

Hamish Hamilton

Upfronts



WENJACK

Joseph Boyden



HAMISH HAMILTON

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The real life Chanie “Charlie” Wenjack was forcibly taken from his parents and his sisters and his home in Ogoki Post, Northern Ontario, in 1964 when he was nine years old. He asked his sisters to please look after his two beloved dogs until he returned from Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School over six hundred kilometres away in Kenora. None of them knew how long he'd be gone. Chanie came home two years later in a casket.

Chanie wasn't, by a very long shot, the only child to leave for residential school and never return. Many thousands of children died during their time in these alien institutions—from disease, from abuse, from exposure or accidents while trying to run away. The true number of children who died under the watch of those responsible for their care will never be known. Proper records were purposefully not kept. The death of these countless innocents remains one of the deepest, most brutal stains on Canada's history. More than six thousand dead children's names have so far been uncovered, but there are thought to be far, far more, many of them buried in unmarked graves near the residential schools that pocked our country. **The Truth and Reconciliation Commission believes the numbers might be as high as 30,000.**

From the 1870s until 1996, when the last school closed its doors, more than 150,000 Indigenous children over seven generations were removed from their families in an attempted cultural genocide. Chanie, for me and for a number of others, has become a symbol not just of this

tragedy but of the resilience of our First Nations, Inuit and Métis people—which is why I use the word “attempted.” Our cultures were forced underground for a long time, but they have re-emerged despite the odds. And they are thriving once more.

Ian Adams wrote “The Lonely Death of Charlie Wenjack” for *Maclean’s* not long after Chanie’s tragic death in 1966; up to that point, it was one of the few times that a national publication had exposed this dark national secret. And Chanie Wenjack couldn’t have known it, but that sweet boy forced the first public inquiry into residential schools in Canada. At the conclusion of this inquiry, the all-white jury unanimously questioned not just the philosophy but also the morality behind residential schools . . . although it would take another thirty years for the last institution’s doors to be shut.

It will take many more years before the intergenerational trauma left in the wake of this grotesque social experiment begins to abate. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission worked tirelessly for many years to uncover the truth—and now the tougher part, the reconciliation, begins.

HERE I AM

Jonathan Safran Foer



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The president's speech, in the chapter "Nothing Is Not Political," was adapted from a speech President Obama gave, in 2010, after the earthquake in Haiti. The poems quoted from in Part VII are Franz Wright's "Year One" and "Progress." Radiolab, Invisibilia, 99% Invisible, and Dan Carlin's Hardcore History offered the inspiration for the podcasts Jacob listens to.

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GET BACK TO HAPPINESS

When the destruction of Israel commenced, Isaac Bloch was weighing whether to kill himself or move to the Jewish Home. He had lived in an apartment with books touching the ceilings, and rugs thick enough to hide dice; then in a room and a half with dirt floors; on forest floors, under unconcerned stars; under the floorboards of a Christian who, half a world and three-quarters of a century away, would have a tree planted to commemorate his righteousness; in a hole for so many days his knees would never wholly unbend; among Gypsies and partisans and half-decent Poles; in transit, refugee, and displaced persons camps; on a boat with a bottle with a boat that an insomniac agnostic had miraculously constructed inside it; on the other side of an ocean he would never wholly cross; above half a dozen grocery stores he killed himself fixing up and selling for small profits; beside a woman who rechecked the locks until she broke them, and died of old age at forty-two without a syllable of praise in her throat but the cells of her murdered mother still dividing in her brain; and finally, for the last quarter century, in a snow-globe-quiet Silver Spring split-level: ten pounds of Roman Vishniac bleaching on the coffee table; *Enemies, A Love Story* demagnetizing in the world's last functional VCR; egg salad becoming bird flu in a refrigerator mummified with photographs of gorgeous, genius, tumorless great-grandchildren.

German horticulturalists had pruned Isaac's family tree all the way back to the Galician soil. But with luck and intuition and no help from

above, he had transplanted its roots into the sidewalks of Washington, D.C., and lived to see it regrow limbs. And unless America turned on the Jews—*until*, his son, Irv, would correct—the tree would continue to branch and sprout. Of course, Isaac would be back in a hole by then. He would never unbend his knees, but at his unknown age, with unknown indignities however near, it was time to unball his Jewish fists and concede the beginning of the end. The difference between conceding and accepting is depression.

Even putting aside the destruction of Israel, the timing was unfortunate: it was only weeks before his eldest great-grandson's bar mitzvah, which Isaac had been marking as his life's finish line ever since he crossed the previous finish line of his youngest great-grandson's birth. But one can't control when an old Jew's soul will vacate his body and his body will vacate the coveted one-bedroom for the next body on the waiting list. One can't rush or defer manhood, either. Then again, the purchase of a dozen nonrefundable airplane tickets, the booking of a block of the Washington Hilton, and the payment of twenty-three thousand dollars in deposits for a bar mitzvah that has been on the calendar since the last Winter Olympics are no guarantee that it's going to happen.

A group of boys lumbered down the halls of Adas Israel, laughing, punching, blood rushing from developing brains to developing genitals and back again in the zero-sum game of puberty.

“Seriously, though,” one said, the second *s* getting caught on his palate expander, “the only good thing about blowjobs are the wet handjob

you get with them.”

“Amen to that.”

“Otherwise you’re just boning a glass of water with teeth.”

“Which is pointless,” said a redheaded boy who still got chills from so much as thinking about the epilogue of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

“Nihilistic.”

If God existed and judged, He would have forgiven these boys everything, knowing that they were compelled by forces outside of themselves inside of themselves, and that they, too, were made in His image.

Silence as they slowed to watch Margot Wasserman lapping water. It was said that her parents parked two cars outside their three-car garage because they had five cars. It was said that her Pomeranian still had its balls, and they were honeydews.

“Goddamn it, I want to be that drinking fountain,” a boy with the Hebrew name Peretz-Yizchak said.

“I want to be the missing part of those crotchless undies.”

“I want to fill my dick with mercury.”

A pause.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“You know,” Marty Cohen-Rosenbaum, né Chaim ben Kalman, said, “like . . . make my dick a thermometer.”

“By feeding it sushi?”

“Or just injecting it. Or whatever. Dude, you know what I mean.”

Four shakes, and their heads achieved an unintended synchronicity, like Ping-Pong spectators.

In a whisper: “*To put it in her butt.*”

The others were lucky to have twenty-first-century moms who knew that temperatures were taken digitally in the ear. And Chaim was lucky that the boys’ attention was diverted before they had time to slap him with a nickname he would never shed.

Sam was sitting on the bench outside Rabbi Singer’s office, head lowered, eyes on the upturned hands in his lap like a monk waiting to burn. The boys stopped, turning their self-hatred toward him.

“We heard what you wrote,” one said, thrusting a finger into Sam’s chest. “You crossed a line.”

“Some fucked-up shit, bro.”

It was odd, because Sam’s profligate sweat production usually didn’t kick in until the threat had subsided.

“I didn’t write it, and I’m not your”—air quotes—“*bro.*”

He could have said that, but he didn’t. He also could have explained why nothing was as it seemed. But he didn’t. Instead, he just took it, as he always did in life on the crap side of the screen.

