

The Chain of the Hours

Michael Bavidge

When a man is asleep, he has in a circle around him the chain of the hours, the sequence of the years, the order of the heavenly bodies.

Marcel Proust

Visiting the sick

Heads, he would stay. Tails, he would leave. He stared at the coin lying in the palm of his hand. He put it in his pocket and reached for the coffee. Tomorrow he would spin again.

He sat in a cafe on the Via Delle Murat. Crowds of seminarians streamed from the Gregorian University after the lectures of the morning. Students in every conceivable clerical dress, speaking numerous languages, hurried down the streets. They kept in their national groups, a variety of forms and colours, yet in small flocks of identical individuals. Tourists moved against the flow, mini-skirts and shorts among the cassocks and the habits, high-heels skidding on the cobblestones. A black American woman tottered past calling out to a group of friends, 'Come sta? Buona baby! Never fear, Flossie's here.'

He finished his coffee and set off along the Corso to the Piazza di Spagna. He made his way through groups of tourists and stepped around huddles of students talking or lying asleep on the Spanish Steps. He sat down with his back against a wall. The sun warmed him through and through, drawing him out to the periphery of his body, penetrating his closed eyelids with warm, red light. The familiar odours of the city, of food and traffic, were pierced by the sharp smell of the marijuana openly passed from hand to hand in the groups around him. Under the pressure of the sun his mind spread itself flat and calm.

It was some minutes before the first whorl disturbed his tranquillity. A tiny snaking anxiety. A memory? An intimation of a decision to be made? He did not wait to identify it. His eyes opened suddenly. A group of tourists were taking photographs of him from a few feet away.

'Excuse us, Father.'

In his black, clerical habit, apparently asleep among the exotic cliques on the Steps, he would feature in slide shows from Tokyo to Detroit. He stood up and walked away in the direction of the American Seminary.

He found Darren Sobocinski's room on the third floor. It always took him a moment to get over the luxury - the en suite shower, the record player, cameras, radio, binoculars, fishing rods, skis.

Darren lay in bed, unshaven. He shrugged at Aidan's inquiry about his health.

‘Make some coffee. You'll find everything on the window-sill.’

They listened to Mose Alison, Chet Baker, Bessie Smith, talking only occasionally.

‘What’s the matter with you?’

‘Panic relieved by bouts of anxiety.’

‘How long have you been stuck in here?’

‘A month. One morning I had a vision of Being. Perhaps in a dream, perhaps just after I awoke. I saw Being, all of it, and it was rotten through and through. Since then I have lain here, trying not to care.’

‘You've been reading the wrong philosophers. How can everything be diseased? That would mean that the disease itself was diseased.’

‘I’ve seen it with my own eyes, decaying, putrid flesh falling away from the bone.’

‘How do you look at the world so that you see its very existence corrupted or whatever you thought you saw? Do you half-close your eyes or do you have to keep them wide-open?’

Darren turned away in irritation.

‘I know. I know what you are up to. But I’ve seen it.’

‘Well, things come and go, except perhaps Mind for which World becomes a spectacle.’

‘You think so? Most of the time, I haven’t got a mind. Little pieces of consciousness, spasms of sense and feeling, migrate from the corners of my body, a spark of memory, a pinpoint of insight, a glimmer of sensitivity. They come together only for a moment and form something worth calling a personality. And, they are put to flight, poor things, at the first sign of danger. Then I have to begin again, coaxing them from the edges of my experience, back into the centre.’

Darren lapsed into tense silence. There had always been something enigmatic about him, and yet there seemed to be nothing hidden - like an animal scampering across the floor of its cage, an alien form of life, even though it has no corner to hide from the gaze of anyone who cares to stop and look in. The enigmas, one might say, were all on the surface. There were times when he was reduced to a state of transparency. His body, covered by a single sheet, showed the passage of the anxiety that invaded him. Aidan watched the pain move through him like a breeze through leaves. He followed its progress from the shudder that began in his pelvis and spread across stomach and chest, losing its way in the jerking of an arm until it emerged in a rasping breath.

To calm him Aidan said, ‘The world seems to me from time to time, not so much rotten as light, blowing away, weightless. Nothing to it.’

‘Some guy set fire to himself at the University of California. He's the second, there was another at Wabash. Did you know at 5.00am the other morning Nixon went for a prowl among the demonstrators at the Lincoln Memorial?’

‘I heard. The whole place is in an uproar. Strikes in over two hundred colleges.’

‘If I leave here, I will be conscripted. I don't know what I would do. Would you go?’

‘No. I would keep out of it at any price. But are the Marines really on the look-out for conscripts who have visions of Being?’

Darren stared at the wall.

‘It is a terrible thing to devote yourself to the spiritual life and then find that there is nothing inside you but emptiness.’

‘Come on Darren, there is more to you than that.’

‘I wasn't talking about me. I was talking about you.’

They laughed for the first time that evening. For a few moments Darren returned to his old self.

