, reflect on his reflection - just gets in the bath.

The steam mixing with the smoke coming from outside the room, crack under the door, alarm still going O/S as we -

CUT TO:

7 INT. EDWARD'S HOUSE. FRONT ROOM / HALL - NIGHT

EDWARD at the front window.

Behind him a glass table with four chairs, placemats and runner along the centre - set up but untouched, unused. He twitches the blinds, peeks outside.

Walks into the hall and picks up some post, bills - the red lettering a giveaway.

Stacks them together, adds to an already impressive pile in the drawer of a sideboard, even presses down to close it.

Moves to the front door.

Opens it, bit tentative.

No one there.

EDWARD
Kids.

Probably.

EDWARD stepping out, front step - we stay indoors, though - then -

CUT TO:

8 INT. ADAM AND LAURA'S HOUSE. BOYS' BEDROOM - NIGHT

ADAM in the doorway - white of the landing light behind him, black of the dark bedroom ahead.

Two boys, DAVID and CHRISTOPHER (both 4), in single beds.

A beat, before ADAM walks into the room and sits down on the edge of DAVID's bed.

Looks to the doorway.

Sees the light.

Turns back to DAVID.

Gets up to straighten the pillow under his head.

Beat.

A father watching his sons sleeping.

Then ADAM pulls the pillow out from under DAVID's head and presses down, both hands, arms, shoulders and the weight of his own body - a man's body - on the dreaming child.

A moment - nothing more - then nothing.

ADAM looks over at CHRISTOPHER, not even stirring, DAVID's pillow still in his hand.

Moves over to CHRISTOPHER and, even less time, smothers his one remaining son.

Another moment - another nothing.

Lifts DAVID's head, places the pillow back under.

ADAM walking out of the room - away from the darkness and back into the light - before we -

CUT TO:

9 EXT. EDWARD'S HOUSE - NIGHT

EDWARD finishing his cigarette, flicking the tab end over a parked car then turning to go back inside.

A girl (15 but like she's seen a few things, black eye for good measure) on the wall to the side of the house - MARY.

MARY
Cool...

EDWARD hesitates, before MARY invites herself in.

EDWARD
Shoes!

MARY ignoring him - EDWARD after her - then -

CUT TO:

10 INT. EDWARD'S HOUSE. SITTING ROOM / KITCHEN - T/C

EDWARD trailing behind MARY - her coat chucked over the sofa. The dog jumps up at her.

MARY
You got fat, Spider.

MARY gives the dog a kiss then looks at EDWARD.

MARY (CONT'D)
Are you still feeding him pork pies?

EDWARD
He likes them.

MARY
Looks like he likes everything. Is it normal for a dog to wheeze?

MARY walks into the kitchen, EDWARD following.

The kitchen's a galley, tiny extension to the two-up, two-down, everything in its place.

She puts the kettle on.

EDWARD
What do you want?

MARY
Got any three mint? No but seriously. If he gets any bigger they'll have to take the wall off your house, like them fat bastards on Jeremy Kyle.

EDWARD
Jerry Springer. What do you want?

MARY digs in the cupboards, takes stuff out - EDWARD putting everything back as she goes.

MARY
Normal will do.

Tea bags and sugar by the kettle.

MARY bites the packet of sugar to open it.

EDWARD
Let me do it.

EDWARD snatches the sugar, grabs a mug from the side.

MARY
You don't even know how I take it.

EDWARD
Free, two sugars?

MARY
Why are you so grumpy all the time?

He pours.

MARY (CONT'D)
Aren't you even a little bit happy to see me?

Stirs.

EDWARD
I'll ask you a third time.
What do you want?

She doesn't answer.

MARY going into the sitting room and EDWARD left possing as we -

CUT TO:

11 INT. ADAM AND LAURA'S HOUSE. SITTING ROOM - DAY

DAVID and CHRISTOPHER either side of ADAM on the sofa.

TV in the corner - cartoons but, just like the rest of the scene, no colour.

Watching together - the three of them - before we -

CUT TO:

12 INT. EDWARD'S HOUSE. SITTING ROOM - NIGHT

MARY changing channels from EDWARD's chair.

EDWARD sits a cup of tea down next to her, moves her hair to the side - looking at the black eye.

EDWARD
How did you get that?

MARY
Finally.

EDWARD
Well?

MARY
How's Dad?

EDWARD
Like you care.

MARY
Sure.

She settles on cartoons, turns the volume right down.

EDWARD
Not good. He’s getting more...

MARY
What?

EDWARD
Difficult, I suppose.

MARY
How long’s he got?

EDWARD
A few years maybe.

MARY
Maybe? Aren’t you meant to be a doctor?

EDWARD
Not that kind of doctor.

He stays close, looks at the TV.

EDWARD (CONT’D)
They normally say eight years from when it starts. It can be longer.

MARY
How much do you see of him?

EDWARD
A lot more than you do.

MARY
Here, have a gold star.

She pins nothing on his chest.

EDWARD
I take him to church.

EDWARD moves away, sits down on the sofa.

MARY
You mean...once a week?

MARY’s mouth open in faux-shock.

MARY (CONT'D)
Is that it?

EDWARD
He has a carer, which I pay for.

MARY
You can afford it, moneybags.

She palms some imaginary money into the ether, like EDWARD's lounge is a strip club.

MARY (CONT'D)
Spending that NHS money, which I pay for.

EDWARD
You're 15.

Beat.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
I'm not working at the minute actually.

MARY
All right for some...

EDWARD
I'm on gardening leave.

MARY
You don't have a garden.

MARY gesturing to the back window - then -

CUT TO:

13 EXT. EDWARD'S HOUSE. BACKYARD - DAY

EDWARD following the dog around, wind blowing, rain coming down - looks like fun.

Not a plant or plastic furniture or even one of those little barbecues you use once and forget to throw away - nothing in the yard but broken paving.

The dog squatting and the human catching, little black bin bag covering one hand as we -

CUT TO:

14 INT. EDWARD'S HOUSE. SITTING ROOM - NIGHT

EDWARD standing by the TV - now off.

EDWARD
We call it a sabbatical.

MARY
We call it skiving.

EDWARD
Why are you here?

MARY
Can I stay?

Hesitates again.

EDWARD
What about school?

MARY
Ever heard of buses...

Looks away.

EDWARD
There isn't room.

MARY
You've got two bedrooms.

Sits back down on the sofa then looks at MARY.

EDWARD
Tell me why you're here.

MARY
I don't know.

A beat.

MARY (CONT'D)
Mum kicked me out.

EDWARD
Not my mum. Not my problem.

She stiffens her spine, mimicking him.

MARY
Not my mum. Not my problem.

Another beat, before MARY smiles her sweetest smile.

EDWARD
One night.

He sits back - resigned.

MARY
Sleepover!

She kicks her legs in the air - excited.

EDWARD
One. Night.

MARY's feet dancing - trainers still on - then -

CUT TO:

15 INT. ADAM AND LAURA'S HOUSE. BEDROOM - DAY

The final scene in our B&W sequence, LAURA (28) stuffing clothes into a suitcase and ADAM standing on the far side of the bed - big window behind him, lots of daylight, ADAM a silhouette.

The stuff - shirts, shoes, socks - all clearly his.

LAURA
I told you this would happen.

ADAM
Keep your voice down. The boys are asleep.

But ADAM's calm, still - doesn't move from next to the bed.

LAURA
I want you gone.

She walks into the bathroom, starts to clear out a cupboard above the sink.

A beat, before she comes back, empties the toiletries into the case and closes it.

Now he goes for her.

ADAM
Please.

Clutches her arm, elbow joint, tight.

LAURA
Have you been drinking?
It’s 10 o’clock.

LAURA shakes him off but ADAM steps in her way, the two of them face to face.

Another beat.

Then ADAM grabs her - not her arm this time, no, this is both hands around her throat.

She struggles but he pushes her against the wall by the foot of the bed, hard, her head cracking and the force of the impact knocking over a lamp.

Eyes wide open she kicks out - gasps - but he turns and forces her down onto the bed.

Seconds is all it takes, legs still kicking arms throwing then nothing.

Another nothing.

ADAM collapses on top of LAURA.

A final beat.

He starts to sob.

Stops.

Composes himself.

No sound now - all quiet - before we -

CUT TO:

16 INT. EDWARD’S HOUSE. LANDING / SPARE BEDROOM / BATHROOM - NIGHT

EDWARD looking in on MARY, the girl sleeping.

He’s in the doorway - light of the landing light behind him, darkness of the bedroom ahead.

EDWARD walks one door along.

Doesn’t splash his face then look in the mirror - does look at a bottle of tablets, though, there by the side of the sink.

Picks it up.

Zopiclone.

A beat.

A reminder.

EDWARD (PRE-LAP)
You’ve not talked to the police.

EDWARD shaking the bottle - empty - binning the container as we -

CUT TO:

17 INT. MEETING ROOM - DAY

EDWARD sitting with ADAM opposite.

Behind ADAM, high up on the wall, a clock.

EDWARD watches it, a beat, turns to ADAM - no eye contact.

ADAM
Where are you from?

EDWARD
Round here.

Beat.

EDWARD (CONT’D)
Not far from you...

ADAM finally meets EDWARD’s gaze - EDWARD looking back at ADAM with something close to care - then -

CUT TO:

18 INT. EDWARD'S HOUSE. MASTER BEDROOM - NIGHT

EDWARD lying in bed, a street-lamp lighting up the room enough for us to see it's tidy, plain bedding, no clutter, no furniture and no clothes piled up on furniture - just the bare minimum.

His eyes open, wide awake.

And another voice O/S - ADAM.

ADAM (O/S)
Why are we here?

A beat.

EDWARD (O/S)
Why do you think we're here?

EDWARD staring at the ceiling - crack down the centre - before we -

CUT TO:

19 EXT. SCHOOL. CAR PARK / MAIN BUILDING - DAY - PART II

MARY crossing in front of moving cars, parents at drop-off, one of them pipping her - pointless, headphones on and head somewhere else.

She's in uniform, sort of, skirt rolled up two or three times on the waist, trainers instead of proper shoes, no tie.

LEANNE with a N/S GIRL on the steps to the entrance (both of them 15 - and both of them talking about MARY, it seems, given the nudges and the pointing).

LEANNE
Slag...

Oh, and that.

MARY pushing through the doors and giving not one shit - and the girls the middle finger - then -

CUT TO:

20 EXT. JOHN’S HOUSE - DAY

EDWARD parking his car across from a terraced house.

Two teenage boys playing with a football, standing on opposite pavements - MICKEY and SHANE, houses behind them boarded up not with wood but steel.

EDWARD gets out of his car and boots the ball away.

The boys jeer him, ball under another car further down the street.

MICKEY and SHANE glare at EDWARD.

SHANE
Fag it then, you prick.

MICKEY
Tell your dad I said hello.

SHANE
And tell him I said he’s a miserable bastard.

EDWARD under the car.

Turns back to the lads.

SHANE (CONT’D)
Knocked on for my Christmas tips. Didn’t give me owt. I know he’s got it.

Comes back with the ball.

MICKEY
You playing, Eddie?

EDWARD rummages in his pockets and digs out a fiver.

EDWARD
Here...

Hands SHANE the fiver.

SHANE
He’s still a miserable bastard.

EDWARD approaching one of the actual doors as we -

CUT TO:

21 INT. MEETING ROOM - DAY

ADAM rubbing his face - beard, nose, eyes - trying to wipe the feeling away.

EDWARD
Why are we here...

EDWARD pulls out pen and paper.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
Well, the object of the exercise-

ADAM
The object of the exercise?

ADAM manages to laugh - to himself - after he interrupts.

ADAM (CONT'D)
That's something my dad used to say.

A beat.

ADAM (CONT'D)
And before you say it - yes, I fucking hated him.

ADAM looking at EDWARD - then -

CUT TO:

22 EXT. JOHN'S HOUSE - DAY

EDWARD following the game, SHANE throwing the ball short of the opposite kerb.

Two voices O/S now - blast from the past - EDWARD and ADAM.

EDWARD (O/S)
The object of the exercise...

MICKEY's go.

ADAM (O/S)
We were on holiday. Think it Was Spain. Mallorca probably. Fancy a game of bat and ball?

Throws the football, misses SHANE's kerb by a mile.

SHANE
Unlucky!

ADAM (O/S)
We'd stand there in the sea, a few feet apart, a few feet from the shore. Paddling.

EDWARD (O/S)
Where's your mum?

ADAM (O/S)
Watching. Not watching. Who cares. To me, to you – remember that?

SHANE's turn.

SHANE
Look and learn.

A beat, before he throws.

ADAM (O/S)
After a while, I'd get bored - I wanted to win.

SHANE hits the opposite kerb and catches the ball as it lands in the middle of the road.

SHANE
Two points...

ADAM (O/S)
When the ball looped up - high, sun in our eyes - smash! I'd volley it back down, hard as I could, back down into the sea. Splashing my dad in the process.

MICKEY
It bounced.

ADAM (V.O.)
He'd always say, 'The object of the exercise is to keep the rally going.' He didn't understand. I wanted to win.

SHANE
And the crowd goes wild!

SHANE lifts both arms, fists clenched, drops to his knees - as if he's just won the World Cup of kerby.

MICKEY just shakes his head.

ADAM (O/S)
You think that means something, I suppose.

EDWARD (O/S)
Don't you?

Beat.

ADAM (O/S)
Not everything has to Mean something.

Back to EDWARD, following everything from the doorstep as we -

CUT TO:

23 INT. MEETING ROOM - DAY

ADAM leaning back in his chair, EDWARD writing on his pad.

ADAM
What do you want to know? That I'd like to kill my dad? Or that I'd like to kill myself?

A beat.

ADAM (CONT'D)
Second time lucky.

A smile, more rueful than anything.

ADAM (CONT'D)
I couldn't even get that right.

The smile cracks.

ADAM (CONT'D)
Out with it then - why are we here?

EDWARD
Why do you think we're here?

No physical reaction, body language as if to say: nice try.

ADAM
You're the expert.

EDWARD scribbles something.

ADAM cranes to sneak a look.

ADAM (CONT'D)
What are you saying?

A long beat.

ADAM (CONT'D)
Come on, I can take it. Borderline personality? Bipolar? Bit sad?

ADAM pulls a sad face.

EDWARD looks up again.

EDWARD
We're here to determine whether or not you're fit to enter a plea and face trial for the murder of your wife and two children.

ADAM dropping the act - straight-faced or poker face - hard to say - before we -

CUT TO:

24 INT. JOHN'S HOUSE. HALL - DAY

EDWARD hovering in the hall of a house that's not been decorated in a generation, beige paint

on chipboard faded, the only exception a strip of tinsel above the door.

Hanging proudly where EDWARD comes in, some photos of a teenage boy, all teeth - JOE (15).

EDWARD straightens one of them.

JOHN (O/S)
Don't touch that.

JOHN (69 but could be 79 - crumbling with age) in hat and coat, frail on frame.

ISABELLE (30, pretty in carer uniform, not that she knows it) just behind - just in case.

EDWARD
Merry Christmas.

Not clear who that's to.

A beat, before EDWARD looks at a fibre-optic Christmas tree on a side table.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
What happened to the tree I got you?

JOHN
She took it to the tip. Bloody needles all over the shop. This is still my house, no matter who you move in here.

EDWARD glances at ISABELLE.

ISABELLE
I actually wanted fake snow.

Smiles and shrugs - she's heard it all before.

EDWARD looks at the photo again, turns to JOHN.

EDWARD
I thought we could go by the grave first.

JOHN
Not likely. You're late.

EDWARD
And you owe me a fiver. I had to give Shane his tip. He's your paperboy.

JOHN
He's always late and all.

JOHN leads the way, EDWARD catching his reflection in a mirror opposite the photos.

ISABELLE
Beard suits you.

EDWARD
What about the white hairs?

ISABELLE
Right time of year – are you here for your tea?

EDWARD
I can't.

Leaves it at that.

