



*If you're destined to be a sardine,
the can will drop from heaven.*

BURN OUT

My sister came to visit with a friend of hers, a beautiful woman if a little out of shape. She was very talkative and was soon at ease with me as if we had been friends forever. Evidently, she was well educated and cultured because she could refer to Swedish films, saying I reminded her of a fellow in a Swedish film with sweat on his brow, the kind that uses words like pellucid and insouciant, at least as they appear in the subtitles, which made my sister laugh because he would not even be able to pronounce those words correctly, she said. We Irish have a strange sense of humour, this cultured lady added. The other day I went to a restaurant here with your sister when an English lady with a dog appeared. She asked the waiter if dogs were allowed. The waiter said, dogs yes, mother-in-laws no, leaving the English lady perplexed. I tried to laugh politely, twitching my head on my shoulders no doubt, she had such a lovely face and cheerful smile. Being out of work I had become a rather insouciant and apologetic type, characteristics that choked my doings with others, especially the alarming variety of technical people I came into contact with such as the man who came to take away the broken satellite dish and the tools salesman who called to the door with all the tools I needed to do repairs on the house and the man in the computer clinic where I took the non-functioning laptop. If you found a genie in a bottle washed up on the beach, what three wishes would you make, he said? At first I believed that this was his way of informing me that my broken laptop was beyond repair but no it was only a lead-in to a joke, a rather lengthy one that soon lost me. However, I didn't forget to laugh, knowing by his tone when he had hit the punch line. Joke over, he leaned on the counter and said there was nothing really wrong with my laptop, the hard disk

simply needed to be fragmented or something to that effect, a simple task which he had performed and now the machine was functioning if not as speedily as when new well fast enough for the likes of me. He was a tall, thin man with a long, narrow face and a little meggle on his chin. He touched the keys of my laptop with slender fingers, the words qwertyuiop, asdfghjkl and zxcvbnm, making more sense to him than any I could utter, ink under the fingernails, and then he touched the meggle with his thin, inky fingers. When I asked what I owed him he said; no fix, no fee, in a deep, cinematic voice; unless you want to write me a blank cheque for the laugh.

It was a rainy day in dismal Cork as I left the computer clinic with my laptop under my arm. A good day for a funeral as they say. At that time my sister was of the opinion that I had become too moribund and blamed it on my lack of social vigour. She no longer called to see me all that much but when she did it was to harass and accuse. You ought to get out more. Why don't you take a trip, join a book club or walking society, you have become so withdrawn? Before I could conjure up a witness for the defence her mobile phone would start off, its stupid tune blaring incessantly, and she would have to step into the hall for a better signal. I could hear her voice disturbing the shadows in the house. She spoke loudly and with the confidence of a person successful in the marketplace. When she returned she would snap the ridiculously small phone shut and place it back in her purse with the air of a busy person giving time to someone entirely insignificant. I loved my sister but longed only to make myself scarce as far as she was concerned, stay out of her busy life, avoid being a nuisance as far as possible, though I admit there were times when my blathering tongue ran out of control, my voice sounding off with shameful nonsense in her ear. Your voice is in my ear she said to me once, right here like a drip in my ear. Then it would be some time before she would appear again such as this most recent visit with her Dublin friend. She would be staying over for the night, she said, with her friend as they were attending a seminar in a nearby hotel. It would be nice for me to have

some company and they hated hotels. This information sent my brain into a panic. When, how, why, I wanted to splutter but could find not the spittle to make a sound. Don't worry, she said, I have everything arranged, she will sleep in Granddad's room. I will cook prawns and we'll have a civilized evening together. It will do you good.