On the other side of the rabbi’s door, on the other side of the rabbi’s desk, sat Sam’s parents, Jacob and Julia. They didn’t want to be there. No one wanted to be there. The rabbi needed to embroider some thoughtful-sounding words about someone named Ralph Kremberg before they put him in the ground at two o’clock. Jacob would have preferred to be working on the bible for *Ever-Dying People*, or ransacking the house for his missing phone, or at least tapping the Internet’s lever for some dopamine hits. And today was supposed to be Julia’s day off—this was the opposite of off.

“Shouldn’t Sam be in here?” Jacob asked.

“I think it’s best if we have an adult conversation,” Rabbi Singer said.

“Sam’s an adult.”

“Sam is *not* an adult,” Julia said.

“Because he’s three verses shy of mastering the blessings after the blessings after his haftorah?”

Ignoring Jacob, Julia put her hand on the rabbi’s desk and said, “It’s clearly unacceptable to talk back to a teacher, and we want to find a way to make this right.”

“But at the same time,” Jacob said, “isn’t suspension a bit draconian for what, in the scheme of things, is not really *that* big a deal?”

“Jacob . . .”

“What?”

In an effort to communicate with her husband but not the rabbi, Julia pressed two fingers to her brow and gently shook her head while flaring her nostrils. She looked more like a third-base coach than a wife, mother, and member of the community attempting to keep the ocean from her son’s sand castle.

“Adas Israel is a progressive shul,” the rabbi said, eliciting an eye-roll from Jacob as reflexive as gagging. “We have a long and proud history of seeing beyond the cultural norms of any given moment, and finding the divine light, the Ohr Ein Sof, in every person. Using racial epithets here is a very big deal, indeed.”

“*What?*” Julia asked, finding her posture. “That can’t be right,” Jacob said.

The rabbi sighed a rabbi’s sigh and slid a piece of paper across his

desk to Julia.

“He *said* these?” Julia asked.

“He wrote them.”

“Wrote *what*?” Jacob asked.

Shaking her head in disbelief, Julia quietly read the list: “Filthy Arab, chink, cunt, jap, faggot, spic, kike, n-word—”

“He wrote ‘n-word’?” Jacob asked. “Or the *actual* n-word?”

“The word itself,” the rabbi said.

Though his son’s plight should have taken mental precedence, Jacob became distracted by the fact that this was the only word that could not bear vocalization.

“There must be a misunderstanding,” Julia said, finally handing the paper to Jacob. “Sam nurses animals back to—”

“*Cincinnati Bow Tie*? That’s not a racial epithet. It’s a sex act. I think. Maybe.”

“They’re not all epithets,” the rabbi said.

“You know, I’m pretty sure ‘Filthy Arab’ is a sex act, too.”

“I would have to take your word for it.”

“My point is, maybe we’re completely misinterpreting this list.”

Ignoring her husband again, Julia said, “What has Sam said about this?”

The rabbi picked at his beard, searching for words as a macaque searches for lice.

“He denied it. Vociferously. But the words weren’t there before class, and he is the only person who sits at that desk.”

“He didn’t do it,” Jacob said.

“It’s his handwriting,” Julia said.

“All thirteen-year-old boys write the same.”

The rabbi said, “He wasn’t able to offer another explanation for how it got there.”

“It’s not his job to,” Jacob said. “And by the way, if Sam *were* to have written those words, why on earth would he have left them on the desk? The brazenness proves his innocence. Like in *Basic Instinct*.”

“But she did it in *Basic Instinct*,” Julia said.

“She did?”

“The ice pick.”

“I guess that’s right. But that’s a movie. Obviously some genuinely racist kid, with a grudge against Sam, planted it.”

Julia spoke directly to the rabbi: “We’ll make sure Sam understands why what he wrote is so hurtful.”

“Julia,” Jacob said.

“Would an apology to the teacher be sufficient to get the bar mitzvah back on its tracks?”

“It’s what I was going to suggest. But I’m afraid word of his words has spread around our community. So—”

Jacob expelled a puff of frustration—a gesture he’d either taught to Sam or learned from him. “And hurtful to *whom*, by the way? There’s a world of difference between breaking someone’s nose and shadow boxing.”

The rabbi studied Jacob. He asked, “Has Sam been having any difficulties at home?”

“He’s been overwhelmed by homework,” Julia began.

“He *did not* do this.”

“And he’s been training for his bar mitzvah, which is, at least in theory, another hour every night. And cello, and soccer. And his younger brother Max is going through some existential stuff, which has been challenging for everyone. And the youngest, Benjy—”

“It sounds like he’s got a lot on his plate,” the rabbi said. “And I certainly sympathize with that. We ask a lot of our children. More than was ever asked of us. But I’m afraid racism has no place here.”

“Of course it doesn’t,” Julia said.

“Hold on. Now you’re calling Sam a *racist*?”

“I did not say that, Mr. Bloch.”

“You *did*. You *just did*. Julia—”

“I don’t remember his exact words.”

“I said, ‘Racism has no place here.’”

“Racism is what racists express.”

“Have you ever lied, Mr. Bloch?” Jacob reflexively searched his jacket pocket yet again for his phone. “I assume that, like everyone who has ever lived, you have told a lie. But that doesn’t make you a liar.”

“You’re calling me a liar?” Jacob asked, his fingers wrapped around nothing.

“You’re boxing at shadows, Mr. Bloch.”

Jacob turned to Julia. “Yes, the n-word is clearly bad. Bad, bad, very bad.

But it was one word among many.”

“You think the larger context of misogyny, homophobia, and perversion makes it *better*?”

“But he *didn't do it*.”

The rabbi shifted in his chair. “If I can speak frankly for a moment.” He paused, thumbing the inside of his nostril with plausible deniability. “It can't be easy for Sam—being Irving Bloch's grandson.”

Julia leaned back and thought about sand castles, and the Shinto shrine gate that washed up in Oregon two years after the tsunami.

Jacob turned to the rabbi. “Excuse me?”

“For a child's role model—”

“This should be good.”

The rabbi addressed Julia. “You must know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean.”

“We do *not* know what you mean.”

“Perhaps if it didn't seem, to Sam, that saying anything, no matter—”

“You've read volume two of Robert Caro's biography of Lyndon Johnson?”

“I have not.”

“Well, if you were the worldly kind of rabbi, and *had* read that classic of the genre, you'd know that pages 432 to 435 are devoted to how Irving Bloch did more than anyone else in Washington, or *anywhere*, to ensure the passage of the Voting Rights Act. A kid could not *find* a better role model.”

“A kid shouldn't have to look,” Julia said, facing forward.

“Now . . . did my father blog something regrettable? Yes. He did. It was regrettable. He regrets it. An all-you-can-eat buffet of regret. But for you to suggest that his righteousness is anything but an inspiration to his grandchildren—”

“With all due respect, Mr. Bloch—”

Jacob turned to Julia: “Let’s get out of here.”

“Let’s actually get what Sam needs.”

“Sam doesn’t need anything from this place. It was a mistake to force him to have a bar mitzvah.”

“What? Jacob, we didn’t force him. We might have *nudged* him, but—”

“We nudged him to get circumcised. With the bar mitzvah, it was proper force.”