Then turns back, eyes the stairs next to ISABELLE.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
Mind if I...

ISABELLE
Of course not.

She steps to one side.

ISABELLE (CONT'D)
I'll even let you use the lift.

EDWARD looking back at her - now the stairlift at the foot - forcing a smile - then -

CUT TO:

25 INT. JOHN'S HOUSE. LANDING / BEDROOM - DAY

EDWARD passing the bathroom and walking straight into JOHN's room.

Double bed, dresser, armchair in one corner - dated but immaculate, too, no indication JOHN - or anyone, come to think of it - actually sleeps in here.

EDWARD doesn't waste any time, just heads for the wardrobe in the back.

Slides out a brown leather briefcase, buckle fastener, old-fashioned, the sort of thing people might keep to keep things that need keeping.

No bother, finds what he's looking for - an open A4 envelope - and pulls out what's inside.

A beat, before he looks over his shoulder.

Reading it again to make sure as we -

CUT TO:

26 INT. MEETING ROOM - DAY

EDWARD going through a file in front of him.

EDWARD
Was he a good father?

ADAM
Nosey bas-

ADAM stops short.

A beat.

And a little laugh - to himself again.

EDWARD
We can talk about something else.

ADAM lets the half-smile, tail end of that laugh, slip.

ADAM
Yes. He was a good father. He was always there anyway, if I needed him. He'd take me to football, watch me play.

EDWARD
Why did you hate him?

ADAM
I remember him standing on the side of the pitch, screaming at me. 'You're offside!' I was 10.

EDWARD
Baby-lining.

EDWARD puts the file down on the table.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
When you just stand near the goal and wait for the ball. That's what we called it.

ADAM
Permies or rushies. Jumpers for goalposts. 17-12, next goal wins...

ADAM looks at EDWARD.

ADAM (CONT'D)
My dad would join in sometimes. On the fields near our house.

EDWARD
Before the divorce?

Beat.

ADAM
Before the divorce.

ADAM smiling again - rueful again - then -

CUT TO:

27 INT. CHURCH - DAY

JOHN managing to genuflect at the back and refusing EDWARD's arm - mass in full flow, the handful of parishioners staring at the two latecomers.

EDWARD helps JOHN into a pew near the front.

FATHER MICHAEL (still a young 37, despite his best efforts to grow a beard - trendy priest,

mind - they look like Birkenstocks) with the Lord's Prayer.

FATHER MICHAEL
Our Father...

EDWARD the only one not joining in as we -

CUT TO:

28 INT. MEETING ROOM - DAY

ADAM leaning forwards, EDWARD writing again.

EDWARD
Tell me about the affair.

ADAM
Is this how you fuck?

EDWARD looks up.

ADAM (CONT'D)
No foreplay - just straight in there.

A beat.

ADAM (CONT'D)
We've become so emasculated we actually compete with other men at how much we can be just like women.

EDWARD
The crisis in masculinity.

ADAM
Suppose you wrote a paper on it.

EDWARD
Not that kind of doctor.

ADAM
What kind are you then?

Another beat.

ADAM (CONT'D)
I see. The quiet kind - I've had a few of you.

EDWARD
Really?

EDWARD picks up the file, goes through it again.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
When was this?

ADAM
Oh, I get it - you're Cracker. L-I-V, E-R-P, double-O-L, Liverpool F.C.

Full scouse Robert Carlyle.

ADAM (CONT'D)
You're meant to go... (Scottish accent here) Cel-tic! Cel-tic!

EDWARD sets the file down again.

ADAM (CONT'D)
My dad told my mum he wasn't a babysitter. She told him you can't babysit your own children. There's no such thing. Still makes me laugh, even now.

Beat.

ADAM (CONT'D)
We're not expected to be like women, apart from when we are. And even then we're not allowed to talk about it.

ADAM stretches in his chair.

ADAM (CONT'D)
The crisis in masculinity.

EDWARD
Did you babysit?

ADAM
Christopher wouldn't sleep on his back. I'd put him in a sling, all night, just walk around. One time he was sick on me, 3am, about two miles from home. Nothing open. I didn't

have a change of clothes so I carried him, no top on, me bare-chested-

EDWARD
Were you going to tell your wife?

ADAM
Whatever works for you, people say - but what they don't say is none of it works-

EDWARD
Before she found out.

ADAM lets out a guttural, primal moan, his version of the fake orgasm scene in When Harry Met Sally.

A long, awkward beat - no reaction from EDWARD.

ADAM
Don't know about you but I need a cigarette after that.

ADAM winking at EDWARD - then -

CUT TO:

29 INT. CHURCH. CONFESSIONAL - DAY

JOHN looking ahead, FATHER MICHAEL on the other side of the partition - neither man speaking.

FATHER MICHAEL
Joe will be in my prayers today.

JOHN looks through the partition, unsure where he is or why he's here or maybe both.

FATHER MICHAEL (CONT'D)
Would you like to talk about him, John?

A beat.

FATHER MICHAEL (CONT'D)
Or would you prefer to talk about

Edward?

JOHN staring through the partition, eyes boring at the wood as we -

CUT TO:

30 INT. MEETING ROOM - DAY

ADAM slumping in his chair, EDWARD sitting up straight in front of him.

ADAM
I know everything I know about women from my dad.

EDWARD
Did you blame your mum?

ADAM
My mum wasn't a strong person. She was quite weak, really. And for years I used to think she let him be the way he was. Get away with the things he did.

A beat.

ADAM (CONT'D)
The other women, I mean.

EDWARD
What about now?

ADAM rubs his face.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
Have you been sleeping?

ADAM
Not really.

EDWARD
When did this start?

ADAM
The first night.

EDWARD
The first night in here?

ADAM
The first night.

Another beat.

EDWARD
How old were you when he left you?

ADAM
He didn't leave me.

ADAM not looking at EDWARD here.

ADAM (CONT'D)
He left my mum.

ADAM still avoiding EDWARD's gaze - over at the door - then -

CUT TO:

31 EXT. CHURCH - DAY

EDWARD helping JOHN outside, FATHER MICHAEL in the doorway.

FATHER MICHAEL
Nice beard, Eddie.

EDWARD nods.

FATHER MICHAEL
(CONT'D)
My door's always open. It's more of a curtain but you know what I mean.

FATHER MICHAEL smiles wide.

EDWARD
I can never think of anything to say.

FATHER MICHAEL
I find that hard to believe – no offence.

Smiles again, even wider.

EDWARD
None taken.

JOHN stumbles - but EDWARD's there.

JOHN
Joe...

EDWARD
I’m not Joe. I’m Edward.

A beat, JOHN eyeing him.

JOHN
I know who you are.

JOHN struggling on - EDWARD a few steps behind - before we -

CUT TO:

32 INT. MEETING ROOM - DAY

ADAM standing by the door now, single pane, EDWARD still sitting.

ADAM
He wasn’t a good father.

A beat.

EDWARD
I know.

ADAM turns.

ADAM
Then why did you ask?

EDWARD not looking at ADAM here.

EDWARD
It’s my job.

Now stands.

EDWARD (CONT’D)
And I’m a nosey bastard.

EDWARD making eye contact with ADAM as we -

CUT TO:

33 I/E. EDWARD’S CAR - NIGHT

EDWARD smoking in his car - the only light inside that amber glow.

Outside, his headlights.

He’s in a car park, more like a lay-by - in any case the car high up, above the town, a twinkle of orange street-lamps down below.

One other car two spaces along, headlights on, driver smoking with a friend in the passenger seat.

A beat, before the passenger door opens.

EDWARD stubs out the cigarette - his ashtray overfloweth.

Now TRACEY (40, white blonde, shiny black boots and lots of leg) bending over his bonnet, facing the murky windshield, hitching up her backside for DEAN (40, grey blonde) now neatly behind her.

Lovebirds pounding away, before a third car pulls in - two spaces along the other side.

EDWARD in the middle again.

Another beat, before he gets out of the car.

This time EDWARD joining in - then -

CUT TO:

34 INT. MEETING ROOM - DAY

ADAM sitting now, EDWARD opposite.

ADAM
My dad left before I was born.

EDWARD letting ADAM go.

ADAM (CONT’D)
I never met him, never even tried. Might be long dead. Might be living just outside Birmingham.

He laughs, as if living just outside Birmingham is funny.

ADAM (CONT’D)
But you know that, don’t you.

ADAM's eyes tearing now as we -

CUT TO:

35 INT. EDWARD'S HOUSE. SITTING ROOM / HALL - NIGHT

MARY in EDWARD's chair, TV on, some birds migrating across the screen.

The front door O/S.

MARY doesn't move, EDWARD lingering in the doorway for a beat then switching the telly off.

MARY
I was watching that.

Walks into the hall, MARY's things everywhere - bag, coat, phone charger - gathers it all up.

MARY (CONT'D)
I said I was watching that.

EDWARD
And I said one night.

MARY in the doorway to the hall now.

MARY
What are you doing?

She goes to stop him - EDWARD pulling the bag then pushing her arm away.

MARY (CONT'D)
That hurt.

EDWARD
Oh yeah?

MARY
Yeah.

EDWARD
How did you get that black eye?

MARY
You can barely even see it.

She laughs - not fooling anyone.

EDWARD
How did you get it?

MARY
I didn't do it to myself,
did I?

EDWARD doesn't answer, doesn't look like he cares either way.

MARY (CONT'D)
Fine. If you want me to
go I'll go.

A beat - MARY putting on her coat but taking her time, EDWARD hanging back.

He bites, looks at her.

EDWARD
So where will you go?

MARY
What do you care?

EDWARD
You're right, I don't.

Not as convincing this time.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
Look, if you want to
piss your life away
that's your choice.

MARY
Says you?

Beat.

MARY (CONT'D)
Anyway you're not my dad.
You're not even really my
brother.

EDWARD
I wish.

MARY
Fuck you.

EDWARD walks back into the sitting room and switches the telly on, some distraction, skips through channels until he finds the news - the weather actually.

MARY in the hall.

She's halfway out but waits - stinking rain never stops - has a rethink.

Heads back into the sitting room.

MARY (CONT'D)
You really don't care, do you?

No, he doesn't - the news with the sound down, aerial shot of some big houses.

EDWARD
(not looking at her)
You're a child, do you know that?

MARY
Duh.

She tries to smile - but he's still not looking at her.

MARY (CONT'D)
You don't get it.

EDWARD turns the volume up, FAMILY KILLER on a rolling ticker, hard to make out anything else with MARY talking.

MARY (CONT'D)
Haven't you worked it out yet?

Female reporter - GEMMA (30) - in front of one of those big houses.

MARY raises her voice even higher.

MARY
I'm pregnant.

GEMMA (O/S)
Gemma Robbins, North West Tonight.

EDWARD turning to MARY - then -

CUT TO:

36 INT. EDWARD'S HOUSE. SPARE BEDROOM - DAY -

PART III

MARY waking up - young now, her make-up off.

There's a beat as she looks around the box room, everything quiet.

She reaches for her phone on the side - cup of tea, untouched, next to it.

And next to that, a note: TAKE SPIDER FOR A WALK. A LONG ONE. EDDIE

MARY sipping her tea as we -

CUT TO:

37 INT. EDWARD'S HOUSE. SITTING ROOM / KITCHEN - DAY

MARY watching telly, feet in bedsocks and over the armrest.

The sound of the front door O/S - EDWARD already in the doorway.

She sits up.

MARY
I'm in your chair...

EDWARD
It's fine.

A beat, EDWARD nudging a pair of trainers - tucked away behind the door - with his toe.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
I'm impressed.

MARY grins, invisible halo above her head.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
Put the fire on - I can see your breath.

She glances at the ugly brown thing to her left, grill panel.

MARY
Does that even work? Looks older than you.

He smiles then walks into the kitchen, opens cupboards O/S.

MARY changes channels, reality after reality - not settling on one.

EDWARD (O/S)
When's your next scan?

MARY
Tomorrow morning. First thing.

She shudders.

EDWARD (O/S)
Got anything on tonight?

MARY
Just staying in. If that's ok.

EDWARD (O/S)
It's fine.

He's back now - another smile.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
Fine fine fine - I just wondered...

MARY changes channel again.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
...if you wanted to come with me to see Dad.

MARY
No way am I going to church. I'll burn if I cross the threshold. Do you call it a threshold?

EDWARD
Church was this morning. You know what morning is, don't you? The bit before you get up.

MARY
Lol.

Not like she means it.

EDWARD
Anyway I said I'd make his tea. Well, I thought I'd get fish and chips.

MARY
I'm going to take Spider round Towneley Park later.

The dog hears 'walk' and jumps up at her, on her lap.

MARY (CONT'D)
You're on a new regime, aren't you Spider? Lean mean fighting machine.

EDWARD
Not sure about mean. He's soft as-

MARY
Don't be jealous.

EDWARD watches the dog on MARY, comfy.

EDWARD
Traitor.

Smoke from the kitchen – EDWARD turning on heels.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
Jesus wept.

MARY smirking.

MARY
And well He bloody might.

Smoke alarm going off O/S – then

CUT TO:

40 INT. JOHN'S HOUSE. SITTING ROOM / HALL – NIGHT

EDWARD and MARY on a sofa, three-piece suite, JOHN in one of the other armchairs, closest to the TV – single light coming from that corner – all eating out of the paper.

The news on – JOHN switches over.

JOHN
I can't even understand what they're saying half the time.

MARY covers her mouth with one hand, like a footballer at full-time.

MARY
Maybe you should turn it up...

JOHN
What?

EDWARD shooting her a look – careful.

He looks at JOHN.

EDWARD
This is nice, isn't it?

JOHN
You what?

EDWARD
I said, this is nice.

He looks back at EDWARD for a beat then MARY – she smiles.

JOHN turns to the telly again, blank box.

ISABELLE in the doorway.

ISABELLE
I'm off, if that's still ok?

EDWARD
I've got it covered. Thank you.

A beat, ISABELLE going and MARY staring at him.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
Sauce on my face?

He tries to lick his nose, misses.

MARY
Show her out.

EDWARD
She knows the way.

MARY
Show. Her. Out.

She tilts her head – amazed he’s being this thick.

Another beat, before he gets the message.

EDWARD after her now.

In the hall, ISABELLE by the door.

EDWARD
I wanted to...show you out?

ISABELLE
I think I’ll be all right from here.

Beat.

EDWARD
Any plans this weekend?

She looks at him, makes him sweat.

ISABELLE
Depends.

EDWARD
On what.

ISABELLE
Whether you’re asking me out.

EDWARD
Right.

ISABELLE
Well?

EDWARD
I don’t know.

A beat.

EDWARD (CONT’D)
What if I am?

ISABELLE
Is that a good idea?

EDWARD
I don’t know that either.

They both smile.

Then the door to the other room opens, MARY on her way out with JOHN, wobbly on his frame but moving fast, right behind her.

EDWARD (CONT’D)
What’s gone off?

MARY slamming the front door – before we –

CUT TO:

40 EXT. JOHN’S HOUSE – T/C

EDWARD calling after MARY – she’s halfway down the street.

EDWARD
Mary...

She stops – rain still coming and EDWARD catching her up.

MARY
He doesn’t know who I am. It doesn’t matter.

EDWARD
It does. Of course it does.

Turns to him.

MARY
He’s ill. I know that.

EDWARD
Still hurts.

EDWARD next to her now.

EDWARD (CONT’D)
It’s all right to admit it.

MARY
I’m not going back in.

EDWARD
Ok. But I think I should stay.
Help Isabelle.

MARY
Is that what they call it.

EDWARD
Who's they?

MARY
Grown-ups, I suppose.

MARY looking away – young again.

EDWARD
See you tomorrow morning.

A beat.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
First thing.

She still doesn't look at him, though, just turns away.

MARY off down the street as we –

CUT TO:

40 INT. JOHN'S HOUSE. BATHROOM – NIGHT

EDWARD taking some water from the tap, ISABELLE watching him.

ISABELLE
He's sleeping.

EDWARD
Won't remember it in the morning.
Maybe that's a blessing.