When she was gone, much to my relief and to the relief of the shadows, I threw myself once more upon the divan in the second floor room, arm dangling over the side, touching the floorboards, you know how it is, questioning every note of the blackbird outside on the sill, or in the tree, and began to dream once more of escaping back West, Dingle and Corca Dhuibhne, soft rain drifting in off the Atlantic over the bogs and valleys, nestling in the gentle contours of Mount Brandon, falling into some unreal existence out there, poetic and strange. You might think that I am being hard on my sister, with the little portrait I've given and of course you are right. I haven't told you about the lengths she has gone to, to get me out of myself, how she has persevered with my moods, trying to cajole me back into the world, imploring me to be less serious and more at ease. To no avail. Moribund is the word, actually she never used it, morbid is another, miserable is the last.

That evening before my sister, her friend, and the prawns arrived I slipped out the back way and began to drive around in the car, lost in time, driving on into a strange texture, mind-twisting vaporous air dripping from a grey cloudbank, creating an interior cloudiness in my brain, so that soon I found myself astray while driving up a hill near the airport. I'd taken a sudden off-ramp from the South Link and ended up first in a farm-yard with a runway in sight and enormous red and white pylons on every side, then into the middle of a herd of cattle crossing the road, heavy udders weighed down by milk. The cows, enormous beasts from that vantage, brushed past the car, rear ends covered in thick layers of stinking dung. The farmer strolled by, no hurry on the man, merrily thumping a splattered rump with his stick. A cow prodded my side-view mirror, slamming it out of shape.

The farmer's son came at the rear with an ear-piercing whistle and a demon in his eye. A beautiful collie lumbered at his heels ready to spring. How do I get out of here, I asked the farmer's son. For a moment he stared at me silently and I fancied that twinkle in his eye said, I'm not in the mood for solving metaphysical dilemmas, but then with a dramatic clearing of his throat followed by a ball of healthy sputum aimed with precision just wide of his boots and the collie's head, he said that any left hand turn would do me, pointing with his stick in the general direction of a runway. As I drove on, taking only left hand turns which did eventually get me back into the stream of traffic on the South Link Road, the rain began, the wipers knocked to and fro, drivers staring straight on, drivers bobbing heads to music, drivers shaking fists with all the pent-up fury of belonging, displaying an enviable sense of proportion that signalled how normal they were. When I reached home I parked the car and surveyed the scene. My sister's car was parked outside. I sneaked in the back way and held still in the scullery. I could hear their voices coming from the kitchen.

Taking my chance I tip-toed past the kitchen door, seafood sizzling, music, laughter, stepped gingerly around the tell-tale broken timbers of the stairs and climbed into the mouldy attic, drawing the loft ladder up behind me. I shut down the trapdoor and was alone in darkness broken only by rays of light filtering through cracks in the slates. There was enough of it to reveal that the newspaper at my feet was eight years old, yellow and mouldy. My position now was not normal, whatever that is, which had suddenly become the aim, to be not normal, tormented, finger on the self-destruct button, unable to evaluate any sort of criteria or make any valid moral judgement whatsoever, at the risk of loss of civil rights in perpetuity, rather to somehow find some mental state profoundly other than what would be left below in the world, at the risk, I repeat, of loss of civil rights in perpetuity. Here, my hope was to stumble on something other than what I've always been, adapt eyes to find beauty among the ruins, the decomposing sandcastle, somewhere in desert sands, in crumbling ma-