“For the last two years, your grandfather has been saying that the only reason he hangs on is to make it to Sam’s bar mitzvah.”

“All the more reason not to have it.”

“And we wanted Sam to know that he’s Jewish.”

“Was there any chance of him not knowing that?”

“To *be* Jewish.”

“Jewish, yes. But *religious*?”

Jacob never knew how to answer the question “Are you religious?” He’d never not belonged to a synagogue, never not made some gesture toward kashruth, never not assumed—not even in his moments of greatest frustration with Israel, or his father, or American Jewry, or God’s absence—that he would raise his children with some degree of Jewish literacy and practice. But double negatives never sustained a religion. Or as Sam’s brother Max would put it in his bar mitzvah speech three years later, “You only get to keep what you refuse to let go of.” And as much as Jacob wanted the continuity (of history, culture, thought, and values), as much as he wanted to believe that there was a

deeper meaning available not only to him but to his children and their children—light shone between his fingers.

When they had started dating, Jacob and Julia often spoke about a “religion for two.” It would have felt embarrassing if it hadn’t felt ennobling. Their Shabbat: every Friday night, Jacob would read a letter he had written for Julia over the course of the week, and she would recite a poem from memory; and without overhead lighting, the phone unplugged, the watches stowed under the cushion of the red corduroy armchair, they would slowly eat the dinner they’d slowly prepared together; and they would draw a bath and make love while the waterline rose. Wednesday sunrise strolls: the route became unwittingly ritualized, traced and retraced week after week, until the sidewalk bore an impression of their path—imperceptible, but there. Every Rosh Hashanah, in lieu of going to services, they performed the ritual of tashlich: casting breadcrumbs, meant to symbolize the past year’s regrets, into the Potomac. Some sank, some were carried to other shores by the current, some regrets were taken by gulls to feed their still-blind young. Every morning, before rising from the bed, Jacob kissed Julia between the legs—not sexually (the ritual demanded that the kiss never lead to anything), but religiously. They started to collect, when traveling, things whose insides had an aspect of being larger than their outsides: the ocean contained in a seashell, a depleted typewriter ribbon, the world in a mercury-glass mirror. Everything seemed to move toward ritual—Jacob picking Julia up from work on Thursdays, the morning coffee in shared silence, Julia replacing Jacob’s bookmarks with small notes—until, like a universe that has expanded to its limit and then contracts

toward its beginning, everything was undone.

Some Friday nights were just too late, and some Wednesday mornings were just too early. After a difficult conversation there would be no kiss between the legs, and if one isn't feeling generous, how many things really qualify as being larger on the inside than on the outside? (You can't put resentment on a shelf.) They held on to what they could, and tried not to acknowledge how secular they had become. But every now and then, usually in a moment of defensiveness that, despite the pleas of every better angel, simply could not resist taking the form of blame, one of them would say, "I miss our Shabbats."

Sam's birth felt like another chance, as did Max's and Benjy's. A religion for three, for four, for five. They ritualistically marked the children's heights on the doorframe on the first day of every year—secular and Jewish—always first thing in the morning, before gravity did its work of compression. They threw resolutions into the fire every December 31, took Argus on a family walk every Tuesday after dinner, and read report cards aloud on the way to Vace for otherwise forbidden aranciatas and limonatas. Tuck-in happened in a certain order, according to certain elaborate protocols, and on anyone's birthday everyone slept in the same bed. They often observed Shabbat—as much in the sense of self-consciously witnessing religion as fulfilling it—with a Whole Foods challah, Kedem grape juice, and the tapered wax of endangered bees in the silver candleholders of extinct ancestors. After the blessings, and before eating, Jacob and Julia would go to each of the children, hold his head, and whisper into his ear something of which they were proud that week. The extreme intimacy of the fingers in the

hair, the love that wasn't secret but had to be whispered, sent tremors through the filaments of the dimmed bulbs.

After dinner, they performed a ritual whose origin no one could remember and whose meaning no one questioned: they closed their eyes and walked around their house. It was fine to speak, to be silly, to laugh, but their blindness always became silent. Over time, they developed a tolerance for the dark quiet and could last for ten minutes, then twenty. They would meet back at the kitchen table, and then open their eyes together. Each time it was revelatory. Two revelations: the foreignness of a home the children had lived in their entire lives, and the foreignness of sight.

One Shabbat, as they drove to visit their great-grandfather Isaac, Jacob said, "A person gets drunk at a party, and hits and kills a kid on the way home. Another person gets equally drunk, and makes it home safely. Why does the first one go to jail for the rest of his life, while the second gets to wake up the next morning as if nothing happened?"

"Because he killed a kid."

"But in terms of what they did wrong, they are equally guilty."

"But the second one didn't kill a kid."

"Not because he was innocent, but because he was lucky."

"But still, the first one killed a kid."

"But when we think about guilt, shouldn't we think about actions and intentions, in addition to outcomes?"

"What kind of party was it?"

"What?"

"Yeah, and what was the kid doing out that late, anyway?"

“I think the point—”

“His parents should have kept him safe. *They* should be sent to jail. But I guess then the kid wouldn’t have parents. Unless he lived in jail with them.”

“You’re forgetting he’s dead.”

“Oh, right.”

Sam and Max became enthralled by intention. Once, Max ran into the kitchen crying, holding his stomach. “I punched him,” Sam said from the living room, “but not on purpose.” Or when, in retaliation, Max stomped on Sam’s half-finished Lego chalet and said, “It wasn’t on purpose; I only meant to stomp on the rug beneath it.” Broccoli was fed to Argus under the table, “by accident.” Quizzes weren’t studied for, “on purpose.” The first time Max told Jacob “Shut up”—in response to a poorly timed suggestion that he take a break from some Tetris derivative on which he was about to crack the top ten scores of the day but wasn’t supposed to be playing in the first place—he put down Jacob’s phone, ran to him, hugged him, and with fear-glazed eyes, said, “I didn’t mean it.”

When the fingers of Sam’s left hand were crushed in the hinge of the heavy iron door and he screamed, “Why did that happen?” over and over and over, “Why did that happen?” and Julia, holding him against her, blood blooming across her shirt as breast milk used to when she heard a baby cry, said simply, “I love you, and I’m here,” and Jacob said, “We need to go to the emergency room,” Sam, who feared doctors more than anything any doctor could ever treat, pleaded, “We don’t! We don’t! It was on purpose! I did this on purpose!”

Time passed, the world exerted itself, and Jacob and Julia began to forget to do things on purpose. They didn't refuse to let go, and like the resolutions, and Tuesday walks, and birthday calls to the cousins in Israel, and three overflowing shopping bags of Jewish deli food brought to Great-Grandpa Isaac on the first Sunday of every month, and skipping school for the Nats' home opener, and singing "Singin' in the Rain" while riding Ed the Hyena through the automated car wash, and the "gratitude journals," and "ear inspections," and annual pumpkin picking and carving and seed roasting and monthlong decomposition, the whispered pride fell away.

The inside of life became far smaller than the outside, creating a cavity, an emptiness. Which is why the bar mitzvah felt so important: it was the final thread of the frayed tether. To snip it, as Sam had so badly wanted, and as Jacob was now suggesting against his own real need, would send not just Sam but the family floating off into that emptiness— more than enough oxygen to last a life, but what kind of life?