ISABELLE looks at EDWARD, smiles – doesn't know what else to do.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
I should've said something.

ISABELLE
Like what?

A beat.

EDWARD
I’m all right.

He goes to pass, ISABELLE still there.

There’s another beat, before she hugs him - EDWARD letting her.

Lingering together - then -

CUT TO:

41 EXT. EDWARD’S HOUSE - NIGHT

MARY crying on the front street - a proper cry not a gentle sob - and walking slowly.

She staggers through the gate. Up the path.

Fumbling with a key at the front door, all the while tears coming as we -

CUT TO:

42 INT. JOHN’S HOUSE. LANDING / SPARE BEDROOM - NIGHT

EDWARD kissing ISABELLE, the two of them stumbling into the nearest room.

She pulls back, looks at him - like he shouldn’t, like they shouldn’t.

EDWARD
Stinky breath?

ISABELLE laughs, shakes her head.

He kisses her again.

She pulls back a second time.

A longer beat, charged.

ISABELLE unbuttoning EDWARD’s shirt - the bedroom door closing - before we -

CUT TO:

43 INT. EDWARD'S HOUSE. BATHROOM - NIGHT

MARY slumping down on the loo - more like collapsing, tears still coming, one hand resting against the wall.

She wipes, looks at the tissue, obvious from her face - from the bit of screwed-up roll in her hand - blood.

A lot.

Too much to be nothing.

MARY miscarrying - not the right word, not her fault - then -

CUT TO:

44 INT. JOHN'S HOUSE. SPARE BEDROOM - DAY

EDWARD waking up in a single bed.

Looks at his clothes on a chair in the corner.

Over at the window, curtain not fully drawn - dawning. In the doorway ISABELLE with a tray, tea and toast.

A beat, holding each other's stare.

ISABELLE
Bit weird, me bringing you a tray?

EDWARD
A bit.

She sets down the tray anyway, dresser by the door, sits on the edge of the bed.

ISABELLE
About last night...

EDWARD
Wait, what time is it?

ISABELLE
Nice try.

She goes to kiss him - but he moves away.

Then he's throwing on clothes.

Leaving ISABELLE on the bed - no apologies - before we -

CUT TO:

45EXT. ESTATE - DAY

EDWARD parking outside shops below flats, the row one long line of fliers in dirty windows.

A gang of lads hanging around a smashed-up bus stop.

Three of them, old enough to know better (LEE, 19 - something in his walk - his posture even - that sets him apart from CARL and JJ, also 19).

EDWARD
Who's Lee?

CARL
Who's asking?

EDWARD
I am.

CARL
Ooh, I'm shaking in my Classics.

LEE
I'm Lee.

EDWARD
Want to tell me why my little sister's got a black eye?

LEE laughs.

LEE
No, not really. My turn.

EDWARD
Your turn?

LEE
You ask, I ask.

A beat.

LEE (CONT'D)
Red or Blue?

EDWARD
You mean...as in, gangs?

The lads laugh - not LEE, though.

LEE
United or City.

EDWARD
I don’t really follow football.

JJ
Fuck off...

Takes out a gun from the band of his trackies.

JJ (CONT’D)
I’m not joking. Do one.

EDWARD backs off, all that swagger gone.

LEE
It’s not loaded.

JJ
I can still pistol-whip him,
the little bitch.

Laughs again.

JJ (CONT’D)
Get out of my sight.

Then the other one shoves EDWARD.

CARL
Faggot!

JJ
Bender!

CARL
Knob-jockey!

EDWARD being jostled.

LEE
What are you doing?

The two lads turn to LEE.

JJ
He doesn’t like football.
Gay.

LEE
He’s not gay because he doesn’t like football. He’s a dickhead because he doesn’t like football. Have a word.

EDWARD takes his cue and walks away, tail between his legs, back to his car.

A beat, before LEE follows without his mates.

LEE (CONT’D)
You want to know how she got that bruise?

EDWARD unlocking.

EDWARD
I just want to know where she is - I was supposed to meet her this morning but...

EDWARD trailing off - embarrassed or ashamed.

EDWARD (CONT’D)
I can’t get hold of her.

LEE
Ask her mum.

EDWARD
I don’t think she’d go home-

LEE
I’m talking about the black eye.

EDWARD getting back in his car - then –

CUT TO:

46EXT. LORRAINE’S HOUSE - NIGHT

EDWARD knocking on the door of a big house, detached, couple of shiny cars in front.

A woman answers - LORRAINE (35, well-to-do now but not always and she knows it).

LORRAINE
I haven’t got anything to say to you.

Goes to close the door.

EDWARD
Where’s Mary?

LORRAINE
Not here.

EDWARD
She turned up at mine. No money and a black eye to show for it.

LORRAINE
Then she’s your problem now.

EDWARD
She’s gone.

LORRAINE
That didn’t last long. Never does with you, does it?

LORRAINE tries to close the door again - EDWARD stopping it with his foot.

LORRAINE (CONT’D)
I’ll call the police.

EDWARD
So will I.

A beat.

LORRAINE
It was an accident - look at my wrist.

EDWARD
What am I looking at?

LORRAINE thrusts her arm out further.

LORRAINE
I’m covered in bruises.

EDWARD
What was it this time?

LORRAINE
She not told you?

EDWARD quiet.

LORRAINE (CONT'D)
No shame, that one.

EDWARD
I talked to Lee.

LORRAINE
The proud daddy? Little scally - don't believe a word. He'll end up in prison the way he's going. Either that or dead.

EDWARD
Sounds like a threat.

LORRAINE
This - whatever you're doing...

Pointing at him here.

EDWARD
What am I doing?

LORRAINE
The big brother act. It doesn't suit you.

A big fella behind LORRAINE, firm hand on the back of her neck - STEVE.

Crisp shirt and jeans but that's definitely him.

EDWARD and STEVE sharing something.

LORRAINE (CONT'D)
Have you met my fiance? He's very protective.

EDWARD takes a step back, just a little one but it's enough.

LORRAINE (CONT'D)
Give my regards to your father.

STEVE slamming the door as we -

CUT TO:

47 INT. WORKING MEN'S CLUB - NIGHT - PART IV

20 YEARS EARLIER on screen and EDWARD drinking with JOE, both underage - 17 and 15 here - a queue of glasses telling its own story.

The club full, lines of small tables, teenagers centre of attention on a cushioned bench the length of a big window, dark outside but light inside, light and heat.

Old timers, men and women and two more kids - they're just girls - all of them N/S.

The girls - up and dancing now on a wobbly table - then -

CUT TO:

48 EXT. CHURCHYARD - DAY

Four N/S figures - all 60s - ringing church bells.

Double doors to the tower wide open, the figures in unison. Grass and graves from further back, by the roadside now.

Morning broken - EDWARD listening to the bells - before we -

CUT TO:

49 INT. CHURCH. CONFESSIONAL - DAY

EDWARD on one side of the partition, FATHER MICHAEL on - or through - the other.

FATHER MICHAEL
This is a big day for you, Edward.

EDWARD shakes his head, can't believe it.

FATHER MICHAEL (CONT'D)
For God it's truly the greatest day. He's welcoming you back with open arms. Like a son. It really is just like that.

A beat.

FATHER MICHAEL (CONT'D)
Father and son.

EDWARD
I don’t want to say the words.

FATHER MICHAEL
That’s ok-

EDWARD
I just want to confess.

EDWARD looks through to FATHER MICHAEL.

EDWARD (CONT’D)
I need to confess.

FATHER MICHAEL
What would you like to confess?

EDWARD looks away.

EDWARD
Everything.

FATHER MICHAEL
Let’s try and narrow it down, shall we. Between us.

EDWARD
I’m just like him.

FATHER MICHAEL
Who do you mean?

EDWARD
You know who.

Beat.

EDWARD (CONT’D)
Like father, like son - I can’t bear it.

FATHER MICHAEL
Take your time.

EDWARD
No, the cliche. Saying the things I’m saying. It’s like hearing your own voice in a recording.

FATHER MICHAEL
In what way do you think you’re like your father?

EDWARD
I’m selfish. I don’t care about anyone but myself.

FATHER MICHAEL
I don’t think that’s true.

EDWARD shifts in his seat.

FATHER MICHAEL (CONT’D)
I don’t think you do either.

FATHER MICHAEL smiles - it’s to himself, though, EDWARD not looking at him.

FATHER MICHAEL (CONT’D)
This confession stuff is serious business. The real deal, you know. You’re going to have to do a lot better than that.

FATHER MICHAEL smiles again beyond the partition - EDWARD sensing it, feeling it, despite not looking up.

EDWARD
I’m so scared of being like him.

A beat.

EDWARD (CONT’D)
I don’t feel anything.

Another beat.

EDWARD (CONT’D)
I don’t want to feel anything.

FATHER MICHAEL
I thought you could never think of anything to say.

EDWARD
You’re right, I feel much better.

FATHER MICHAEL
Not even a little bit?

EDWARD
All it means is I’m just like him - but without the two failed relationships, the dead son, the other son he hates and the daughter he doesn’t even recognise.

FATHER MICHAEL
Now look-

EDWARD
I’m basically him without the dementia. And that’s hereditary. It’s all hereditary...

Laughs, the sound out of place.

EDWARD (CONT’D)
He’s left me out of his Will.

FATHER MICHAEL glances through the grille.

FATHER MICHAEL
There’s good in your father. He can still see the good in you, too. If you’ll let him.

EDWARD
More cliches.

FATHER MICHAEL
Cliches are cliches for a reason. It’s because, on a very simple level, they make sense. And they speak a truth we all of us recognise.

FATHER MICHAEL turns away, as if not quite believing his own words.

FATHER MICHAEL (CONT’D)
Don’t knock a cliche.

EDWARD
That’s me told. How many Hail Marys is that then?

FATHER MICHAEL
Let’s call it a dozen. You need the practice.

FATHER MICHAEL looking up.

FATHER MICHAEL (CONT'D)
There's good in all of us. If you look hard enough. Surely I don't need to tell you that...

Emphasis on 'you', EDWARD looking up - finally - through the partition.

EDWARD
What I do - that's different.

FATHER MICHAEL
Is it?

EDWARD
I treat people. I don't judge them.

FATHER MICHAEL
I don't judge them. I listen.

A long beat.

FATHER MICHAEL (CONT'D)
We listen, both of us. That's my point. That's why you're here. You spend your whole life listening to other people - now you need someone to listen.

A longer beat.

FATHER MICHAEL looking through the partition and realising EDWARD's gone as we -

CUT TO:

50 INT. LEE'S FLAT. SITTING ROOM - DAY

MARY waking up on a sofa.

She's alone, the room untidy, pizza boxes, cans, tin foil - crap - all over the place, big flatscreen in one corner and front door, no hall, in the other.

Gets up, slow.

Puts on an oversized T-shirt.

MARY stepping through an open door - half-glass, half-PVC - then -

CUT TO:

51 EXT. LEE'S FLAT. BALCONY - T/C

MARY outside and looking down on the street, some kids playing with a ball.

Behind her - relaxed - LEE.

She doesn't move, as if expecting him there, just watches the kids below.

A beat, LEE up against her now.

MARY
Probably for the best anyway.

LEE moves closer, into her.

MARY letting him put his hands around her belly - before we -

CUT TO:

52 INT. MEETING ROOM - DAY

EDWARD now standing by the door, ADAM in a chair - his eyes open and his whole demeanour brighter than before.

ADAM
Have you ever thought about it.

Not really a question.

ADAM (CONT'D)
Your friends. Your family. Everything and everyone in your life - gone.

EDWARD
Is that what you were doing?

A beat.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
The pills, the fire-

ADAM
Have you heard of Saint Dymphna?

Another beat, before EDWARD sits - intrigued.

ADAM (CONT'D)
The patron saint of the mentally disturbed. And psychiatrists, funnily enough.

EDWARD, opposite now, leans back.

ADAM (CONT'D)
Mum died when she was a kid. Dad subsequently lost the plot.

EDWARD
I should say, not a technical term.

A smile, this time from EDWARD.

ADAM
He decided he wanted to marry his daughter because she looked like his dead wife - but Dymphna had taken a vow of chastity.

EDWARD
How inconvenient.

ADAM
So she did a runner with her confessor...I forget his name.

A smile from ADAM.

ADAM (CONT'D)
I know. Anyway, they escaped, Belgium, then Dymphna's daddy cut her head off.

EDWARD
Do you regret anything?

ADAM
Just when I thought we were making friends...

Beat.

ADAM (CONT'D)
We're here to determine - etcetera, etcetera.

Parroting.

ADAM (CONT'D)
I told you - I can take it. Borderline? Bipolar?

Or am I really just a bit sad?

EDWARD
It’s not that simple.

ADAM
Isn’t it?

EDWARD
I suppose it is actually.

A beat.

EDWARD (CONT’D)
When I was in training, child forensics, I talked to a little girl.

ADAM
I had a happy childhood.

EDWARD
She didn’t. Police found her in bed with her dead mother.

ADAM looks away - cold.

EDWARD (CONT’D)
The mum OD’d on heroin. Been lying there for nearly a week. The little girl was trying to feed her crisps.

ADAM doesn’t look at him, react or respond in any way.

Another beat, before EDWARD glances up at the clock.

Makes a decision.

And gathers his things.

EDWARD walks over to the door, presses a button on the wall next to it.

ADAM
What flavour were they?

Presses the button again, ADAM’s voice louder.

ADAM (CONT'D)
What flavour were the crisps, Eddie? I know you want to tell me...

A N/S GUARD (35) through the glass pane - unlocking the door.

ADAM louder still.

ADAM (CONT'D)
Look at me.

His fists banging the table in front of him.

A shout now.

ADAM (CONT'D)
Look at me.

EDWARD not looking back - then -

CUT TO:

53 INT. LEE'S FLAT. SITTING ROOM / BEDROOM - DAY

MARY letting herself in and setting a plastic bag down on the carpet, contents spilling out - multipack of crisps.

Sits on the sofa, grabs the remote.

TV stand in the corner - but no telly now.

Under her, a cushion, digs something out.

Paraphernalia, glass pipe black.

Then the front door O/S - LEE.

MARY
Where have you been?

LEE
Out.

MARY
I know out but where?

LEE
Why are you nagging me?

MARY
I’m not nagging. I’m just asking.

LEE
Well don’t just ask. We’re not married.

MARY
Not yet.

LEE not taking the bait.

MARY (CONT’D)
Joke.

LEE
Not a very funny one.

He walks over to the window, opens it.

LEE (CONT’D)
I’ve been thinking - if you’re staying you have to start paying your way.

MARY
Shut that, I’m freezing.

LEE
Did you hear what I said-

MARY
Who else has been here?

She stands up, hand behind her back.

LEE
What?

MARY
Who else has been in the flat?

Walks over to the TV stand.

MARY (CONT’D)
Lately, I mean.

LEE
Don’t know. Loads of people.

MARY
I found this.

From behind her back, holds up the glass pipe.

MARY (CONT'D)
Is it yours?

LEE
What do you think?

MARY
You're a crackhead now?

LEE
I smoked it, like, once.

MARY
Then why keep the pipe?

LEE
Forgot it was there.

MARY
What happened to the telly?

LEE looks behind her.

LEE
Had to give it back. Wasn't mine.

MARY
Whose was it?

LEE
What's with all the fucking questions?

MARY
You're lying to me.

LEE
I'm not lying.

MARY
And you're not even good at it.

She walks into the bedroom.

Then he follows - MARY with a bag open on the bed, LEE in the doorway.

LEE
Where are you going to go? Your brother's?

Moves closer to her.

LEE (CONT'D)
You said so yourself, he was only bothered when you said you were pregnant - he doesn't give a shit about you.

MARY
And you do?

A beat.

MARY carries on - LEE taking stuff out of the bag, laughing along at first.

MARY (CONT'D)
Stop it.

He stops laughing and starts throwing it across the room, what's left of the bag then the bag itself.

MARY (CONT'D)
What are you doing?