sorry, in the vilest of places. Even there in the drab attic, one thing was reaffirmed, colour is the sign of life. My eyes adjusting to the darkness I crawled along a splintery beam until I reached a crack big enough to see out through. I saw cloudlets parting from the grey cloudbank to fall like parachutes towards the trees, the rolling, tumbling sky full of them. I saw that the grass needed to be cut. I could see the next door neighbour's beautiful golden retriever sniffing among the stalks of dandelions. The wild grass danced in the breeze, the trees gently swayed, the unchained cloudlets as the universe tumbled to inertia. Somehow or other, I thought, I could be happier here than anywhere in the civilized world chewing cobwebs and observing the chromatic and refractive effect light has on the attic beams and upon metal pots placed to capture leaking drips of rain, light still streaming in through the cracks in the slates, while the practical fellows calculated confidently, lump sums, bridging loans and superannuation funds, bonds and stocks and monetary funds. Actually, if I was in Paris, I could leap into the Seine, but not being able to afford to get to Paris, I'd have to settle for the Lee, if I didn't perceive it as somehow less romantic than the Seine. More stupidity. In this attic, I mused, I might starve to death or hang myself from the rafters if I had a rope and knew how to make a proper noose, always a hundred miles from nowhere, avoiding sloth, always very busy but busy at what, head always brimming with ideas that run out of control sometimes or more often with no more inkling to answer the doorbell than I had to put a pistol butt in my nose or jump in the Seine, The Lee or The Tiber. Here in the attic, I could be Mr. Dunne, my neighbour, finally gone mad after more years than he cared to recall, conforming to every rule in the book, obediently imbibing the strong values and beliefs of his superiors, economical, sociological, and eschatological, the first rule of society being to drag everyone in, sign that contract, right there on the dotted line. It can become almost impossible to disentangle yourself from the web. I am Mr. Dunne, gone mad now at last, according to his wife, who spoke to me through her open window recently, poor Larry was losing his

mind, she feared. For example when they went out for their walk he would no longer salute the neighbours and in fact would keep going if she stopped to talk to somebody, as if they didn't exist. And he has all these obsessions, she said. He mopes around looking for things that no longer exist, rummaging in boxes and cupboards for old watches and bits of useless junk sent to the dump long ago. He just spent the entire day rummaging around in the garden shed for a compass he'd had when in the boy scouts, long gone, then it was a precision level that belonged to his father who'd been a stone mason. When he sits still for any length of time he begins to believe that he is a piece of furniture. He searches high and low for a tube of Bostik to glue broken pieces back on. I had to hide the glue for fear he'd poison himself. Poor Mr. Dunne after all the service he had done the state, to be reduced to a piece of furniture in his front room, rifling through drawers and cupboards for a watch that was no longer there; pained look, hangdog eyes, long, sickly features, vague physical resemblance to an exhumed body, skull and bones, something of a sad, but sardonic expression. It was all very quiet in the attic. That eight-year-old newspaper was so quiet now and I was quiet, just a little breathing sound, a slight wheeze in the chest, something sighing like wind through the thorax, like wind in reeds and how about achieving the indifference of a recluse who dreams only of growing a beard until it extends out through a crack in a slate, finally unable to extricate oneself from this lonely, forgotten position. It was so quiet I had to strain my ears to pick up even the merest tinkle of my sister or her friend's shrill laughter. Cowering in an attic under cobwebs, I am Mr. Dunne, old and weary, sitting on his chair until he becomes a part of it, sitting in the room, yes, blending with the furniture, no further need for subterfuge, contemplating the end of life and such. Moribund may as well be my sister's word for it or stagnant. Dead is another.

The next morning when my sister's friend came down for breakfast she treated me with cool indifference, the jokes were over. The banter was as dead as the men in her life, no longer, men, no longer. The