Julia turned to the rabbi: "If Sam apologizes—"

"For *what*?" Jacob asked.

"If he apologizes—"

"To *whom*?"

"Everyone," the rabbi said.

"Everyone? Everyone living and dead?"

Jacob assembled that phrase—*everyone living and dead*—not in the light of all that was about to happen, but in the pitch-blackness of the moment: this was before the folded prayers bloomed from the Wailing Wall, before the Japanese Crisis, before the ten thousand missing chil-

dren and the March of a Million, before “Adia” became the most searched term in the history of the Internet. Before the devastating aftershocks, before the alignment of nine armies and the distribution of iodine pills, before America never sent F-16s, before the Messiah was too distracted or nonexistent to awake the living or the dead. Sam was becoming a man. Isaac was weighing whether to kill himself or move from a home to a Home.

“We want to put this behind us,” Julia said to the rabbi. “We want to make it right, and go through with the bar mitzvah as planned.”

“By apologizing for everything to everyone?”

“We want to get back to happiness.”

Jacob and Julia silently registered the hope and sadness and strangeness of what she’d said, as the word dissipated through the room and settled atop the stacks of religious books and on the stained carpeting. They’d lost their way, and lost their compass, but not their belief that it was possible to get back—even if neither knew exactly what happiness she was referring to.

The rabbi interwove his fingers, just like a rabbi, and said, “There’s a Hasidic proverb: ‘While we pursue happiness, we flee from contentment.’”

Jacob rose, folded the paper, tucked it in his pocket, and said, “You’ve got the wrong guy.”

**THREE YEARS
WITH
THE RAT
JAY HOSKING**



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The phone rattles its way off the little square table and stings the hardwood floor. I shrug an arm from the sheets and bring the phone toward my face. The little panel across the back of it flashes between the time, just before noon, and a number with no associated name. I consider turning it off. Instead I roll onto one side, flip open the phone with my thumb, and graze my ear with the receiver.

My pillow smells like the grease from my hair.

“Hello?” My voice struggles.

“Eh, where is John and Grace?” It’s a man’s voice, accented, and there is something both distant and familiar about it. I can hear traffic in the background.

“I don’t know where they are,” I say. I clear my throat. “Who is this?”

The blinds on the window cut the sunlight into shards, bright fragments scattered across the dirty clothes covering my floor. The light causes a stab of pain along the back of my head. I squeeze my eyes closed.

The man’s accent is probably European. “He gave me this number.”

“What?” Suddenly my body is lurching awake. “John gave you my number? When? Who the hell is this?”

“The cheque bounced,” he says. “I call them all week and nothing.”

John and Grace’s landlord. I don’t say anything and he continues. “I bang on their door and nothing. Another day and still nothing. I don’t like nothing. I think maybe there’s a problem and look inside. There’s a

note from John and it doesn't say 'Here's the rent' or 'I'm sorry.' It says call you and remove their things. So now I call you."

I writhe under the sheets, my guts turning over and over. How long would it have taken for John's bank account to run out of money, for his post-dated cheques to bounce? How long has he been gone? I count backward until I reach last December. Eight months, more or less. A year and eight months for Grace.

I clench my stomach and pull up my knees. The sheets scrape my skin. My jaw aches as if I've been grinding my teeth in my sleep.

"Hello?" he shouts.

"I'm here."

"What's wrong with you?"

"Hung over." It's an excuse but also strictly true.

His voice gets deep and sharp. "Eh, I don't give a fuck if you're dying. Get over here and clean out the apartment."

I can taste bile but I don't say anything, only hang up.

I stall. Kick the clothes into one large mound in the corner of the room. Pull the blinds and crack open my tiny windows. Stand in the shower until the water runs cold. Select the least dirty clothes and put them on slowly, slowly. Sit on the edge of the bed, breathe, try not to be sick. My stalls run out and I leave. I have to duck a little to get through the door of my basement apartment.

Outside it is almost a proper early August day in Toronto. These last few months have been uncharacteristically cold and grey, but today the sun is out and the breeze carries warm air. The neighbours' kids look

like apes as they shake the hell out of my landlord's persimmon tree. They stop and stare when they see me shuffle up the concrete steps to ground level. I grin and stare back, another dumb ape.

My car sits on the street in front of the house. It is unwashed, matte from years of abuse, and rusted around the wheel wells. A flood of hot air hits me when I open the driver's side door, and I'm glad to sink into its murky heat and shut the door behind me. I sit for a few minutes, thinking, then throw all the passenger-seat garbage into the back. The engine turns over disappointingly quickly, as if the car is urging me forward.

At least there is no good way to drive from my house to the apartment. My street is a one-way and forces me into traffic. In this city, drivers are eager to complain about public transit but always polite enough to yield. I turn left onto Dundas Street, eastbound through the Portuguese and Vietnamese neighbourhood, and left again onto Bathurst, northbound past the neuropsychiatric ward of the hospital.

On the other side of the passenger window, people walk around in shorts and skirts, much of their skin bare and tanned. I am overdressed, jeans and a hoodie, and there is no air conditioner in my car, but still I am not hot.

Thoughts of John and Grace keep crashing in, unwanted. I turn on the stereo and Grace's mix CD starts playing. I turn it off again.

My car grinds its way past College Street and Shifty's, and at the gaudy, bulbed storefront of Honest Ed's I turn right. Traffic is just as slow on Bloor as I pass the dingy entrance to the Fortress. Just past the club are the two sushi restaurants and above them, one window still

covered with cardboard, is John and Grace's apartment. My destination.

I find parking on the next side street, but on the way back, I stop at Features and order coffee and mashed potatoes. The potatoes come in the shape of a volcano, gravy pooled in the crater. I sit at a bench along the front window and feel my hangover ease. A stream of people moves along Bloor Street, couples smile and touch, friends carry bags of books or records and shout their opinions at one another. Everyone is so god-damned vital and happy in this neighbourhood. I finish my coffee and eat away one side of the potatoes, gravy spilling out onto the plate.

Only then, when I can't possibly delay any longer, I make my way to the apartment.

—

"You get in touch with them?" the landlord asks.

He is paunchy, stained, and graceless. He meets me at the apartment door, between the two sushi restaurants. He does not recognize me, likely on account of my beard.

"I don't know where they are," I say. "Haven't seen them in a long time."

"Why he asked for you in the note, then?" The landlord's finger extends, pokes toward me. He wants to press it against my chest but he is shorter than me and he isn't angry enough yet.

"I don't know," I say.

"I have an idea. I think they don't want to pay rent. I think maybe they found another place."

"Maybe," I say.

He smiles, unfriendly. “And I think they send you to clean up. Because they know me. They know I don’t take the bullshit.”

I say, “Look. I’m tired. I’d like to get into the apartment. I’d like to help you.”

His mouth hangs a little and his finger curls in. He pulls a ring with two keys from his shirt pocket and hands it to me.

“End of today,” he grunts. “That’s it. I’m gonna paint after that.”


“Sure. Sure.”