Squares up to her next, MARY back until she's against the far wall.

Stands on her toes, messing around - maybe.

MARY (CONT'D)
What are you going to do, hit me?

Shoves her, hard, on the bed.

Leaves her there - sound of the bedroom door locking - before we -

CUT TO:

54 INT. WORKING MEN'S CLUB - NIGHT

JOHN with LORRAINE propping up the bar.

Unmistakable - JOHN sure on his feet here, LORRAINE just a kid - but it's them all right.

'Whiskey in the Jar' on the jukebox.

EDWARD - 20 years ago, remember - watching - then -

CUT TO:

55 INT. BLUES BAR - NIGHT

Grown-up EDWARD - bar and stage around him quiet, more like dead actually, apart from Thin Lizzy through dusty speakers - and the barman, MARCUS (28), catching his eye.

MARCUS
It's usually rammed. Good group on later.

EDWARD
I bet.

MARCUS
What do you do for fun?

Maybe the other way around - EDWARD interesting him.

EDWARD
Do you have fizzy water?

Beat.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
Sorry to disappoint.

MARCUS
Ice and lemon?

EDWARD
Why not.

MARCUS opens a fridge behind him.

MARCUS
I'm 28. I'm at a new stage in my life. I'm trying to get some money behind me - trying to own something.

Sets it down.

EDWARD
Leave the bottle.

EDWARD smiles, MARCUS blank.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
Tough crowd.

MARCUS
Don’t take this the wrong way-

EDWARD
But-

MARCUS
Can I have your number?

MARCUS pours half a glass from the bottle.

MARCUS (CONT’D)
You look like you could do with a good time.

EDWARD pulls out his phone as it buzzes off - MISSED CALL from MARY on the screen.

A beat, before MARCUS takes the phone off him.

MARCUS (CONT’D)
Here...

Keys in some digits.

ISABELLE sitting on the next stool, her bag on the bar - am I interrupting something?

MARCUS handing the phone back, EDWARD handing over a few quid.

And ISABELLE and EDWARD avoiding eye contact.

Another beat.

EDWARD
I didn’t think you’d turn up.

She prods his glass of water.

ISABELLE
Not drinking?

EDWARD
I’m on the council pop.

Beat.

EDWARD (CONT’D)
I stopped after Joe.

Turns on the stool, faces her.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
I didn't like who I was when I was pissed. And I was pissed a lot. More and more anyway.

ISABELLE
You never drink? Not even one?

EDWARD
Not even one.

ISABELLE
That's some self-control you've got there, mister.

EDWARD
I don't know about that. I think I'm just controlling full-stop.

He looks at her.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
Anyway, what are you drinking?

ISABELLE
Feel bad now.

EDWARD
Don't. Seriously - have whatever you want. How about a pitcher of mojitos?

ISABELLE
Surprise me - I'll be right back.

EDWARD's eyes following her to the Ladies as we -

CUT TO:

56 INT. LEE'S FLAT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

MARY sitting on the bed, the bedroom door unlocking.

She doesn't move, though - LEE just standing there.

LEE
You sulking?

MARY wipes her face, pre-empting tears.

LEE (CONT'D)
Not this again. You don't even know it was mine, you little slag.

The front door - a buzz O/S.

MARY half-turns on the bed, looks at LEE.

MARY
Who is it?

LEE walks out of the room and into the hall, leaves the bedroom door open.

A beat.

More sounds O/S - the front door opening and closing, some footsteps and muffled voices.

All of it enough to make MARY jump up off the bed, go for the door.

Too late, LEE there with two mates - CARL and JJ.

LEE
I told you, you're going to start paying your way.

MARY falling back on the bed - then -

CUT TO:

57 INT. BLUES BAR. LADIES - NIGHT

EDWARD standing outside the stall.

A voice O/S - ADAM.

ADAM (O/S)
Have you ever thought about it.

A beat - and not really a question.

ADAM (O/S) (CONT'D)
Your friends. Your family. Everything and everyone in your life - gone.

That voice echoing as we -

CUT TO:

58 INT. LEE'S FLAT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

MARY lying on her side - mouth bleeding, eyes streaming, obvious even in the dark.

Holding her phone, screen lighting up her face, gripping it tight in her hand - then -

CUT TO:

59 INT. BLUES BAR. LADIES - NIGHT

EDWARD by a corner sink.

A flush from behind the door.

Then ISABELLE walks out, sees EDWARD - a half-smile.

ISABELLE
You lost?

He moves into her, kisses her.

She kisses him back for a beat.

Stops.

ISABELLE (CONT'D)
Not here. Let's go back in-

But he kisses her again.

Pushes her back into the stall.

She pushes him away.

Plain language - no.

A third time, back foot and her back in the stall.

ISABELLE (CONT'D)
I said no.

ISABELLE shoving EDWARD - she pushes past - leaving him in the stall - before we -

CUT TO:

60 I/E. EDWARD'S CAR - NIGHT

EDWARD, long way from that bar, sitting in the driver's seat.

Outside, his headlights off.

A car park - a lay-by - high up at any rate, twinkle of orange street-lamps below.

Radio on - female voice O/S - 'A local man will go on trial next week...'

EDWARD turns it off and opens the glove box, takes out a bottle of tablets.

Rattles it.

Next to him, cup holder, a bottle of water - half-empty or half-full.

His phone buzzes on the seat next to him.

Screen lighting up the car as we -

CUT TO:

61 EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - NIGHT

A car, the wrong way up - smoke and flames spitting into the evening sky.

We look on from the road, shadow of Pendle Hill.

No sign of other vehicles - no sign of life.

Apart from EDWARD, it must be, only 20 years ago.

On EDWARD - his eyes flickering in the fire - then -

FADE OUT.

Appendix

‘Living Without’

I self-diagnose the way a friend of mine self-diagnoses sucrose-intolerance, the way I swear I don’t, or won’t, Google my symptoms when I feel unwell.

It takes months before I admit to admitting, important, like seeing my dad in the chapel of rest, but not anything like a resolution. There’s no closure in looking at a dead body. A circle both can and can’t be closed.

Somewhere between abuse and dependence, that’s me. I’m not a trope. I don’t binge. Sometimes, I drink a few beers and leave it at that. I don’t drink every time I’m stressed.

Not at first, anyway.

I give up alcohol when I’m 18 and don’t drink again until after university. I grow up in a town where one wrong look and it’s a glassing. I accumulate a few too many bad experiences, the worst one after talking to someone’s girlfriend and that someone blind-siding me in a club. I pull on the girl’s tie, overstep the mark and blame it on the drink – foreshadowing the morning after, guilt and shame, and what I later become. A friend of hers tells me I’m a creep. This should matter more but it’s enough, even then, to make me stop.

I start drinking again in my twenties, progressively more and more with the only problem years, before the most recent, during a bad break-up. This is at the end of 2011, beginning of 2012.

I run away to Paris – am I sure I’m not a trope?

You can walk across Paris in two hours, and for two months I do nothing but walk around and write bad poetry and letters telling her it’s over. She tells me the same. We fight to have the last word, like when we’re together.

In August that year, she says she wants to try again. By then and only then, I'm over it.

I'm over it because of walking in the snow, the bitter cold of Paris. I'm not a father, not married, not engaged, not in a relationship with anyone or anything but me. Not any more and not yet. My misery. My pain. My solitude.

My self-indulgence, more like.

This is my first experience of grief as I come to understand it years later – my dad dead now but alive and at home then. Here I'm mourning a failed relationship, lost romance, in a city that's nothing if not a mausoleum to Love.

'I've lost that part of you – the part that was mine,' she says, just before it's really over.

I miss her when she leaves. To admit it, the sentiment somehow distorts; an abstraction hollow now by confession.

'There is no such thing as autobiography,' Winterson says. 'There is only art and lies.'

Then the confession of a lost love's the greatest deception of all.

Back in 2012, I want to move on. People tell me I have to, like my dad in a letter he writes at the time – one letter from my dad I don't lose – urging me to move on with my life.

But I can't replace her.

In Paris, a sublet from a friend, I lean out of the window, fall against the frame in the cold – unbelievable cold that winter, a single heater on wheels positioned wherever I am in the apartment – and smoke. I think of her, the way we are or, rather, were. She isn't with me. And there it is. There, in that ephemeral place, transient space.

Life goes on, as stupid people say – as if the suffering of loss can be ignored simply because, for everyone else, it doesn't matter.

I fill a notebook I'll later destroy, like another letter from my dad – one letter from my dad I lose deliberately. I fill it with my fears, fears I'll never be able to love again, when in fact I'll never be able to love her again.

A perfect sentence.

I will never be able to love her again.

In that first glimpse of loss, grieving a dead relationship, I discover a self-destructive side of me that never really goes away. That side can only, I think, be suppressed – my not drinking meaning my lack of inhibitions has to take on an altogether different shape.

Sober, I don't go with near strangers, take my turn, follow them into cubicles, or wander down alleyways and hidden corners of city streets after dark, my battery dead and my head spinning, no idea how or why I got here.

With practice, I manage to get to the same level as friends who drink. I get progressively looser over the night. I can't fake the chemical, though – the one I've got a problem with, the one that, no matter what I say or do as I negotiate ways I might one day drink again, long after I no longer live in Paris, I can't live with but can just about live without.

B

Overview

This thesis was envisaged as a critical and creative inquiry into the process of writing through grief.

My intention was to write *through* rather than simply about the loss of my father in 2015 and to then explore the structure of this writing, yielding insights for other practitioners. The four-year process of research resulted in the production of a creative component over three parts – an original television screenplay, a work of nonfiction and a bridging piece of prose in various ways drawing on a personal experience of grief – alongside a contextual component exploring the structure of 'writing through'.

Restatement of Objectives

My objective in part A, the creative component, was to see if I could write through grief (rather than about or even around it) to produce something – a script or a piece of prose – to then take out into the world as a practitioner.

This was about creatively handling loss through practice rather than therapy. The point was not to cure myself but *to produce a creative outcome*. Many of the insights I will discuss here in part B arose from this process of creative inquiry, rather than through a theoretical review of literature. I nevertheless recognised during the process a structure, which I could see in my own work as well as the work of others.

My overarching objective was therefore to investigate this proposed *structure of writing through grief* via reflection on my own practice as a writer – i.e., by examining the *formation of writing through grief* as a process and exploring *the resulting form of this writing* as a body of text on the page.

The discovery was made possible because of the journey, as it were, a process of writing through fiction and nonfiction and the joining of dots – in other words, the integration of creative elements and analysis of what was there on the page. I mean *on the page* literally, of course, the structure of writing through manifesting in sentences and paragraphs and pages and pages and pages.

This is recognisable in the text but does not call for a one-size-fits-all approach to writing through. It is not a checklist of things to find and tick off. It is not rigid. It is a very delicate pattern to do with writing as a structured and lived process and indeed writing as a way of experiencing *life through writing*. In a word, writing through is a process of integration and it has a structure.

Rationale

Existing knowledge in this area can generally be divided into writing *about* and writing *around*, with the two approaches requiring academic or creative distance.

My contribution to new knowledge is in writing through as a way of *creatively handling a loss* and in then *outlining its structure* – although grieving is in my experience far more complicated and even messy than simply moving on. I am, after all, a writer. I embrace this messiness not for therapeutic reasons but for an understanding of what writing through looks like on the page. I take myself (my writing and my grieving) as my subject and interrogate this using the tools of my discipline. My work – the *result* – has a particular structure.

Research Questions

This thesis represents a scholarly process of investigation that from the start set out to address and answer the following questions:

1. Can I write through my grief?
2. What does this writing look like on the page?
3. Are the results supported in a wider literature?

The creative component is integrated and connected through practice while the contextual component is evidenced in the following inquiry and chapters below, which encompass an exploration of the theoretical underpinnings and findings of this thesis.

Theoretical and Literary Underpinnings

Chapter One – Handling Grief as a Creative Methodology

'Writing Through' used a practical research methodology and was grounded in my work as a practitioner.

My research process started with a script. DESCENT (formerly OUR FATHER) was envisaged as a television drama about family and forgiveness. The story, set in the north-west of England, would ultimately follow Edward, an NHS forensic psychiatrist at a high-security hospital, and Adam, his patient – with the drama centring on Edward, his responsibilities both as an NHS doctor and a man finally stepping out of his father's shadow.

I began working on the script a few months after my father died in May 2015. I wanted to see if I could write *through* rather than around or even about my grief. I also wanted to continue a conversation cut short – a conversation that I could, somewhat obviously, never have again. I found myself writing about a relationship between two men as well as the relationship between these men and their fathers – the doctor-patient dynamic both a fictional meeting of minds and a once (or perhaps twice) removed searching for answers to seemingly unsolvable real-life questions in dramatic form. The result, effectively, was me talking to myself about my dad, missing my dad and grieving for the loss of my dad.

The two main characters, Edward and Adam, would nevertheless come to mirror my own descent. I had become a new father not long after losing my own and, in a case of life mirroring art, I struggled spectacularly to cope with my new responsibilities. This resulted in my arrest for drink-driving at the end of 2015 and

then led, beyond all that, to the writing of *Your Father's Secrets* – a parallel work of nonfiction *memoirising* this period in my life.

If the script was about making sense of my grief through fiction then the 'memoir' was designed to make sense of the making sense. The intention was to experience and understand my life by *writing* – that is, *supra*, writing as a structured and lived process and indeed writing as a way of experiencing *life through writing*. I went from being twice removed through fiction to (perhaps) once removed through nonfiction. I was my own subject. I was interrogating this fact using the tools of my discipline. I was getting closer to my grief and writing through it. The bridging piece now at the very top of this thesis, while completed last of all, joined up the dots. The three pieces were therefore integrated and connected through *practice* – they were also three pieces forming one *creative* whole.

My methodology was grounded in my work as a practitioner.

I nevertheless had a duty of self-care to consider when deciding what to share and what to protect. I worked with the Centre for Death & Society in Bath for guidance on counselling and meeting other researchers in my field. I interviewed working forensic professionals for DESCENT, a work of fiction – but for *Your Father's Secrets* I had to be careful to show respect for other people and their part in 'my' story.

This was supported by the creative application of the Dual Process Model (1999) – a model that separates the experience of dealing with grief into the 'loss-orientated' and the 'restoration-orientated' (the former focusing on the loss itself and the latter focusing on the life after loss), with everyday living then involving a degree of 'oscillation' between the two. Loss-orientated activities centre on the

avoidance and even denial of change while restoration-orientated activities centre on attending to this change and embracing new things. In my research I went one step further, coalescing these loss-orientated and restoration-orientated activities by merging the writing life with the everyday life – *without oscillation between the two*. I lived my grief and wrote through my grief and there was, in my case, neither oscillation nor separation. I was not using the model as a form of therapy but, rather, as a way of thinking about how I engaged with grief through my process of writing.

This essentially personal nature of grief directed my wider research, involving a close reading of a range of texts across various genres and platforms as well as existing scholarship on the grieving process. My writing process included the reading itself and keeping a journal with light notes. Much of the latter comprised observations, snippets of dialogue and quotes either heard or remembered. These rough thoughts were expanded on and transferred, in my case, to a laptop screen – but I maintained the diary, writing about my emotions and how these emotions might eventually be represented in another form.

Reading supported my writing. I looked at other examples of writing in this specific area, considering contemporary nonfiction and autobiographical fiction – and this writing helped me to reflect on my own work and how grief rendered itself visceral on the page. I looked at self-help books. I looked at grief memoirs, all of which dealt with first-hand and felt loss. By exploring how this experience impacted on the creative process – in turn reflecting on *my* grief and its influence on *my* writing – I pursued a clear line of investigation into grief as delineated in writing through and recognised how grief could shape creativity in particular ways. It became possible to decipher the poetics of writing through and reveal where grief

showed up in the language and mood of a text. In this way, I was able to identify a structure to this writing through.

Writing Through is more than just the title of my thesis – it is the key methodology that I used to research, investigate and create this body of work.