stock exchange was in her eyes as she choose her cereal, caring for her life, minding her existence. She examined the date small-stamped in pink letters on the egg. I slipped out of her way. Soon they would be gone. I would be safe in the second floor room. For a rare interlude, I felt quite together in myself listening to their voices below at breakfast, laughter-waves vibrating on the air. I did not know whether I was becoming more perceptive or more insane. It is difficult for the subject to decide without parting from the subject which is impossible to our knowledge, give or take a sense of transmigration or astral projection, to be other than one subject at any given time, in this infinitely absurd world. Ridiculous how difficult it is to make sense. Ridiculous how accuracy evades us so easily. Ridiculous how tenuous our judgements, judgements that can rise from the swamp like hot air balloons, pumped full of gas. I could go on, but the day allowed in a daydream in which I saw myself in a dance club with my sister's friend, better give her a name for this oneiric segment, another one of those words I'd struggle to pronounce, Lucille or Lucinda, maybe Lady Caroline and I'm talking to her through a kaleidoscope of noise and lights, fascinating her with a combination of metaphysics and fanciful nonsense. She wore a tight black sweater, shoulder length black hair, eyes like burning anthracite in the disco luminosity, her fascination for the macabre as I related tales about my grandmother whose spirit appears to me, who was once a great reader of tea leaves, tarot cards and tales of the supernatural, who left instructions to have pins stuck in her when she was in her coffin laid, so avoiding her great living dread, to be assumed dead while still in her senses and buried alive. Lady Caroline was very impressed. She leaned closer. A breast touched my arm. Do you believe it is possible to state an absolute truth, she asked. Only in images dragged into the light from the deepest subconscious, I replied, relayed in language uncontaminated by history and then with a theatrical brush-back of my quiff, I asked did she want to hear the expression of an absolute truth, making her lean closer, making her eyes glow sharper, both sumptuous breasts

in contact with me, yes, she sighed, an absolute truth at last? . . . My hand flew to my head to suppress a wave of panic. Only just. The voices of the ladies rang against the floorboards. Only just, this wave of panic suppressed. The follies of reason. The accusing voice; what do you do every day, my sister's friend, Lady Caroline, said, the day before when we first met, even repeated it for fear I was a little deaf, and what is it you do every day? He's a doorman, my sister said. He works in the premises of an agricultural insurance corporation. But at the moment I'm afraid to say . . . afraid to say, by the way, what do you do every day, emphasis on the first do, extra weight on that one, do you do, doldrums, driving, drudgery, drink, these are the witnesses who will speak for me, a poor, nondescript man unable to separate himself from the subject that was from the first chosen for him but not by him, placed upon him, no choice in the matter, no one ever asked him, this coat of skin, these bones, the metabolism of an insect geared to survive any level of radiation, not exactly of his choosing and the mind in it, the power to choose or not may well have begun there. A Cuban revolutionary once said: If you're destined to be a sardine, the can will drop from heaven. I'm not sure what that means but somehow felt it was pertinent as my sister and Lady Caroline continued to bray in the room below, Lady Caroline not as shapely as she should be anymore, maybe she should take it easy on the eggs. I told her that as I helped carry my grandmother's coffin out of the church I heard something knock against the lid, which tale had the effect in the blaring discotheque, under the kaleidoscope of lights of drawing our heads into contact, a most profound moment and one worth more than many others. Her face looked lovelier under the surreal lights than in daylight. Do you think she was tapping against the coffin lid with her hand? I could hear them moving below, laughing still, shrill voices raised in the hallway now. We're going came my sister's voice, come down and see us off. I stood at the head of the stairs and threw a word or two I don't remember what. Lady Caroline smiled, her lips were moist, breasts pert in tight woollen jumper, alas, shapelier now

than other parts, enjoy the silence, she said, I think she said silence, but whatever word she used it sent them in titters through the front door, slam and in chortling racket down the garden path. Bye, bye, echoes hovering like smoke on the air, bye, bye, enjoy the, was it sloth, she said, or asylum, silence maybe, it was too late to get it now as all settled down back into place, the dust, the shadows, uneasy at having been disturbed into architecture too elaborate for them, falling like sandcastles in the desert returning inexorably in a process of entropy into a natural state. I remained motionless there. I drank the pellucid air, I stroked the pensive sunlight, I watched the world turning on its axis, so beautifully precise, the precision of the most well-oiled machine, moving relentlessly on without so much as the squeak of a hinge. I stared into the abyss, take care, some voice spoke, take care not to become a monster, staring into the abyss, the abyss staring back at you. I heard my heart beat, no more than a shadow, if sound and shadow can be so configured, my heart beat on the stairs, in the empty house, the echoes of their voices settling with the dust stirred by their exit, the empty world, the shadow of a heartbeat. ■