He scuttles up the stairs and I follow him. The only light in the stairwell comes from a window above the front entrance. At the top of the narrow steps is the door. I unlock the door, enter, and lock it behind me, leaving the landlord in the hallway. And for the first time in eight months, I am inside the apartment.

The drapes are closed and only a little pale light filters in around their edges. I can see down the front hallway into part of the kitchen and living room. A blanket is neatly folded over the edge of the couch. Everything is tidy and unused, but it smells stale and musty and dead.

I take a few more steps. Grace’s Bachelor of Science degree, framed on the wall. The standing coat rack, still buried under Grace’s jackets and shawls and scarves. The homemade shelf lined with their indecipherable textbooks. The only photograph John kept, its kitschy frame taken off the wall and now resting on the coffee table. And a flashlight sitting next to the photo.


It quickly becomes clear that the apartment hasn’t been occupied in months. The refrigerator is a dank shock of rotten, twisted shapes and




jars greening with mould. The garbage can is still full of John's bloodied bandages. Though the apartment has been tidied one last time, the front closet remains jammed with newspapers. Bedding for the rats.

It takes me a couple of minutes before I realize what's wrong with the space. My attention is narrowed, grasping for strangeness in the tiny details, and the obviousness of it only comes to me when I sit on the arm of the couch for a moment. I breathe in sharply.

The door to the second bedroom is open by a few inches.



I stand and walk to the door, press my fingertips against the wood. The oversized key is in the deadbolt. John installed the lock and I strongly doubt he would have provided the landlord with a key. Why am I still holding my breath, trying not to make a sound? I push my arm out and the door swings open, bumping into something soft before the knob hits the wall. The toes of my shoes are on the threshold of the doorway. There is a faint division in the carpet, with the pile in the living room lighter than the bedroom. I step inside.



The room is very dark and the light switch next to the door doesn't do anything, so I flip open my cell phone for light. My eyes can't understand the shapes inside. Some large piece of furniture dominates the centre of the room, all right angles and hardwood. I make my way around it to the covered window, peel the duct tape from the wall, and pull away the cardboard. Daylight floods in and for a moment I cannot see.

In the centre of the room is a wooden box that is large enough to house a person, perhaps five feet in every direction. I circle it. The box is made from six identical, sanded pieces that seem to fit together with-

out nails or hinges. The only noticeable feature is a handle at the bottom of the panel that faces me. Otherwise it is a perfect, symmetrical cube without any knots or imperfections in the wood. I have seen the materials of this box but never imagined what it might be when put together. It is a marvel.


The rest of the room is no more comprehensible. A smaller version of the box, another perfectly sanded cube of wood, sits atop a TV-dinner table in one corner of the room. Instead of a handle, one of its sides has a hole lined with black rubber, and an additional slat leans against the table. Piled on the floor are little cloth pouches, their openings drawn tight with strings. They look like bags of marbles. Between the door and the wall is a large burlap sack with something dark spilled on the carpet around it, and next to it are some discarded tools.

And last, I see the small table near the door. On it is a hardbound, sky-blue notebook, and resting on the book is a handwritten note. It is John's writing.


I'm sorry to put this on you. It was my fault, all of it, and it was supposed to be mine to deal with. Don't stay in there too long. Take the photo, the light, and one of those pouches with you. If you don't see anything right away, it can always be taken apart and put together somewhere else. This is the only way back for us. Thank you.

Some vague story begins to thread its way through the last two years of my life.


I put down the note and look at the large wooden box next to me. I



reach down for its handle, first pulling outward without luck, then upward. The side of the box slides up a little and creates a crack of darkness at the bottom. I look down into that space, see movement, and jump back. A moment later I realize that it's reflected light. The floor inside the box is a mirror. I tug on the handle again and the slat slides up by a few feet. The interior of the box is empty but completely covered in mirror, without frames or borders, the edges of the glass connecting seamlessly with one another. The entire inside of the box is reflective surface.



I leave the second bedroom, pace the living room, open and close the fridge, sit down, stand up. I look into the master bedroom, then the washroom, but my thoughts are only of the box and John's written request. I curse at myself and wring my hands. On the coffee table is the framed photo, John and Grace on the day they moved into the apartment. They are smiling without reserve and I can see myself among the friends in the background of the picture. I grab the photo and flashlight and walk back into the second bedroom.



I work swiftly. The picture frame comes apart without difficulty and I pocket the photograph in my hoodie. I pick up one of the small pouches and it is full of some malleable material. A quick inspection of the large sack on the floor reveals that it's full of soft dirt. The pouch goes in my other pocket. I glance into the box, and after brief consideration I go back to the pile of tools. There I find the hammer, silver and shiny, and feel calm with its weight in my hand. I take one last breath, a pause to consider whether I am doing the right thing.

Then I crouch and step inside the box, using my fingertips to gently



lower the open face until I am enveloped by an overwhelming, total darkness.

It takes only a click of the flashlight to see the care and precision that have gone into designing this space. I have stood between two mirrors before, in an elevator, and seen reflections of myself curving off into the distance, the mirrors not being exactly parallel. This is not what the box is like. By the pale beam of the flashlight, I can see that copies of my reflection are not turning but rather absolutely, perfectly straight in every direction. No matter where I look I see myself, hammer in one hand and light in the other. In the distance are some abstract and indeterminate forms that are probably still composed of parts of me. There is no background to reflect, only reflection that dilates space itself. It is geometric and infinite.

And something is changing. The temperature seems to be dropping and I feel the ache of wet, damp air. The sound of my small, shuffling movements enlarges within the box, just like my reflection. I have no free hands so I clear my throat to make noise, and it sounds as though I'm standing in a field instead of sealed in a tiny mirrored box.

Fear seeps into me. In this space is movement and breathing, so much that it could not possibly be mine alone. I am being watched. I turn around and around but see the same thing in every direction, my mirror image threatening and tight. It isn't clear what I should do next.

I jam the hammer under my arm and pull the photograph out of my pocket. My toes are becoming numb. I am sure some *thing* is drawing close to me but I can see nothing but myself in the mirrors. John and

Grace look at me from the picture and they have nothing to offer. I fumble and drop the photo, but instead of retrieving it I pull the hammer from under my arm, test its weight again in my hand.

Here it comes.

And then I feel it, as though someone is drawing a rough, curved line down my back. I shout, I twist around, but there is nothing behind me. I can feel the sensation where the arc has been made across me, and soon that touch on my back becomes an itch. The itch becomes burning. The burning becomes vivid pain. My shirt begins to stick to my back. I turn and scour the mirrors but again there is only my own image, my face calmer than I would expect. My legs become uncoordinated, weak. The pain is now torture and something wet is pooling in the small of my back. Worse, I can feel that thing approaching. *Here it comes again.* I do the first and only thing that comes to my mind.

I swing the hammer at a wall.

In an instant, the temperature jumps up and the space in the remaining mirrors compresses to reflections of wood and shattered glass. I try each wall until I find the one that slides up, toss the hammer and flashlight onto the floor in front of me, and crawl out of the box. When I reach my arm around to feel between my shoulder blades, I bring back a hand covered in blood. My body tries to vomit but only a little coffee and gravy come up. I wipe my mouth with my clean hand, bite my lip, and try to stop shaking. A sound catches my attention and I turn.