In plain language, I write in order to reflect on writing. Specifically, within this thesis, I use writing to creatively investigate and explore the structure of grief on the page.

Other writers (and scholars) have approached writing (and grief) in a similar way. Natalie Goldberg, in *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* (1986), asks writers to focus only on 'the essential, awake speech of their minds'. In the context of grief, Goldberg's words evoke the Freudian concept of working through (with *mourning*, rather than writing, providing necessary separation and release from *melancholia*). The result here, or the answer to Goldberg's question of methodology – writing with no other goal than to discover something about the process of writing itself – leads inevitably to further questions. These questions concern form as well as structure – i.e., what this writing actually looks like. 'We may write three novels before we write a good one,' Goldberg warns. 'So form is important, we should learn form, but we should also remember to fill form with life. This takes practice.'

Goldberg is not an academic but her approach to writing, much like mine, has a lot in common with the scholarly tradition of 'autoethnography' (Matthews, 2019). The use of writing as a methodology is most prominent in this tradition. Practice (or structure) here renders the imperfect (or life) something writers can work with – give form – and leave out there on the page. To give the reader an insight into how I used

this thinking and writing as a research methodology, I will discuss and explore the similarities between the scholarly use of autoethnography and more 'authorly' practices of autobiography and autofiction. I will use a combination but prefer *author* over *scholar* to refer to creative thinkers who, although not academics in the traditional sense, have nevertheless produced new knowledge about the processes, experiences and structures of writing on the page. Scholars and authors alike, I propose, can use writing not only to communicate a subject but also to work and write *through* it creatively.

The following methodological exposition entails a review of how autoethnographers, nonfiction writers and literary authors have approached the practice of writing through grief in its initial phases, often with no audience but themselves in mind. I will consider the process or methodology of writing through and look at what it means to directly confront grief within the felt experience of writing, drawing on and analysing how scholars / authors have talked about the ways in which their grief first appears in the text and citing the work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler (2014), alongside writing by (among others) Joan Didion, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Thomas Harding, Richard Beard, Yiyun Li, Martin Amis, Julian Barnes and Annie Ernaux. I will also compare the process of scholars / authors with my own methodology, using the theory of 'Handling Grief' as a scaffold to explain how the raw and unprocessed appearance of grief first appeared on the page in my own work.

In her profoundly moving paper, 'Writing Through Grief: Using Autoethnography to Help Process Grief After the Death of a Loved One' (2019), Angela Matthews harnesses autoethnography – i.e., an approach to research and writing that seeks to

describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis *et al*., 2010) or, as Matthews defines it, ethnography with the self at its centre.

She does this via a 'grief journal' to process the grief she endures over the loss of her son, arguing persuasively that a combination of the so-called 'personal' and the so-called 'academic' can reveal an understanding of 'complex, painful issues' and indeed that such an approach can work as a strategy for others. The paper is itself an outgrowth of Matthews' Dissertation (2017), exploring writing through grief as a doctoral student and offering this as a guide to other doctoral students during the completion of their studies.

This work is very much in step with my inquiry here, although there are three major differences.

The first difference is my avoidance of approaching writing as 'therapy'. This is a personal rather than theoretical rejection, although I will explore some of the differences between grief writing as therapy and writing through grief as a creative process in Chapters Two and Three. The second difference is my absolute and total focus on writing as a practitioner (rather than, say, a student), hence the emphasis on *writing* rather than what follows – my preoccupation, remember, was with the creative handling of a loss and ultimately producing a creative outcome. The third difference is the departure I make by examining the results of this process on the page, offering a structural analysis of my work and the work of others and yielding insights for other scholars / authors.

To understand my methodology in the context of handling grief is to begin to recognise a structure to the process of writing through and even to see the early

stages of this structure on the page. I will draw below on different examples of how this might work in practice, both from my own writing and the writing of others.

Matthews herself writes about feeling 'flat and dead' immediately after the death of her son and describes the 'sparseness' of her early journal entries (Matthews, 5). Echoing the work of Goldberg, the act of writing, for Matthews, then gradually becomes about discipline and release. This study of the self follows stages, in Matthews' case the model belonging to Worden (2009). Greenblatt's stages follow denial, depression and acceptance (1978) while the five stages of loss – a model belonging to Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2014) – presents a five-act structure, following denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. 'Handling Grief' might represent a parallel stage for creative thinkers, a stage that is at once integral and able to stand apart.

Whatever the model, though, it is tempting to think of this initial phase of writing through grief as *the beginning*. There is still a need here for refinement as well as caution. 'The fives stages,' warn Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 'are a part of a framework that makes up our learning to live with the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or goes in a prescribed order.' Similarly, during the process of producing this thesis, I found that although there was a structure to writing through grief – a structure with 'stages' – this process was not linear. There is order to the chaos but no order to either writing or grieving. Kessler (2019) himself adds 'meaning', a sixth stage – writing three years after the death of his own son – and it is this yearning that relates directly to writing through. Finding meaning, like writing, requires effort, as Julia Samuel (2017) writes, for 'grief is a process that has to be worked through'.

This process can be a painful one. ‘My brother Chuks called to tell me,’ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2021) writes, ‘and I came undone.’ The immediacy of the writing here, coming as it does in the very first entry, offers a way in. Subsequent sections are short – the book, originally an essay in *The New Yorker* (2020), maintains this rhythm throughout – but these opening moments deal with the impact of loss, the loss itself and felt experience of that loss.

The news of Adichie’s father’s death comes via Zoom, a physical distance joining the ontological. ‘I stare and stare at my father,’ Adichie writes. ‘My breathing is difficult. Is this what shock means, that the air turns to glue?’ There is denial to go with the sense of shock. ‘He *was* not,’ Adichie corrects, denial turning into anger. ‘He *is*.’ This denial is at times to the point of *unseeing*. ‘A refuge, this denial, this refusal to look,’ Adichie writes. In the immediacy of a loss there is still a choice to make – to face things or turn away – to *orientate*, one way or another. ‘Grief is forcing new skins on me,’ Adichie explains, ‘scraping scales from my eyes.’ There is also a feeling of futility – of hopelessness. ‘Only now do I learn,’ Adichie continues, ‘while feeling for its porous edges, that there is no way through.’ There is a questioning, too. ‘How is it that the world keeps going, breathing in and out unchanged,’ Adichie writes, ‘while in my soul there is a permanent scattering?’ The immediacy here is, among so many things, *physical*. ‘My four-year-old daughter says I scared her,’ Adichie admits – then continues:

> She gets down on her knees to demonstrate, her small clenched fist rising and falling, and her mimicry makes me see myself as I was, utterly unravelling, screaming and pounding the floor. The news is like a vicious uprooting. I am

yanked away from the world I have known since childhood. And I am resistant (p. 3) …

The loss of a loved one – whether parent or partner – brings with it a physicality evident on the page. ‘No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear,’ writes C. S. Lewis (1961) after the death of his wife, ‘H’. ‘At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed.’ Again, for Lewis, there is denial. ‘I find it hard to take in what anyone says,’ Lewis writes. ‘Or perhaps, hard to want to take in.’ Denial then hardens into something like resolve. ‘There are moments,’ Lewis continues, switching gears, ‘most unexpectedly, when something inside me tries to assure me that I don’t really mind so much, not so very much, after all.’ A dose of realism swiftly follows. ‘Then comes a sudden jab of red-hot memory,’ Lewis adds, ‘and all this “common sense” vanishes like an ant in the mouth of a furnace.’ There is that questioning again, for Lewis, of the spiritual sort. ‘Thank God the memory of her is still too strong (will it always be too strong?) to let me get away with it,’ he writes – but the immediacy of it all, even for the devout, brings with it recrimination. ‘Meanwhile,’ he asks, ‘where is God?’

A Grief Observed, like Adichie’s a relatively short work, forms four separate sections, while Calvin Trillin’s *About Alice* (2006), which is about the loss of a spouse and, at its heart, about love, unfolds over eight parts. Trillin tells the story of Alice from the beginning. He dedicates and devotes but navigates the immediacy of her death through laughter and lightness – a particular condolence letter opening the story.

For Joan Didion (2005), writing after the sudden death of her husband, a longer work comes after a protracted pause, the only words possible, at first, ‘Life

changes in the instant. The ordinary instant.' These come 'a day or two or three after the fact', in January 2004, following Didion's husband's death in late December 2003. There is nothing more for a number of months until it is finally time for Didion to tell the story. 'In outline,' she begins again, not quite able to find the right words. 'This is a case in which I need more than words to find the meaning,' she writes, yearning for something more but finding this elusive. Writing on the page, for Didion – and like grief – 'comes in waves'.

To recognise a structure to the process or methodology of writing through is to see the stages there on the page – but understanding the structure of any story is about listening to what the story is telling the writer it wants to do (Saunders, 2017).

Returning to the stages, in the case of handling grief it is only *the beginning* insofar as it initiates or sets up everything that happens straight after (inclusive of the ultimate inciting incident – i.e., death). This unstructured process of handling grief often happens without a reader in mind and only through the immediacy of the first act. There is nevertheless the process of writing through a gradual build-up to *the next thing*, an impact, or a second act. The writer moves towards a moment when they are writing *for* someone, or for something – i.e., towards a time when their writing might make an impact somewhere else.

In some instances this is impact of a brutal, unthinkable kind. For Thomas Harding, writing in *Kadian Journal* (2014), the only way to tell the story of his son's death is by beginning at the beginning and describing the terrible accident in the present tense – everything immediate and *happening*. Kadian is riding up front, his father behind. 'He's suddenly way ahead of me,' Harding writes. 'A hundred feet perhaps. He must have gathered speed. And then there's a flash of a white van,

moving fast from left to right, at the bottom of the slope. It shouldn't be there. And it hits Kadian. Driving him away from view, away from me.' Harding establishes time and place and builds a dreadful tension, over the space of a few pages, until he sees the worst. 'This is real,' he continues. 'This is happening. I can't believe it.' Harding's sister arrives at the scene. '"He's dead," I say to her. "He's dead."' Harding, on the page, is seemingly back in an endless present and uses the tense to bring the reader with him.

Richard Beard, in *The Day That Went Missing: A Family's Story* (2017), uses this same tense to great effect. 'For nearly 40 years I haven't said his name,' he writes, 'but in writing I immediately slip into the present tense, as if he's here, he's back. Writing can bring him to life.' Beard describes the day and the hour and the moment of loss and tells the story from there. Doubt creeps in. 'The memory is unsatisfactory,' Beard concedes. That self-assurance and initial control over tense soon slips, the writing faltering. 'My younger brother's name is Nicholas Beard,' he writes. 'He was nine years old, and I was with him in the water when he drowned.' Beard manages to steady himself in the *now* rather than the *then*. 'Events that happened before and after are a blank to me.' The story becomes about the telling, moving beyond denial – 'without any fictional evasions' – towards something like honesty. 'Liars prosper, no question about it,' Stephen King (2000) confirms, 'but only in the grand sweep of things, never down in the jungles of actual composition, where you must take your objective one bloody word at a time. If you begin to lie about what you know and feel while you're down there, everything falls down.'

Fiction, too, tackles the impact of an encounter with grief – as well as its immediacy. *Bad News* (1992), the second of Edward St Aubyn's Patrick Melrose novels, delivers on the promise of its title on the opening page. Patrick's father, the

reader and Patrick soon learn, is dead. The rest of the story, taking place over the proverbial long weekend, involves the protagonist attempting to outrun his past and painful memories of an abusive parent – neither one of which is *gone*. Life and death coexist in this space. 'For the heart, life is simple: it beats for as long as it can,' goes the first line of Karl Ove Knausgaard's *A Death in the Family* (2009), the first in his autobiographical My Struggle series.

In Carys Bray's novel, *A Song for Issy Bradley* (2014), the eponymous heroine dies and the family, stricken, must learn to deal with what comes after a life (and a loss). 'There is no discernible moment of death; she stops imperceptibly, like the clock in the Parents' Lounge,' Bray writes, evoking *the moment* and pre-empting the next. Meanwhile, in *Where Reasons End* (2019) – 'a novel', according to its title page – Yiyun Li imagines a conversation between a writer and her son, Nikolai, the conversation here taking place in the shadow of Nikolai's suicide. 'One of us made this happen,' Li writes, assuming the narrative 'I'. Nikolai replies, 'I blame you.' Li began writing the book only months after her 16-year-old son's suicide (Sehgal, 2019).

Where Bray's search for honesty adopts a more familiar fictional form and Li's book cleverly subverts convention, Beard's is a journalistic quest for the truth or, again, something like it. All three writers deal with the immediacy of writing on the page, Bray by exploring the moment and its aftermath, Beard by reliving and Li by circling it – in the latter case not evasion but avoidance and, for the author, a necessary and understandable denial.

Inside Story (2020), by Martin Amis, also presents on the title page as 'a novel'. 'Fiction,' he writes, 'comes from silent anxiety.' The cover image of the UK edition is a photograph of Amis with his long-time friend, Christopher Hitchens –

the conceit of the 'novel' inviting the reader in, like a house guest, even suggesting something of an *entre-nous* quality to the telling. The result is straight-talking autobiography and structurally 'freewheeling' at the same time (Harvey, 2020). Amis missing his friend is, however, what he is really writing through. 'Life,' Amis writes, 'is artistically lifeless; and its only unifying theme is death.' Here, writing and grieving, Amis is beginning to find structure to the experiences of loss in a writerly form.

'When someone dies in a family,' writes Justine Picardie in *If the Spirit Moves You: Life and Love After Death* (2001), 'the survivors rearrange themselves in unexpected places; find different ways of talking to each other; negotiate the spiked mantraps of grief. This struggle to make the separate pieces of a broken family fit together again is, possibly, as bewildering as anything one might encounter in a séance room.' Picardie writes in the present tense, like Harding and Beard, turning her attention to conjuring and communing and, like Didion, following a full year in her life after her sister's death – although the beginning of this story begins almost three years later. 'Good Friday in the year 2000,' she writes. 'Jesus is dead and so is my sister, and I'm running on a treadmill at the gym, watching MTV with no sound on.' Picardie nevertheless looks for structure by stages – 'numbness, denial, anger, grief, acceptance' – before that familiar doubt, again, creeps in – 'but it can't only be me who looks for short cuts, and ends up going the long way round?' There is no order – to writing or to grieving.

Cathy Rentzenbrink (2015) writes about the death of her brother, Matty. She begins the story not at the beginning but later, looking back, questioning her prayers immediately following her brother's accident – 'Please don't let my brother die' – and accepting, rather than Matty living for eight years in a coma, 'It would have

been so much better if Matty had died then.' In the next chapter Rentzenbrink relives the day of the accident – again, like Harding – and tells the story from there. This becomes about regret (they work in the same bar – she gets a lift home and her brother stays). 'This is the moment,' she writes. 'If I could go back in time and force him to come with me then everything would be different.' The way in – the immediacy here – is also a question of memory. 'I just wish I could tell her,' she adds, 'the girl with the henna-red hair in charity-shop clothes, to write down everything that happened. *Write it down*, I'd say. *You won't want to – you'll think every detail will be burnt onto your brain forever. You don't know this, but you'll forget*.'

Handling grief, like going through those stages, is not a linear process.

Jean Hannah Edelstein (2018) writes about the death of her father – and inheriting 'the gene that would cause me cancer too' – by dividing the story into three and rearranging the order: 'Between', 'Before' and 'After'. The impact of loss, this time in the past tense, is nevertheless there in the first line. 'I was in Brooklyn looking for love on OKCupid when my father died,' she writes. There is a sense of time to go with place. 'It was a cold February night in 2014,' Edelstein continues. 'It was almost two years after the night in late spring when my parents called me on Skype – I was at home in London, and they were at home in Baltimore – and Dad looked into the camera and said: I have lung cancer.' There is, again, the physicality of things to go with the impact. 'That night in February,' she writes, 'I had a rare feeling of contentment, or something like it.' Then, a few pages later, there is the immediacy of it all. 'His heart. It stopped. The cancer wore it out.'

Max Porter's *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (2016), like Edelstein's work, is in three parts: 'A Lick of Night', 'Defence of the Nest' and 'Permission to Leave'. Two young boys and a father are missing a mother, the usual well-meaning visitor taking the form of a Crow, remaining with the grieving family until *the thing* is done. This (re-)structuring is something of a trend. Julian Barnes, too, splits *Levels of Life* (2013) in three – 'The Sin of Height', 'On the Level' and 'The Loss of Depth' – taking in ballooning, photography, love and grief – and dedicates the book to his late wife.

'The facts may be correct so far as they go,' writes Norman Douglas in an open letter to D. H. Lawrence (quoted in Forster, 1927), 'but there are too few of them; what the author says may be true, and yet by no means the truth. That is the novelist's touch. It falsifies life.' Barnes, in *Levels of Life*, certainly employs 'the novelist's touch'. 'You put together two things that have not been put together before,' he writes at the very beginning of part one. 'And the world is changed.' In part two, though, there is a subtle shift. 'You put together two things that have not been put together before; and sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.' A few lines later, Barnes refining things further, he writes, 'You put together two people who have not been put together before; and sometimes the world is changed, sometimes not.' The dramatic arc continues to climb until, in part three, Barnes is able to at least write *about* rather than *around*. Only here, though, two thirds of the way into the book, is the author ready to confront the immediacy of his wife's death.

> You put together two people who have not been put together before. Sometimes it is like that first attempt to harness a hydrogen balloon to a fire balloon: do you prefer crash and burn, or burn and crash? But sometimes it

> works, and something new is made, and the world is changed. Then, at some point, sooner or later, for this reason or that, one of them is taken away. And what is taken away is greater than the sum of what was there. This may not be mathematically possible; but it is emotionally possible (p. 67).

Writing through becomes about, among other things, confusion. 'Grief, like death, is banal and unique,' Barnes writes, himself quoting Forster – 'One death may explain itself, but it throws no light upon another.' Grief, for Barnes, is 'unimaginable: not just its length and depth, but its tone and texture, its deceptions and false dawns, its recidivism. Also, its initial shock' – this in 'the moment', that is, when it comes (just 37 days, he writes, 'from diagnosis to death'). There is denial and anger – anger at the dead and anger at the living, anger at friends – especially for not reacting to the speaking of his wife's name – or for using the euphemistic 'pass' – before Barnes begins to empathise with 'the griefstruck', taking his place among their number.

Writing through does landscape as well as any other writing – that is, emphasising exterior over interior, or setting the scene rather than focusing (only) on emotions.

'It was a Sunday, in the early afternoon,' writes Annie Ernaux in *A Man's Place* (1983), a book about class and about growing up and about leaving home and, in the end, about the death of her father. Within a page or two Ernaux deals with the immediacy of things, describing the day of her father's death and preparation of his body. 'I don't remember the doctor who was called in to sign the death certificate,' she writes – questioning her memory but also confronting the physicality of the

situation. ‘Within a few hours,’ she continues, ‘my father’s face had changed beyond all recognition.’

Combining autofiction with sociology, Ernaux tells the story of her father’s life as well as death and, five years later, performs the same ritual for her late mother. ‘My mother died on Monday 7 April in the old people’s home attached to the hospital at Pontoise, where I had installed her two years previously,’ she writes in *A Woman’s Story* (1988). ‘The nurse said over the phone: “Your mother passed away this morning, after breakfast.” It was around 10 o’clock.’ Again Ernaux describes the body, this time following preparation. ‘She looked like a small mummy,’ she writes. Again Ernaux describes the funeral, before turning to the physical. ‘The week following the funeral,’ she continues, ‘I would start to cry for no particular reason.’ She describes her dreams and, when awake, her forgetfulness. ‘Quite often I forgot how to do things in the right order,’ she writes. Ernaux confronts the reality of her mother’s loss on the page – her mother’s suitcase leaving her ‘paralysed’ in the cellar. ‘The worst moments were when I left home and drove into town,’ she writes. ‘I would be sitting behind the wheel and suddenly it would hit me: “She will never be alive anywhere in the world again.”’ This ‘condition’, as she calls it, ‘is gradually easing’. Full of doubt, Ernaux analyses her own words. ‘I still get that sinking feeling every time I realise “now I don’t need to” or “I no longer have to” do this or that for her,’ she writes. ‘I feel such emptiness at the thought: this is the first spring she will never see. (Now I can feel the power of ordinary sentences, or even clichés.)’ The only way forward, Ernaux decides, is to write about her mother. There is nevertheless more doubt. ‘Perhaps I should wait until her illness and death have merged into the past, like other events in my life’ – like her father’s

death – ‘so that I feel the detachment which makes it easier to analyse one’s memories. But right now I am incapable of doing anything else.’

Before detachment, then, there are *emotions*. ‘You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends,’ Didion writes. There might be another way of seeing, so to speak, or another way of writing. You sit down to *write* and life as you know it ends, immediacy only the first thing before the next thing. This for Didion was a beginning, of course, if only insofar as it was the beginning of her ‘year of magical thinking’. She continues:

> This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself (p. 7).

I have here introduced and explored ‘Writing Through’ as the principle methodology that I used to investigate and develop my thesis and I have argued that the brutality of loss represents an inciting incident for the writer – it is not a linear beginning but a way of directly confronting the immediate impact of grief on the page.

Writing through, as it goes – after anger and denial and the questioning of memory (and even words) but before detachment from the moment – indeed still before confession and the structuring of grief on the page, which I will discuss in the following chapter – is on the page all about *immediacy*.

Chapter Two – Confessing Through Grief

‘I felt like a visitor from another planet, which I suppose is what I was and always had been,’ says Clive James (1989), expressing a longing for a life lost in his *Postcard from Paris*.

‘No matter how often you come back to Paris,’ he adds, ‘if you go away that first time you leave behind the life you might have lived there.’

After the immediacy of handling grief, writing through becomes about building on that early questioning and doubt, finding depth beyond denial and on-the-surface anger and recrimination. ‘I had to leave Paris the next morning,’ James continues. ‘As always I would wonder why and start counting the days before I could go back, and then lose count, and be lost again in the life that by some strange twist of fate I lived somewhere else.’ At the heart of this interrogation, this yearning for meaning, this longing – not only for something more but something *more than this* – is confession.

In this chapter I will further consider the structure of writing through, focusing on confession, memoir and, as I touch on above, the benefits of a self-aware approach to both writing and grieving.

‘We have singularly become a confessing society,’ writes Foucault (1978).

The confession, he reasons – at the time of writing more than four decades ago – is everywhere. He continues:

> The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relationships, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses

> one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell to anyone else, the things people write books about (p. 59).

Writing through, literally on the page, is here more accurately *confessing through* – especially 'the things people write books about'.

'Western man has become a confessing animal,' Foucault concludes. All this raises for him the question of truth – or rather what he calls 'the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage'.

Admit or omit, do include or do not include – these are above all things *creative* choices when writing through. And this is at the heart of interrogation, a quid pro quo exchange between writer and reader. 'A guilty conscience needs to confess,' writes Albert Camus (1963). 'A work of art is a confession, and I must bear witness.' Then again a writer's 'greatest art', argues Ray Bradbury in *Zen in the Art of Writing* (1990), 'will often be what he does not say, what he leaves out, his ability to state simply with clear emotion, the way he wants to go'. Decisions must be made in the name of art and indeed truth.

'Western societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth,' Foucault continues – but yet another way of looking at things presents confession as a ritual that transforms desire into discourse (Andersen, 2005). For the artist Claude Cahun this is about defiance, provocation

and discomfiture – hence the title of her 1930 memoir, loosely translated by Anglophone admirers, including Andersen, not as *Disavowals* but *Cancelled Confessions*, these so-called 'confessions' offered then taken back. The quid pro quo – and the trust between writer and reader – is broken, with neither one of them enjoying an advantage.

A degree of push and pull exists on the page. Zinsser describes the need, when approaching autobiographical writing and specifically memoir – 'a window into a life' – to 'become the editor of your own life' (1976). This means thinking about *detail* as well as memory. 'Writers are the custodians of memory,' Zinsser adds. What is most important, here, is 'the transaction between you and your remembered experiences and emotions'. In the end, it is if not quite your truth then *your* story.

'The waiter brought me a café crème and I drank half of it when it cooled and left it on the table while I wrote,' writes Hemingway in *A Moveable Feast* (1964), longing for Paris and finding it. 'When I stopped writing I did not want to leave the river where I could see the trout in the pool, its surface pushing and swelling smooth against the resistance of the log-driven piles of the bridge. The story was about coming back from the war but there was no mention of the war in it.' This is the kicker – although Hemingway's theory was that 'you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood'. Returning to Zinsser and the question, again, of what to admit and what to omit, what to put in and what to leave out, choosing and organising with the reader in mind while still remembering 'you are the protagonist in your memoir' is after all – rather than truth – a question of *honesty*.

‘To place yourself on the page is in part self-discovery, in part self-creation,’ write Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd in *Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction* (2013). ‘The act feels like what a lump of clay must feel like to the hands of a sculptor. *This is all you have to work with, but you know there’s a face in there somewhere*.’ There is room for yet more doubt. ‘You write a paragraph in the first person,’ Kidder and Todd continue, nodding to the choice of tense for many when writing through – then:

> You read it over. You meet – as if for the first time, though the face does look familiar – the person who speaks the words you have written. You think, *That’s not me. This guy sounds downright mean.* You pull out his fangs. *Oh, no. Now he’s getting mushy on us.* Writers want to be engaging, and it is easy to try to purchase charm at the expense of honesty, but the ultimate charm lies in getting the face more right than pretty (p. 51).

Confession and writing through go together. ‘Confession as a means of reconstructing the self can have a keyhole-like fascination for the reader,’ Kidder and Todd write. ‘But confession carries various risks. A sly vanity can lurk in a recitation of misdeeds, a revelling in one’s colourfulness: *Oh, what a bad girl I was!* Or one can end up presenting a much too limited concept of the self.’

This is now a reality of the digital age, according to Nicholas Carr (2010, cited in Graves, 2014), where social networks have ‘placed a whole new emphasis on immediacy’. As Graves notes, ‘The novelty of information disseminated via social media evaporates quickly, in other words, a fact that has institutionalised immediacy and newness as cardinal virtues of digital life. These twinned

imperatives, to *make it new* and *make it now*, undergird the logic of information flow in the digital age.'

When writing through, though, the interrogation of immediacy is a matter of *how* and *how much*. 'How the writer conveys present knowledge of past experience is a delicate problem,' Kidder and Todd write – then continue:

> The question of how much to reveal in constructing the self on the page merges into the fundamental question of how much to interpret and how much simply to describe. When to comment on the past, when simply to portray it in all its starkness and let it speak for itself? It can be tempting to disown the past only to celebrate the present self. *What a fool I was! (But how clever I am now to see it.)* And all the while the reader knows that previous selves are not so easily discarded (p. 53).

'We grieve in character,' writes Barnes (2013), interrogating his own *self* after the death of his wife. He continues:

> You ask yourself: to what extent in this turmoil of missing am I missing her, or missing the life we had together, or missing what it was in her that made me more myself, or missing simple companionship, or (not so simple) love, or all or any overlapping bits of each? You ask yourself: what happiness is there in just the memory of happiness? And how in any case might that work, given that happiness has only ever consisted of something shared? Solitary happiness – it sounds like a contradiction in terms, an implausible contraption that will never get off the ground (pp. 79-80).

According to Mark Fisher (2014), 'The depressive experiences himself as walled off from the lifeworld, so that his own frozen inner life – or inner death – overwhelms everything; at the same time, he experiences himself as evacuated, totally denuded, a shell: there is nothing except the inside, but the inside is empty.' Interrogation, for Barnes, does not lessen the pain – or the reality. Indeed he enters a back and forth with himself and eventually contemplates suicide. 'I mourn her uncomplicatedly,' he writes, 'and absolutely.' He feels weaker for his loss, dismissing the Nietzschean adage (what does not kill me makes me stronger) while ridiculing the notion of *losing* some*one* as if they were some*thing* ('another phrase that jarred').

The interrogation takes its toll. 'Grief reconfigures time,' Barnes continues. 'It also reconfigures space.' Here, again, is time and place. 'In this new-found-land there is no hierarchy, except that of feeling, of pain.' Barnes wonders what else is now lost to him. 'Perhaps grief, which destroys all patterns, destroys even more: the belief that such patterns exist,' he writes. 'But we cannot, I think, survive without such belief.' After questioning belief – and faith – he speculates as to the nature of the next thing and, once again, the honesty of this pursuit. 'So each of us must pretend to find, or re-erect, a pattern,' Barnes writes, before directly addressing writing through. 'Writers believe in the patterns their words make, which they hope and trust add up to ideas, to stories, to truths.' Belief leads to hope and to trust. 'This is always their salvation, whether griefless or griefstruck.' This is the ultimate interrogation, concerning life and death and what, if anything, comes *after*.

'Grief is vertical – and vertiginous – while mourning is horizontal,' Barnes adds, contemplating the difference between grief and mourning. The answer, he then

concludes in another echo of immediacy, is physical. ‘Grief makes your stomach turn, snatches the breath from you, cuts off the blood supply to the brain; mourning blows you in a new direction.’ There is little by way of *control* here. ‘Initially, you continue doing what you used to do with her, out of familiarity, love, the need for a pattern,’ he writes. ‘Soon, you realise the trap you are in: caught between repeating what you did with her, but without her, and so missing her; or doing new things, things you never did with her, and so missing her differently.’ New patterns begin to emerge – new patterns and new hope. ‘It took a while, but I remember the moment – or rather, the suddenly arriving argument – which made it less likely I would kill myself.’ Here, in the now, ‘the moment’ becomes about understanding. ‘I realised that, insofar as she was alive at all, she was alive in my memory.’ This, for Barnes, is progress. ‘I was her principal rememberer,’ he continues. ‘If she was anywhere, she was within me, internalised.’ The questioning returns, though, along with a cruel twist – ‘it feels as if she is slipping away from me a second time: first I lose her in the present, then I lose her in the past’ – the cruelty itself not lost on him. ‘Memory – the mind’s photographic archive – is failing,’ he writes. ‘Though I remember, sharply, last things.’

Interrogation, when it relies on memory, is painful. It is also hard work. ‘Grief-work,’ Barnes starts:

> It sounds such a clear and solid concept, with its confident two-part name. But it is fluid, slippery, metamorphic. Sometimes it is passive, a waiting for time and pain to disappear; sometimes active, a conscious attention to death and loss and the loved one; sometimes necessarily distractive (pp. 104-105) …

There are new distractions, new pains and new patterns to this seemingly never-ending interrogation.

'It can also be an act of healing for you,' writes Zinsser, injecting hope into the writing and grieving process. 'If you make an honest transaction with your own humanity and with the humanity of the people who crossed your life, no matter how much pain they caused you or you caused them, readers will connect with your journey.'

This is certainly the case for Ernaux (1988). 'Although I realise she is dead, sometimes, for a split-second, I expect to see her come downstairs and settle in the living room with her sewing basket,' she writes of her mother. 'This feeling – which puts my mother's illusory presence before her real absence – is no doubt the first stage of healing.' She nevertheless questions her memory, along with the details.

Here is the small matter of honesty again, something writing through deals with in various forms – including fiction. *Threshold* (2020) by Rob Doyle is a 'novel' about a man calling himself 'Rob Doyle' and describing a novel as 'simply a long chunk of prose in which whatever is said to have happened may or may not have actually happened'. Yiyun Li's *Where Reasons End* (2019) interrogates this middle ground between the imaginary real and the all-too real. Li, like Barnes, also talks to her 'other'. 'I had made time irrelevant,' she writes, in the 'I', before handing over to the voice of 'Nikolai'. 'The essence of growing up is to play hide-and-seek with one's mother successfully, Nikolai said. All children win, I said. Mothers are bad at seeking. You did find me. Not as your mother, I said.' She interrogates. Nikolai interrogates. 'Would you call it a tragedy, he said.' Her answer is partial at best. 'I would only say it's sad. It's so sad I have no adjectives left.' The

words, for Li, will not do. ‘Do you want me to feel sad for myself, too? Nikolai said.’ Again, the structure follows question and answer and everything in between. In the end, though, the thing remains elusive. ‘I thought about the question. I didn’t know the answer.’