A black and white rat is standing on the floor of the box, docile, peering out, his pink nose sniffing up at me. I know this rat. Buddy.

This is the only way back for us, the note had said.

I find the rat cages stacked in the closet of the master bedroom, below some of John's clothes. I remove my torn hoodie and replace it with his black jacket. The blood is already sticky along the wound, painful to the touch, but at least it only comes in waves. I return to the second bedroom with a cage and pick Buddy up as John taught me: thumb and middle finger pinched just behind his front legs, index finger lightly on the back of his neck. Buddy seems calm, happy to be back in his cage.

Next I remove the handled slat of the box and the piece opposite to it, the one with the shattered mirror. I use the hammer to clear the half-broken fragments from the wood and lean the two walls of the box against the couch in the living room. With the broom from the kitchen, I sweep the bits of broken glass into a corner. Then, piece by piece, I disassemble the rest of the box. John used grooves and notches rather than nails, so the whole thing comes apart neatly.

I move the walls of the box, the blue notebook, the smaller box with the rubber hole, the sack full of earth, the pouches, the hammer, and Buddy's cage down the stairs and to my car. The wooden pieces are far too big to fit in the interior so I strap them to the roof using bungee cords from the trunk. I stack the six pieces of wood carefully but still worry that the mirrors will break. When I'm finished, the little car is nearly as tall and wide as it is long.

Last of all, I pluck the photograph of John and Grace from the bits of glass and put it in my back pocket, careful not to spoil it with my blood.

The landlord comes up the stairs as I'm preparing to leave the apartment for good. My head is foggy and the line down my back screams to be mended.

"Done," I say.

The landlord looks inside the apartment, looks at me, then back and forth again. "What do you mean, 'done'? It's still full of their shit."

"I've taken everything I can," I tell him.

His lips pinch and his head lowers. "You clean the place, now."

"I need to go to the hospital."

"I don't care if you're dying—"

"Go fuck yourself," I cut him off. "I've heard this story already. See you later."

I begin to stumble down to the front entrance.

"I shoulda never rented to them," he shouts. "I knew she was damaged goods as soon as I met her."

I stop halfway down the stairs. The carpet is filthy with old bits of gum, flattened and black with time. I turn around to face him. My back sings with pain.


"What did you say?" I ask through my teeth. My hands are tight little balls of bone, one still coated in my own blood. "What did you say about my sister?"

His grin becomes nervous, hesitant.



I take a step up the stairs. Another.

"You go," he says, crossing his arms. "You fucken get out. You think I want their trouble? You think this is no problem for me?"

"What did you say about my sister?"



He moves his mouth a little but all I can hear is my pulse in my ears. By the time I reach the top step, the landlord has slid into the apartment. He closes the door and locks the deadbolt. I stand for a few seconds, spit on the floor, and make my way down to the car.



Swing Time

Zadie Smith



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PROLOGUE

It was the first day of my humiliation. Put on a plane, sent back home, to England, set up with a temporary rental in St John's Wood. The flat was on the eighth floor, the windows looked over the cricket ground. It had been chosen, I think, because of the doorman, who blocked all enquiries. I stayed indoors. The phone on the kitchen wall rang and rang, but I was warned not to answer it and to keep my own phone switched off. I watched the cricket being played, a game I don't understand, it offered no real distraction, but still it was better than looking at the interior of that apartment, a luxury condo, in which everything had been designed to be perfectly neutral, with all significant corners rounded, like an iPhone. When the cricket finished I stared at the sleek coffee machine embedded in the wall, and at two photos of the Buddha – one a brass Buddha, the other wood – and at a photo of an elephant kneeling next to a little Indian boy, who was also kneeling. The rooms were tasteful and grey, linked by a pristine hallway of tan wool cord. I stared at the ridges in the cord.



Two days passed like that. On the third day, the doorman called up and said the lobby was clear. I looked at my phone, it was sitting on the counter in airplane mode. I had been offline for seventy-two hours and can remember feeling that this should be counted among the great examples of personal stoicism and moral endurance of our times. I put on my jacket and went downstairs. In the lobby I met the doorman. He took the opportunity to complain bitterly ('You've no idea what it's been

like down here, past few days – Piccadilly-bloody-Circus!’), although it was clear that he was also conflicted, even a little disappointed: it was a shame for him that the fuss had died down – he had felt very important for forty-eight hours. He told me proudly of telling several people to ‘buck up their ideas’, of letting such and such a person know that if they thought they were getting past him ‘they had another think coming’. I leant against his desk and listened to him talk. I had been out of England long enough that many simple colloquial British phrases now sounded exotic to me, almost nonsensical. I asked him if he thought there would be more people that evening and he said he thought not, there hadn’t been anyone since yesterday. I wanted to know if it was safe to have an overnight visitor. ‘I don’t see any problem,’ he said, with a tone that made me feel my question was ridiculous. ‘There’s always the back door.’ He sighed, and at the same moment a woman stopped to ask him if he could receive her dry cleaning, as she was going out. She had a rude, impatient manner and rather than look at him as she spoke she stared at a calendar on his desk, a grey block with a digital screen, which informed whoever was standing in front of it exactly what moment they were in to the second. It was the twenty-fifth of the month of October, in the year two thousand and eight, and the time was twelve thirty-six and twenty-three seconds. I turned to leave; the doorman dealt with the woman and hurried out from behind his desk to open the front door for me. He asked me where I was going; I said I didn’t know. I walked out into the city. It was a perfect autumnal London afternoon, chill but bright, under certain trees there was a shedding of golden leaves. I walked past the cricket ground and the mosque, past Madame

Tussauds, up Goodge Street and down Tottenham Court Road, through Trafalgar Square, and found myself finally in Embankment, and then crossing the bridge. I thought – as I often think as I cross that bridge – of two young men, students, who were walking over it very late one night when they were mugged and thrown over the railing, into the Thames. One lived and one died. I've never understood how the survivor managed it, in the darkness, in the absolute cold, with the terrible shock and his shoes on. Thinking of him, I kept to the right-hand side of the bridge, by the railway line, and avoided looking at the water. When I reached the South Bank the first thing I saw was a poster advertising an afternoon event with an Austrian film director 'in conversation', it was starting in twenty minutes at the Royal Festival Hall. I decided on a whim to try to get a ticket. I walked over and was able to buy a seat in the gods, in the very back row. I didn't expect much, I wanted to be distracted from my own problems for a while, to sit in darkness, and hear a discussion of films I'd never seen, but in the middle of the programme the director asked his interviewer to roll a clip from the movie *Swing Time*, a film I know very well, I watched it over and over as a child. I sat up tall in my seat. On the huge screen before me Fred Astaire danced with three silhouetted figures. They can't keep up with him, they begin to lose their rhythm. Finally they throw in the towel, making that very American 'oh phooey' gesture with their three left hands, and walking off stage. Astaire danced on alone. I understood all three of the shadows were also Fred Astaire. Had I known that, as a child? No one else paws the air like that, no other dancer bends his knees in quite that way. Meanwhile the director spoke of a



theory of his, about ‘pure cinema’, which he began to define as the ‘interplay of light and dark, expressed as a kind of rhythm, over time’, but I found this line of thought boring and hard to follow. Behind him the same clip, for some reason, played again, and my feet, in sympathy with the music, tapped at the seat in front of me. I felt a wonderful lightness in my body, a ridiculous happiness, it seemed to come from nowhere. I’d lost my job, a certain version of my life, my privacy, yet all these things felt small and petty next to this joyful sense I had watching the dance, and following its precise rhythms in my own body. I felt I was losing track of my physical location, rising above my body, viewing my life from a very distant point, hovering over it. It reminded me of the way people describe hallucinogenic drug experiences. I saw all my years at once, but they were not piled up on each other, experience after experience, building into something of substance – the opposite. A truth was being revealed to me: that I had always tried to attach myself to the light of other people, that I had never had any light of my own. I experienced myself as a kind of shadow.