Li writes and rewrites the rules. ‘Life, if not lived, is carried by automatic actions, breathing an inevitable one among them.’ This is a different sort of life now – a life of searching and of making sense of the making sense. ‘I can’t find all those poems you wrote.’ Nikolai then tries to have the last word. ‘Or those I will write.’ The interrogation becomes about letting go – or not. ‘I thought about the people in the world who would all live longer than he.’ Nikolai responds and reassures, to no avail – the ‘I’ lost in a ‘hopeless guilt’ – ‘It’s not your fault.’ She counts the days, still questioning – but implied – *why*. ‘The days he had refused would come, one at a time.’ Nikolai’s answer to this is plaintive. ‘I’m sorry.’

Li writes about trespassing in Nikolai’s life and asking more questions without answers. ‘I thought about the eight hours between when I had dropped him off at the intersection and when he had died. Eight hours was a long time. What had happened would always be unknown to me.’ Nikolai answers, this time with a question of his own, ‘Perhaps it’s the least important thing to know?’ Nikolai, in life, writes poems but also stories – a young boy dies in one of them. ‘They’re only stories, he said. You write stories. You’re making things up even at this moment.’ Li’s rejoinder is, at least in the fictional realm, unspoken. ‘Sometimes what you make up is realer than the real, I thought.’ On the page this interrogation is ‘mere words’, although for ‘I’ these words are all there is. ‘Why write, he said, if you can feel? I always imagine writing is for people who don’t want to feel or don’t know how to.’ A line later, the back and forth continuing, ‘You don’t even mind writing

badly. Because I don't want to feel sad or I don't know how to feel sad? What's the difference? he said. Does a person commit suicide because he doesn't want to live, or doesn't know how to live?' For Li, the 'I', there is no answer to that particular question – only self-doubt. 'I could say nothing. I can always win an argument against you – do you notice that? he said. Had I argued better, would he have stayed longer in this world? I didn't ask him the question. Like sadness, it was there all the time.' These words, still, will not do. She continues:

> Words provided to me – loss, grief, sorrow, bereavement, trauma – never seemed to be able to speak precisely of what was plaguing me. One can and must live with loss and grief and sorrow and bereavement. Together they frame this life, as solid as the ceiling and the floor and the walls and the doors. But there is something else, like a bird that flies away at the first sign of one's attention, or a cricket chirping in the dark, never settling close enough for one to tell from which corner the song comes (p. 93).

Li interrogates the façade – strangers said Nikolai had always seemed 'happy' – as well as the endgame for this, here, on the page, how long it can last and how long she can keep it up. 'A parent should never be a child's biographer, I thought.' Writing through becomes about forgiving herself more than anyone or anything else. There is, surely, some catharsis in that.

'The Story is not The Life,' warns T Kira Madden (2019).

'Writing, for me, is no catharsis. Writing is work. Writing is my job. Writing is the only divinity or spirituality I have found, a medium through which, at my best,

I can speak through time and space.' Writing through is here about 'scaffolding and reconstruction' and 'storying the experience, tidying it, creating the kind of arc you might feel' – the result being a 'reverse projection', the reader (rather than the writer) experiencing the catharsis.

The opposite is true for Ernaux – but the challenge to be 'objective' remains. 'I believe I am writing about my mother because it is my turn to bring her into the world,' she writes, asserting not only belief but also faith. 'As I write, I see her sometimes as a "good" mother, sometimes as a "bad" mother. Although I try to be as objective as possible, certain expressions, such as "If you ever have an accident…" will always strike a sensitive chord with me, while others remain totally abstract, for instance, "the denial of one's own body and sexuality".' Ernaux captures the conflict between mother and daughter, again asserting belief – she nevertheless struggles to believe in what ends up on the page. 'Nobody knows that I am writing about her,' she writes. 'But then, in a sense, I feel I am not writing about her. It's more like experiencing again the times and places we shared when she was alive.' Publishing this book means 'the definitive death of my mother', writing through more than mere avoidance. Where Beard (2017) is bringing his brother back to life, Ernaux is here protecting her mother from death. It is surely impossible for the stakes of this interrogation to be higher.

'I feel like an interrogator myself,' writes Blake Morrison in *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* (1993). He searches his memory for the answer – not to the question but to its provenance. 'I want to warn people: don't underestimate filial grief, don't think because you no longer live with your parents, have had a difficult relationship with them, are grown up and perhaps a parent yourself, don't think that will make it any easier when they die.' Morrison, he confesses, has become 'a death

bore', asking people for their 'death stories' and writing to friends when their own fathers die. 'Bleakness like this – vivaciously denying a life beyond life, brightly expressing dark and nothingness – is the nearest thing to comfort I can find.' But even art, Morrison soon discovers, loses its power to offer comfort. 'Stand them up against grief, and even the greatest poems, the greatest paintings, the greatest novels lose the power to console,' he writes – then continues:

> I used to think that solace was the point of art, or part of it; now it's failed the test, it doesn't seem to have much point at all. FICTION FICTION FICTION the shelves scream in bookshops. But to invent or be artful seems indecent to me now. I can't imagine why anyone would want to imagine. The music of what happened is the only music in my head (p. 207).

The words, for Li and for Morrison, simply *will not do*. 'Now he's given me my opening,' Morrison writes when preparing a eulogy for his father, 'the poems won't come.'

For Karl Ove Knausgaard, however, writing through the death of his father demands patience as well as resolve. 'I was almost 30 years old when I saw a dead body for the first time,' he writes halfway through *A Death in the Family* (2009). 'My father had died.' When tears come, he continues, 'I sensed that it had only just begun.' This is a *felt* process, natural and unnatural. He writes:

> Feelings are like water, they always adapt to their surroundings. Not even the worst grief leaves traces; when it feels so overwhelming and lasts for such a

> long time, it is not because the feelings have set, they can't do that, they stand still, the way water in a forest mere stands still (p. 232).

The novelist's touch falsifies life.

It also *clarifies*, one way or another. 'Many writers have spoken about memoir as a way to "objectify" experience,' according to Kidder and Todd, 'to get clarifying "distance" between oneself and one's past.' Again, though, there is another way of seeing. 'One can also use memoir to get *closer* to the past.' This, for the likes of Barnes and Ernaux, requires faith. 'When writers stop believing in their stories,' Kidder and Todd continue, 'readers tend to sense it.'

Writing through – after anger and denial and the questioning of memory (and even words) but still before detachment from the moment – indeed still before 'Integration', which I will discuss in the following chapter – is on the page all about *interrogation*.

Chapter Three – Discovering the Form of Grief

'If you can go back to the source and see your memories whole, you can create truer versions of what you remember,' write Kidder and Todd (2013).

'If you succeed, you replace the fragments of memory with something that has its own shape and meaning, a separate thing that has a value in itself.' This leaves a question mark over the past – a question swiftly asked then equally swiftly answered. 'The past becomes an assertion that your life is of the present and the future.'

In this chapter I will consider the third and final structural quality of writing through, focusing on a book-shaped coming together where fact and fiction and, as I say above, the writing life and the grieving life can merge on the page to *handle* a loss.

'You must find a narrative trajectory for the story you want to tell and never relinquish control,' writes Zinsser (1976).

'The past looms over them in a thousand fragments,' he continues, thinking here of the writer who is, of course, the one actually doing the writing through, 'defying them to impose on it some kind of order.' Certain decisions – these Zinsser calls 'reducing decisions' – must be made.

This is not necessarily straightforward. 'Life,' argues James Wood (2008), 'will always contain an inevitable surplus, a margin of the gratuitous, a realm in which there is always more than we need: more things, more impressions, more memories, more habits, more words, more happiness, more unhappiness.' Saunders (2021) approaches this task as a matter of 'choosing' – indeed, he notes, 'that's all we've got' – something Mary Karr (2015) echoes when she writes that 'from the second you choose one event over another, you're shaping the past's meaning'. 'A story is an organic whole, and when we say a story is good, we're saying that it responds alertly to itself,' Saunders explains, offering an alternative image for the point. He continues:

> We might think of a story as a kind of ceremony, like the Catholic Mass, or a coronation, or a wedding. We understand the heart of the Mass to be communion, the heart of a coronation to be the moment the crown goes on,

> the heart of the wedding to be the exchanging of the vows. All of those other parts (the processionals, the songs, the recitations, and so on) will be felt as beautiful and necessary to the extent that they serve the heart of the ceremony (p. 84).

This is especially true of memoir, the result – beautiful or not – all about an irreversible causality. 'The delight that memoir can offer is like the delight a woodworker may feel when putting the finishing touches on a beautiful desk,' Kidder and Todd write. 'The desk is different from the wood forever. And the good memoir is different from the memories behind it, not a violation of them but different, and different of course from the actual experience that gave birth both to memory and to memoir.'

'Memoir done right is an art, a made thing,' writes Karr. 'It's not just raw reportage flung splat on the page.' This is about shaping and, again, about *work*. 'I've said it's hard. Here's how hard: everybody I know who wades deep enough into memory's waters drowns a little.' Here, again, is risk. 'Any time you try to collapse the distance between your delusions about the past and what really happened, there is suffering involved.' There is also healing, Karr writes, with another caveat. 'In terms of cathartic affect, memoir is like therapy, the difference being that in therapy, you pay them,' she writes. 'The therapist is the mommy, and you're the baby. In memoir, you're the mommy, and the reader's the baby. And – hopefully – they pay you.'

This is the desired result, of course, writing through *reaching* the reader in the form of a creative outcome. There is a difference, though, circling back to Goldberg (1986), when it comes to this *form*. 'Novels have intricate plots, verse has

musical forms, history and biography enjoy the sheen of objective truth,' Karr explains. 'In memoir, one event follows another. Birth leads to puberty leads to sex. The books are held together by happenstance, theme, and (most powerfully) the sheer, convincing poetry of a single person trying to make sense of the past.' This making sense of the making sense is now, here, about being watchful. 'No matter how self-aware you are, memoir wrenches at your insides precisely because it makes you battle with your very self,' Karr writes. 'You're making an experience for a reader, a show that conjures your past – inside and out – with enough lucidity that a reader gets way more than just the brief flash of titillation.' This concerns reaching the reader and convincing them, too. 'You owe a long journey, and most of all, you owe all the truth you can wheedle out of yourself.'

'Literature differs from life in that life is amorphously full of detail, and rarely directs us toward[s] it, whereas literature teaches us to notice,' writes Wood. 'Literature makes us better noticers of life; we get to practise on life itself; which in turn makes us better readers of detail in literature; which in turn makes us better readers of life.'

Writing through is here about noticing – Wood deepening this understanding by addressing tense and once again interrogating immediacy, the first person lending itself naturally to an urgent predicament. If 'fiction is both artifice and verisimilitude', though – as Wood makes clear – 'there is nothing difficult in holding together these two possibilities' – but only if writing through finds a balance. Book-shaping a life when writing through, whatever the form, is about more than mere facts. 'Truth works a trip wire that permits the book to explode into being,' Karr warns.

What, Li wonders in ‘aftertime’, will become of truth? ‘You write fiction, Nikolai said. Yes. Then you can make up whatever you want. One never makes up things in fiction, I said. One has to live there as one has to live here. Here is where you are, not where I am. I am in fiction, he said. I am fiction now. Then where you are is there, which is also where I live.’

Writing through becomes about preparing for a life without answers – only questions – and more words. The end of the book, like the end of the conversation, represents no end at all. ‘Answers don’t fly around like words, I said. Questions do, right? he said. Indeed they do, I said.’

‘The end came in February of 1974,’ writes King (2000). ‘By then a little of the money from *Carrie* had begun to flow and I was able to help with some of the medical expenses – there was that much to be glad about. And I was there for the last of it.’ The last of it, again, comes with another caveat. ‘I’d been drunk the night before but was only moderately hungover, which was good. One wouldn’t want to be too hungover at the deathbed of one’s mother.’ King continues, delivering detail alongside the sucker-punchline, ‘My mother was buried at the Congregational Church at Southwest Bend; the church she’d attended in Methodist Corners, where my brother and I grew up, was closed because of the cold. I gave the eulogy. I think I did a pretty good job, considering how drunk I was.’

Trillin (2006) reaches the end of the story a few pages from the end of the book. Several years after treatment for a malignant tumour, his wife Alice dies of cardiac arrest – a dreadful surprise, this ‘approached from a direction we hadn’t even been guarding’. Alice manages to walk their daughter down the aisle but, in the next paragraph, Trillin reminds us of the ending’s abruptness by ending the story there and then. He is irrevocably without her – full-stop. ‘Twenty-five years! I’m so

lucky!' Alice says to him. 'I try to think of it in those terms, too,' he writes in the very last line. 'Some days I can and some days I can't.'

Ernaux (1988), similarly, finds resolution in book-shaping a life (or rather a death). 'Throughout the 10 months I was writing this book, I dreamed of her almost every night,' she writes, recalling her mother's nocturnal visitations. 'Once I was lying in the middle of a stream, caught between two currents,' she continues. 'From my loins, smooth again like a young girl's, from between my thighs, long tapering plants floated limply. The body they came from was not only mine, it was also my mother's.'

'In truth, I don't dream of him,' Morrison (1993) writes of his father. 'You don't expect afterlife of an atheist. And even if my father has found an afterlife, he'll be damned if he comes back and admits it: "I may not be right, but I'm never wrong."' There is nevertheless another kind of visitation – and a presence. 'My father wouldn't approve of morbidity,' Morrison adds – then:

> When I hear his voice in my head appraising what I'm writing about him, he doesn't approve of that either: 'You fathead. Seventy-five bloody years, over 40 of them while you were alive yourself, and all we get is me looking like death warmed up. You daft sod – do you think that dying is anything to write home about, that it's any sort of story? (p. 210)'

Morrison punishes himself for his own intentions. 'His story is not my story,' he writes. There is no getting him back. There is no finding a truth. 'There is no missing piece,' Morrison concludes, 'only grief.'

Barnes experiences his own version of a nightly communing. ‘We go down in dreams, and we go down in memory,’ he writes – adding:

> For three years or more I continued to dream about her in the same way, according to the same narrative. Then I had a kind of meta-dream, one which seemed to propose an end to this line of night-work. And, as with all good endings, I didn’t see it coming. In my dream we were together, doing things together, in some open space, being happy – all in the way I had become accustomed to – when suddenly *she* realised that this could not be true, and it all must be a dream, because *she* now knew that she was dead (p. 115).

He wonders how to feel about this ‘ending’. ‘For here is the final tormenting, unanswerable question: what is “success” in mourning? Does it lie in remembering or in forgetting? A staying still or a moving on? Or some combination of both?’ For Barnes, ‘progress’ is fleeting. ‘When might you expect to be “over it”?’ he asks. This is now, for him, ‘four years on’ – but he finds himself at an ending nevertheless. ‘It is all just the universe doing its stuff, and we are the stuff it is being done to,’ he writes. ‘And so, perhaps, with grief.’ The integration of the whole, writing through and book-shaping *the thing*, results in literal progress – as Barnes accepts, at the end, ‘we are in movement again’.

‘I see her more and more the way I imagine I saw her in my early childhood: as a large, white shadow floating above me,’ Ernaux writes, herself resolving to understand, now at the very end, what this writing through *is* (if not *for*). ‘She preferred giving to everybody, rather than taking from them. Isn’t writing also a way

of giving.' The question is now rhetorical, Ernaux uniting by description and summing up for the reader. She writes:

> Naturally, this isn't a biography, neither is it a novel, maybe a cross between literature, sociology and history. It was only when my mother – born in an oppressed world from which she wanted to escape – became history that I started to feel less alone and out of place in a world ruled by words and ideas, the world where she had wanted me to live (pp. 95-96).

There, finally, is that resolution. 'I shall never hear the sound of her voice again,' Ernaux concludes. 'It was her voice, together with her words, her hands, and her way of moving and laughing, which linked the woman I am to the child I once was. The last bond between me and the world I come from has been severed.'

By the end, for Knausgaard (2009), 'Death was everywhere.'

Resolution still finds a way. 'I had written the book for Dad,' he writes. 'I hadn't known, but that was how it was. I had written it for him.' Questions now have answers. 'Did he really mean so much to me? Oh yes, indeed he did.' The ending, when it comes, brings with it admission and even absolution. 'I wanted him to see me.'

As Samuel (2017) writes, 'the death of a father may have an increased impact on sons' – although this, in Samuel's view, is about the parent we 'identify most closely with'. This is an age-old and indeed *formative* subject for fathers and sons – and for writers writing through. 'The country that separates fathers and sons has disoriented many travellers,' writes Hisham Matar in *The Return: Fathers, Sons and*

the Land In Between (2016). ‘It is very easy to get lost here.’ There are guides for this journey, he reassures the reader. ‘Telemachus, Edgar, Hamlet, and countless other sons, their private dramas ticking away in the silent hours, have sailed so far out into the uncertain distance between past and present that they seem adrift.’ He adds:

> They are men, like all men, who have come into the world through another man, a sponsor, opening the gate and, if they are lucky, doing so gently, perhaps with a reassuring smile and an encouraging nudge on the shoulder. And the fathers must have known, having once themselves been sons, that the ghostly presence of their hand will remain throughout the years, to the end of time, and that no matter what burdens are laid on that shoulder or the number of kisses a lover plants there, perhaps knowingly driven by the secret wish to erase the claim of another, the shoulder will remain forever faithful, remembering that good man’s hand that had ushered them into the world (p. 57).

Writing through is, here, about bridging the distance between the past and the present on the page. Matar continues:

> To be a man is to be part of this chain of gratitude and remembering, of blame and forgetting, of surrender and rebellion, until a son’s gaze is made so wounded and keen that, on looking back, he sees nothing but shadows. With every passing day the father journeys further into his night, deeper into the fog, leaving behind remnants of himself and the monumental yet obvious

> fact, at once frustrating and merciful – for how else is the son to continue living if he must not also forget – that no matter how hard we try we can never entirely know our fathers (pp. 57-58).

This looking *forward* is, of course, also looking *back*. 'All the tools I had to connect with my country belonged to the past,' Matar writes, in the book on a physical and emotional journey to his homeland – and finally able to return after the fall of Colonel Gaddafi. 'Rage, like a poisoned river, had been running through my life ever since we left Libya. It made itself into my anatomy, into the details. Grief as a virus.' Matar writes, here, of his father's reaction to his own father's death – before he himself disappeared, kidnapped and taken back to Libya when Matar was just 19 years old, a passage of 22 years between the *then* and the *now* – with grief compared to 'a faraway country'. 'Grief is not a whodunit story, or a puzzle to solve, but an active and vibrant enterprise,' he writes, this time echoing Barnes. 'It is hard, honest work. It can break your back.' Writing through is, again, a case of connecting the dots. 'My father is both dead and alive,' Matar writes. 'I do not have a grammar for him. He is in the past, present and future.' There is no way of writing through this without writing all of it. 'Even if I had held his hand, and felt it slacken, as he exhaled his last breath, I would still, I believe, every time I refer to him, pause to search for the right tense.' Writing through here means writing the past, present and future. 'I suspect many men who have buried their fathers feel the same. I am no different.' Matar then concludes – evoking Li's 'aftertime' – 'I live, as we all live, in the aftermath.'

The aftermath, like grief, is unique. 'In the days after my father's funeral,' Sam Miller writes at the very beginning of *Fathers* (2017), 'I announced to myself

that I wished to try to make some kind of sense of his life and death.' Here, once again, writing through is about making sense of the making sense. 'I began to write about him.' Writing through then becomes about dealing with things, the 'enterprise' for Miller himself rather than anyone else. 'But I did not do this in the expectation of uncovering a hidden truth, or an objective reality that had eluded me until then,' he writes. 'I think it was actually an attempt to make me feel better; a way for me to deal with grief and guilt. I like to write, you see, and in writing I can console myself.' There is, for Miller, a sense of healing in handling a loss on the page. 'And I want to write before I forget,' he continues, this time addressing the question of memory and trust. 'So I have been writing my version, and mine alone, of the life of Karl Miller.'

Despite his intentions, Miller does uncover a hidden truth – his 'real' father was a man, now dead, by the name of Tony White. This leaves him with more questions at the midpoint of the book. 'Did he consider me as his own in some way, or had he banished such ideas from his mind?' he writes. 'And what if he had lived, and I had learned that he was my biological father? How would we have navigated our way through that, and what would we have come to mean to each other? I still struggle with answers to those questions.' Miller, like Li, has questions without answers – that is, until close to the end. Here he finds something like a resolution following a letter, the sender referring to Tony White as 'your father'. 'And that made me uneasy – as if I was being encouraged to take a position, to decide on my loyalties,' he writes. 'And there was no doubt in my filial mind, then and now: Karl Miller was, is, and always will be my father.' The Epilogue contains Miller's eulogy before a final line – and the perfect book-shaped summation – 'And then I went back into the house in which I was born.'

The ending comes, sooner or later – although usually later. ‘The death of the father kicks the son upstairs,’ Amis (2020) writes – concerned here with the death of his own father but elsewhere Christopher Hitchens and Saul Bellow, immeasurable influences over his life. It is part five before he deals with the death of his friend, while on the final page, before ‘Postludial’, is a photograph of ‘Hitch’. Again, like Li, Amis relates here for the reader a conversation *on the page* – in life but in this case the two friends going back and forth after the fact. ‘After you died, Hitch, something very surprising happened,’ Amis writes. ‘It wasn’t supernatural, obviously. Nothing ever is. It only felt supernatural.’ Hitchens, patently curious, replies, ‘How supernatural?’ Amis continues, ‘Mildly supernatural. Only a bit supernatural.’ To which Hitchens then asks, ‘And are you suggesting that I brought this about from beyond the grave?’ Amis rejects the notion. ‘No I’m not saying that,’ he writes. ‘It was all your own work – but the work was done when you were alive.’ Hitchens, in death, still wants *more*. ‘Explain,’ he demands. ‘I will explain,’ Amis writes, in the section’s final lines, ‘and I’ll try to make you understand.’ The section’s title, aptly enough, is: ‘Ultimate: Doing the Dying.’ Life is for the living but death, when writing through, is for the ending.

‘A scar is a healing,’ China Miéville writes in *The Scar* (2002).

‘After injury, a scar is what makes you whole.’ He continues: ‘So many truths have been kept from me. This violent, pointless voyage has been sopping with blood. I feel thick and sick with it. And that is all: contingent and brutal without meaning. There is nothing to be learnt here. No ecstatic forgetting. There is no redemption in the sea.’ There is still, however, another way of seeing. What is taken

away might be greater than the sum of what was there, as Barnes writes above – but what is there is nevertheless *whole*.

Writing through, in the end – after anger and denial and the questioning of memory (and even words) – indeed, finally, after detachment from the moment – is on the page all about *integration*.

Findings, Discussion and Analysis

Chapter Four – Exploration of Findings from the Contextual Component

By exploring how my experience impacted on the creative process – and reflecting on my grief and its influence on my writing – I pursued a clear line of investigation into writing through and recognised how grief could shape creativity in particular ways.

'Writing is the act of discovery,' writes Goldberg (1986) – although the sentiment might in fact now become, at least for the purpose of this inquiry, writing *through* is the act of discovery. We write *this* to write *that* – and writers move on in a fashion, from their grief and from their pain and from their *work* – but what we write and how we write it has a structure. This structure, while not a linear process, is nevertheless a practical one. It has a basis in theory but moves beyond that, when writing through, the everyday life and the writing life becoming one whole.

My findings emerged both from a review of the work of other authors (and scholars) and from an analysis of my own methodology and practice – the key finding demonstrating the structure of writing through and its division into three discrete but necessarily coalescing areas: 'Immediacy', 'Interrogation' and 'Integration'. I will summarise these findings below.

Matthews (2019) merges the so-called personal and the so-called academic in order to *process* her grief, embracing autoethnography – ethnography with the self at its centre – and revealing and understanding and even helping others.

She is, in the writing through, a sort of guide – but there is grief modelling at work here, Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2014) providing a five-act structure via the stages of loss. This is not a linear process, much like writing through is not about doing things in a particular order. There is no timeline for the finding of meaning but this, requiring effort, is at first painful – something Adichie (2021) makes clear. There is denial. There is also a *physicality* evident on the page, Lewis (1961) providing another example and adding recrimination to his denial.

Without being a linear process there is still an obvious place to begin – i.e., at the beginning – like Trillin (2006) and Didion (2005) – but with the accretion of tension comes, inevitably, impact. This Harding (2014) tackles through the use of the present tense, lending urgency to immediacy with everything happening in the now.

There is conjuring and communing but also, for Beard (2017), some very real doubt – and with doubt comes more questioning, something fiction takes on, too. Impact is in the work of St Aubyn (1992), Knausgaard (2009) and Bray (2014), life and death coexisting on the page. Li (2019) finds it possible to subvert the more conventional tropes of fictive telling, dealing with immediacy in a different way, the matter of truth not a matter of evasion or even avoidance but, again, all about denial. Death might even become a unifying theme for a work of fiction, as it does for Amis (2020).

There is no order to writing through – no matter how the writing through presents itself. Some choose to shuffle the deck for the reader, like Edelstein (2018), reorganising things – an event, a life, a death – without neglecting immediacy in the writing through. There is the novelist's touch at work here, for Porter (2016) and for Barnes (2013). This deliberate confusion does not obfuscate or attenuate the shock of

'the moment', when it happens, even with the addition of anger – while for Ernaux (1988) writing through is impossible to resist. It is, indeed, the only way forward.

With interrogation a longing for meaning begins to take on a different form – that is, after immediacy, in the form of confession.

The confession in Foucauldian terms (1978), for the confessing animal in a confessing society, is about confessing through and extracting the truth. This then helps answer the question of omission – or rather what to include and what to exclude, which is itself about a series of creative choices.

There is a degree of push and pull when it comes to vital detail and essential memory but this, for Zinsser (1976), is actually about honesty rather than truth. Indeed for the memoirist especially there is an opportunity for self-discovery and for self-creation, according to Kidder and Todd (2013). There is also an obvious risk factor, vanity and voyeurism – the interrogation of immediacy a matter of *how* and *how much*.

This is, for Barnes, a singularly solitary ordeal and writing through does not in any way lessen his pain. It takes its toll and leads him to the ultimate question – the ultimate interrogation – asking after what comes next. Again there is physicality to this process as well as an awareness of patterns both old and new. Here is progress but 'grief-work', for Barnes, is also hard work – this interrogation seemingly never ending.

Zinsser writes of the possibility for progress and for healing if the writing through is honest. Ernaux echoes this thinking then finds herself questioning all over again. A back and forth between question and answer becomes, for Li, the essential pattern to follow – but there are too many unknowns and the words, 'mere words',

will not do. Li even interrogates the façade in an effort to peel back the veneer but catharsis proves elusive – although for Madden (2019) catharsis itself is the preoccupation of readers rather than writers when writing through, which is all about tidying things up. The opposite is true (as it were) for Ernaux, finding in writing through a way of bringing her mother into the world and protecting her from death – catharsis in creation and no need now to make a choice between the two. Morrison (1993) feels like the interrogator, securing no solace in art but rather a new obsession with stories of death. Knausgaard (2009), however, recognises the need for patience here. This making sense of the making sense is, after all, an apposite example of taking one's time.

The integration of the whole is a matter of organising and, indeed, of choosing – Zinsser and Saunders (2021) advocating the need for order when staring down chaos.

This is a process. This is hard. This is again about shaping as well as an irreversible causality.

Writing through can even get us closer to the past and make it 'truer', according to Kidder and Todd. Karr (2015) nevertheless reiterates the above – namely, this process means *work*. There is healing but also suffering in the yearning for truth, even if, for Wood (2008), truths and lies go easily together. Book-shaping – the integration itself – becomes about more than sifting through facts.

Integration leads to the reconfiguring of time, for Barnes, while for Li the destination signals her arrival in 'aftertime'. Li prepares for a life without answers, a life with only questions – indeed a life without an ending. The book, however, somehow reaches a close. Endings are also possible for King (2000) and for Trillin,

although there is more than one way of getting there. There is still a sense of shock and, for Trillin, a sense of starting all over again both in denial and in doubt.

Where Ernaux finds a degree of comfort in reaching the end, Morrison remains resolutely distant, denying truth and doubting the existence of any 'missing piece' – there is, for him, 'only grief' – while Miller (2017) finds comfort in the emotional journey and the writing through. There is, rather satisfyingly, the uncovering of a truth and a book-shaped ending to go with it. For Knausgaard, meanwhile, his questions now have answers.

Dreams can accompany doubts. For Barnes the nightly visitations bring with them a surprise ending – and there is, here, if not a moving on then 'movement again'. Ernaux seeks a sort of summing up for the reader, explaining what writing through is and even what she is writing through – while Amis, at the very end of his 'novel', suggests it is now time for him to help the reader finally understand. For Matar (2016), however, writing through is about an emotional and physical return – a journey, yes, alongside looking back and connecting the dots. The only way forward is to live and write the whole – because death, in the end, is exactly that.

Chapter Five – Exploration of Findings from the Creative Component

My findings emerged, as above, both from a review of the work of other scholars / authors and from an analysis of my own practice.

The structure of writing through – a very delicate but definite pattern – is present in my creative component. I will very briefly summarise below.

The pattern begins at the beginning and with ‘Immediacy’, the impact and inciting incident in the lived experience of confronting grief – the loss itself and felt experience(s) of that loss.

The opening 12 pages of DESCENT include a sequence of scenes from the past in black and white. These are set against Edward, the protagonist, in the present. They establish the *immediacy* of the situation – grief and loss and devastation and its immediate aftermath – before protagonist and antagonist meet in the literal meeting space of Adam’s high-security confines.

The script divides into four, with the first half building to Mary’s confession. Here the pattern develops with *integration* and the reader (or viewer) in mind, producing a confessional quality and artifice with room for advert breaks. Edward and Adam are by now co-dependent in the past, while in the present strand the nature of our protagonist’s struggle slowly becomes apparent.

The pattern becomes ‘script-shaped’ by rooting us in the present, Edward at least acting like the tragic hero, before delving further into the past and the root of his personal brand of evil – a terrible tragedy to contrast with the one unfolding in Mary’s young life. This *integration* and ending is, of course, no ending at all – the pilot is there to hook us in and make us beg for more.

In *Your Father’s Secrets* the immediacy of my grief is immediately evident via the opening stand-alone section and a note I find from my dad, echoing Trillin’s condolence letter (2006). There are six further parts to the nonfiction but it is more than 30 pages before the interrogation begins and confessional quality first appears – my admissions not omitted following a literary (and literal) comparison of father and son’s sins. A book-shaped ending and integration comes in the Coda when I am

finally able to share my dad's letter – in life and in death, my father having the last word.

'We are important and our lives are important, magnificent really, and their details are worthy to be recorded,' writes Goldberg.

'This is how writers must think, this is how we must sit down with pen in hand. We were here; we are human beings; this is how we lived. Let it be known, the earth passed before us.' When we let it be known we must do so without pause and not give in to doubt. 'Write what disturbs you, what you fear, what you have not been willing to speak about,' Goldberg continues. 'Be willing to be split open.'

In writing through the writer does indeed split open, interrogating the immediacy of the chaos before integrating the pieces with the reader in mind – the results, there, on the page. This writing through has a structure and this structure is useful to others, scholars and authors (and everything in between) – both in theory and, of course, in practice.

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