When the event was over I walked back through the city to the flat, phoned Lamin, who was waiting in a nearby café, and told him the coast was clear. He’d been fired, too, but instead of letting him go home, to Senegal, I’d brought him here, to London. At eleven o’clock he came round, in a hooded top, in case of cameras. The lobby was clear. In his hood he looked even younger and more beautiful, and it seemed to me to be a kind of scandal that I could find in my heart no real feelings for him. Afterwards, we lay side by side in bed with our laptops, and to avoid checking my email I Googled, at first aimlessly, and then with an



aim: I was looking for that clip from *Swing Time*. I wanted to show it to Lamin, I was curious to know what he thought of it, as a dancer now himself, but he said he had never seen or heard of Astaire, and as the clip played he sat up in bed and frowned. I hardly understood what we were looking at: Fred Astaire in black face. In the Royal Festival Hall I'd sat in the gods, without my glasses on, and the scene opens with Astaire in long shot. But none of this really explained how I'd managed to block the childhood image from my memory: the rolling eyes, the white gloves, the Bojangles grin. I felt very stupid, closed the laptop and went to sleep. The next morning I woke early, leaving Lamin in bed, hurried to the kitchen and switched on my phone. I expected hundreds of messages, thousands. I had maybe thirty. It had been Aimee who once sent me hundreds of messages a day, and now at last I understood that Aimee would never send me another message again. Why it took me so long to understand this obvious thing I don't know. I scrolled down a depressing list – a distant cousin, a few friends, several journalists. I spotted one titled: WHORE. It had a nonsense address of numbers and letters and a video attachment that wouldn't open. The body of the message was a single sentence: *Now everyone knows who you really are*. It was the kind of note you might get from a spiteful seven-year-old girl with a firm idea of justice. And of course that – if you can ignore the passage of time – is exactly what it was.

PART ONE

early days

ONE

If all the Saturdays of 1982 can be thought of as one day, I met Tracey at ten a.m. on that Saturday, walking through the sandy gravel of a churchyard, each holding our mother's hand. There were many other girls present but for obvious reasons we noticed each other, the similarities and the differences, as girls will. Our shade of brown was exactly the same – as if one piece of tan material had been cut to make us both – and our freckles gathered in the same areas, we were of the same height. But my face was ponderous and melancholy, with a long, serious nose, and my eyes turned down, as did my mouth. Tracey's face was perky and round, she looked like a darker Shirley Temple, except her nose was as problematic as mine, I could see that much at once, a ridiculous nose – it went straight up in the air like a little piglet. Cute, but also obscene: her nostrils were on permanent display. On noses you could call it a draw. On hair she won comprehensively. She had spiral curls, they reached to her backside and were gathered into two long plaits, glossy with some kind of oil, tied at their ends with satin yellow bows. Satin yellow bows were a phenomenon unknown to my mother. She pulled my great frizz back in a single cloud, tied with a black band. My mother was a feminist. She wore her hair in a half-inch Afro, her skull was perfectly shaped, she never wore make-up and dressed us both as plainly as possible. Hair is not essential when you look like Nefertiti. She'd no need of make-up or products or jewellery or expensive clothes, and in this way her financial circumstances, her politics and her aesthetic were all perfectly – conveniently – matched. Acces-

sories only cramped her style, including, or so I felt at the time, the horse-faced seven-year-old by her side. Looking across at Tracey, I diagnosed the opposite problem: her mother was white, obese, afflicted with acne. She wore her thin blond hair pulled back very tightly in what I knew my mother would call a ‘Kilburn facelift’. But Tracey’s personal glamour was the solution: she was her own mother’s most striking accessory. The family look, though not to my mother’s taste, I found captivating: logos, tin bangles and hoops, diamante everything, expensive trainers of the kind my mother refused to recognize as a reality in the world – ‘Those aren’t shoes.’ Despite appearances, though, there was not much to choose between our two families. We were both from the estates, neither of us received benefits. (A matter of pride for my mother, an outrage to Tracey’s: she had tried many times – and failed – to ‘get on the disability’.) In my mother’s view it was exactly these superficial similarities that lent so much weight to questions of taste. She dressed for a future not yet with us but which she expected to arrive. That’s what her plain white linen trousers were for, her blue-and-white striped ‘Breton’ T-shirt, her frayed espadrilles, her severe and beautiful African head – everything so plain, so understated, completely out of step with the spirit of the time, and with the place. One day we would ‘get out of here’, she would complete her studies, become truly radical chic, perhaps even spoken of in the same breath as Angela Davis and Gloria Steinem . . . Straw-soled shoes were all a part of this bold vision, they pointed subtly at the higher concepts. I was an accessory only in the sense that in my very plainness I signified admirable maternal restraint, it being considered bad taste – in the circles to which

my mother aspired – to dress your daughter like a little whore. But Tracey was unashamedly her mother’s aspiration and avatar, her only joy, in those thrilling yellow bows, a frou-frou skirt of many ruffles and a crop top revealing inches of childish nut-brown belly, and as we pressed up against the pair of them in this bottle-neck of mothers and daughters entering the church I watched with interest as Tracey’s mother pushed the girl in front of herself – and in front of us – using her own body as a means of obstruction, the flesh on her arms swinging as she beat us back, until she arrived in Miss Isabel’s dance class, a look of great pride and anxiety on her face, ready to place her precious cargo into the temporary care of others. My mother’s attitude, by contrast, was one of weary, semi-ironic servitude, she thought the dance class ridiculous, she had better things to do, and after a few further Saturdays – in which she sat slumped in one of the plastic chairs that lined the left-hand wall, hardly able to contain her contempt for the whole exercise – a change was made and my father took over. I waited for Tracey’s father to take over, but he never did. It turned out – as my mother had guessed at once – that there was no ‘Tracey’s father’, at least not in the conventional, married sense. This, too, was an example of bad taste.

TWO

I want to describe the church now, and Miss Isabel. An unpretentious nineteenth-century building with large sandy stones on the façade, not unlike the cheap cladding you saw in the nastier houses – though it couldn't have been that – and a satisfying, pointy steeple atop a plain, barn-like interior. It was called St Christopher's. It looked just like the church we made with our fingers when we sang:

Here is the church

Here is the steeple

Open the doors

There's all the people.

The stained glass told the story of St Christopher carrying the baby Jesus on his shoulders across a river. It was poorly done: the saint looked mutilated, one-armed. The original windows had blown out during the war. Opposite St Christopher's stood a high-rise estate of poor reputation, and this was where Tracey lived. (Mine was nicer, low-rise, in the next street.) Built in the sixties, it replaced a row of Victorian houses lost in the same bomb that had damaged the church, but here ended the relationship between the two buildings. The church, unable to tempt residents across the road for God, had made a pragmatic decision to diversify into other areas: a toddlers' playgroup, ESL, driver training. These were popular, and well-established, but Saturday-morning dance classes were a new addition and no one knew quite what to make of them. The class itself cost two pounds fifty, but a maternal rumour

went round concerning the going rate for ballet shoes, one woman had heard seven pounds, another ten, so-and-so swore the only place you could get them was Freed, in Covent Garden, where they'd take twenty quid off you as soon as look at you – and then what about 'tap' and what about 'modern'? Could ballet shoes be worn for modern? What *was* modern? There was no one you could ask, no one who'd already done it, you were stuck. It was a rare mother whose curiosity extended to calling the number written on the home-made flyers stapled to the local trees. Many girls who might have made fine dancers never made it across that road, for fear of a home-made flyer.


My mother was rare: home-made flyers did not scare her. She had a terrific instinct for middle-class mores. She knew, for example, that a car-boot sale – despite its unpromising name – was where you could find a better quality of person, and also their old Penguin paperbacks, sometimes by Orwell, their old china pill-boxes, their cracked Cornish earthenware, their discarded potter's wheels. Our flat was full of such things. No plastic flowers for us, sparkly with fake dew, and no crystal figurines. This was all part of the plan. Even things I hated – like my mother's espadrilles – usually turned out to be attractive to the kind of people we were trying to attract, and I learnt not to question her methods, even when they filled me with shame. A week before classes were due to begin I heard her doing her posh voice in the galley kitchen, but when she got off the phone she had all the answers: five pounds for ballet shoes – if you went to the shopping centre instead of up into town – and the tap shoes could wait till later. Ballet shoes could be used for modern. What was modern? She hadn't asked. The concerned parent

she would play, but never, ever the ignorant one.


My father was sent to get the shoes. The pink of the leather turned out to be a lighter shade than I'd hoped, it looked like the underside of a kitten, and the sole was a dirty grey cat's tongue, and there were no long pink satin ribbons to criss-cross over the ankles, no, only a sad little elastic strap which my father had sewn on himself. I was extremely bitter about it. But perhaps they were, like the espadrilles, deliberately 'simple', in good taste? It was possible to hold on to this idea right up to the moment when, having entered the hall, we were told to change into our dance clothes by the plastic chairs and go over to the opposite wall, to the barre. Almost everybody had the pink satin shoes, not the pale pink, piggy leather I was stuck with, and some – girls whom I knew to be on benefits, or fatherless, or both – had the shoes with long satin ribbons, criss-crossing round their ankles. Tracey, who was standing next to me, with her left foot in her mother's hand, had both – the deep pink satin and the criss-cross – and also a full tutu, which no one else had even considered as a possibility, no more than turning up to a first swimming lesson in a diving suit. Miss Isabel, meanwhile, was sweet-faced and friendly, but old, perhaps as old as forty-five. It was disappointing. Solidly constructed, she looked more like a farmer's wife than a ballet dancer and was all over pink and yellow, pink and yellow. Her hair was yellow, not blonde, yellow like a canary. Her skin was very pink, raw pink, now that I think of it she probably suffered from rosacea. Her leotard was pink, her tracksuit bottoms were pink, her cover-up ballet cardigan was mohair and pink – yet her shoes were silk and yellow, the same shade as her hair. I was bitter about this, too. Yellow

had never been mentioned! Next to her, in the corner, was a very old white man in a trilby who sat playing an upright piano, ‘Night and Day’, a song I loved and was proud to recognize. I got all the old songs from my father, whose own father had been a keen pub singer, the kind of man – or so my father believed – whose petty criminality represents, at least in part, some thwarted creative instinct. The piano player was called Mr Booth. I hummed loudly along with him as he played, hoping to be heard, putting a lot of vibrato into my humming. I was a better singer than dancer – I was not a dancer at all – although I took too much pride in my singing, in a manner I knew my mother found obnoxious. Singing came naturally to me, but things that came naturally to females did not impress my mother, not at all. In her view you might as well be proud of breathing or walking or giving birth.


Our mothers served as our balance, as our foot-rests. We placed one hand on their shoulders, we placed one foot on their bended knees. My body was presently in the hands of my mother – hoiked up and tied down, fastened and straightened, brushed off – but my mind was on Tracey, and on the soles of her ballet shoes, upon which I now read ‘Freed’ clearly stamped in the leather. Her natural arches were two hummingbirds in flight, curved in on themselves. My own feet were square and flat, they seemed to grind through the positions. I felt like a toddler placing wooden blocks at a series of right angles to each other. Flutter, flutter, flutter said Isabel, yes that’s lovely Tracey. Compliments made Tracey throw her head back and flare her little pig nose awfully. Aside from that, she was perfection, I was besotted. Her mother seemed equally infatuated: her commitment to those classes seemed the only



consistent feature of what we would now call ‘her parenting’. She came to class more than any other mother, and while there her attention rarely wavered from her daughter’s feet. My own mother’s focus was always elsewhere. She could never simply sit somewhere and let time pass, she always had to be learning something. She might arrive at the beginning of class with, say, *The Black Jacobins* in hand, and by the time I came over to ask her to swap my ballet shoes for tap she would already be a hundred pages through. Later, when my father took over, he either slept or ‘went for a walk’, the parental euphemism for smoking in the churchyard.



At this early stage Tracey and I were not friends or enemies or even acquaintances: we barely spoke. Yet there was always this mutual awareness, an invisible band strung between us, connecting us and preventing us from straying too deeply into relations with others. Technically, I spoke more to Lily Bingham – who went to my school – and Tracey’s own standby was sad old Danika Babić, with her ripped tights and thick accent, she lived on Tracey’s corridor. But though we giggled and joked with these white girls during class, and although they had every right to assume that they were our focus, our central concern – that we were, to them, the good friends we appeared to be – as soon as it came to break-time and squash and biscuits Tracey and I lined up next to each other, every time, it was almost unconscious, two iron filings drawn to a magnet.



It turned out Tracey was as curious about my family as I was about hers, arguing, with a certain authority, that we had things ‘the wrong way round’. I listened to her theory one day during break, dipping a



biscuit anxiously into my orange squash. ‘With everyone else it’s the dad,’ she said, and because I knew this to be more or less accurate I could think of nothing more to say. ‘When your dad’s white it means –’ she continued, but at that moment Lily Bingham came and stood next to us and I never learnt what it meant when your dad was white. Lily was gangly, a foot taller than everyone else. She had long, perfectly straight blond hair, pink cheeks and a happy, open nature that seemed, both to Tracey and me, the direct consequence of 29 Exeter Road, a whole house, to which I had been recently invited, eagerly reporting back to Tracey – who had never been – a private garden, a giant jam-jar full of ‘spare change’ and a Swatch watch as big as a human man hanging on a bedroom wall. There were, consequently, things you couldn’t discuss in front of Lily Bingham, and now Tracey shut her mouth, stuck her nose in the air and crossed the room to ask her mother for her ballet shoes.