‘The trouble is you have a Protestant soul. Have I explained to you the difference between the Protestant and the Catholic soul? Catholics get the idea of what their souls are like from St. Peter's Square, a great open space, bathed in sunlight, with classical lines all leading to a focal point where a column from an ancient culture reaches to the sky. Around the sides the colonnade is deep in shadow. Figures flit behind the columns, hurrying about their business, something important, something hidden. Dominating everything, the Basilica, God the Father, half-threatening, half-protective. The Protestant soul is modelled on the vault of a Swiss bank. Cold, white windowless walls, artificial light, and whatever it is full of - riches or nothing at all - the most valuable thing about it is that it is secret and it is all mine, under my own lock and key. Here is some theological grammar for you. The Protestant preposition is “within”. The Catholic preposition is “up”.’

As Aidan was about to leave, Darren grabbed his hand and pulled him close. Aidan noticed his immaculate teeth: Americans clean their teeth even when they have nervous breakdowns.

‘Come back soon.’

‘Of course, can I bring anything for the man who has everything?’

‘No. Just come back. Visit those who are sick and in prison, and scared shitless.’

‘Okay.’

‘Our lives are difficult, I believe that. But still the question that each of us must answer is very simple. Do I love Jesus with all my heart and all my mind? And the answer lies within us. It depends on nothing but ourselves, on our own determination.’

‘Is love so easily commanded?’

‘It isn't love if it is not.’

‘Phoocy.’

Aidan left. He acknowledged the greeting of a student who passed him on the stairs. He was wearing a Snoopy T-shirt and carrying a baseball mitt.

A week later, sometime around noon, and somewhere between the Gregorian University and Piazza Barberini, Aidan could never recall the details, but somewhere on that route, at about that time, a seminarian he did not recognise appeared by his side. He was small. He kept his face averted and only once glanced at Aidan, who looked down on the top of his head with its short-cut dark hair.

‘You knew Darren Sobocinski, didn't you?’

Aidan said nothing. His uninvited companion had used the past tense.

‘He committed suicide yesterday.’

They stopped by the gateway of the American Embassy.

‘That's impossible I was talking to him a couple of days ago. He was much better.’

The small man did not react. He walked on, then waited for Aidan to catch up.

‘Darren caught a plane to Lourdes yesterday afternoon. In the evening he signed into a hostel and an hour later he jumped from a window on the fourth floor. We heard about it at college this morning. The people in Lourdes are cross because they feel we should keep our potential suicides to ourselves. They have enough problems.’

Aidan stared at him, trying to work out if he was joking. All he did was shrug.

‘I am telling you because I know you were his friend. Keep it to yourself. We have been told not to say a word. Avoid scandal at all cost. It is the only thing ecclesiastical authorities are really frightened of. They sorted out the world, the flesh and the devil years ago, the press is quite another matter. Anyway, there is nothing to be done.’

The young man backed off, preparing to leave.

‘His body is being flown directly back to the States. It will kill his mother. She is, by all accounts, even more weird than he was. Don't worry about it,’ he said as a parting consolatory remark, ‘He lived in a different world’.

The Spanish Steps

Aidan waited with a hundred other seminarians in a corridor in Santa Maria Maggiore. They queued in the passageways waiting for their exam for the subdeaconate. At the end of the long corridor the double doors had been jammed open. Through them he could see into the Basilica. There was a Mass

at the high altar. Despite the noise he could hear the priest intoning and the congregation responding. He could not distinguish words, but the language retained its shape and rhythm. Waves of sound rose and fell. The celebrant mounted the altar steps, held out his arms, inclined his face up towards the crucifix and ululated in the face of nature. The children of God responded, huddling together in consolation.

There are so many ways of inhabiting our languages and of making language uninhabitable. Theorists dream of a perfect language, a universal calculus, clean as a whistle and quite odourless. Complete communication, pure, trapped light. Such fantasies don't belong here in Rome, where ancient ruins lie in the entrails of the living city, both overlaid by the straight lines of the fascist metropolis, and underneath it all, the subversive burrows of the catacombs. They come to language too late, these theorists - as if there could be worthwhile experience any place other than where language wells up and reveals a world. To distract himself from these thoughts, Aidan tried to recall the lists of reserved sins and their penalties - what happens to you if you murder a bishop or commit adultery in the enclosed part of a convent.

After the exam, Aidan walked through the city. There were signs everywhere of the disturbances that each day turned the city into an armed camp - anti-American slogans on the walls, piles of debris from the riots of the previous night, placards, banners, shoes. He turned onto the Corso and had gone some yards before he realised that the street was deserted. Looking up he saw a cordon of riot police strung across the road, small, far away. A crowd of demonstrators sat under a colonnade. Colourful, bright, but still and silent. Aidan felt unable to turn back. He walked towards the cordon of police.

The demonstrators sat in rows, many wearing crash helmets. As Aidan walked past, they stared at him without rancour, without smiling. He was, after all, the only moving part of the scene. He approached a policeman whose visor was raised. He held out his student's card.

"Sono un straniero. Questa dimostrazione non mi interessa."

That must sound ridiculous, he thought, waiting for some response. As if he had suddenly woken up, the policeman came to life and took his card.

"Aspetti, padre," he said quietly.

He showed the card to an officer behind him, who called out "Okay, Father."

The cordon parted. Aidan's card was returned and he walked through. He turned off the Corso up the Via Del Tritone. He heard a noise like a distant train. The police had begun to slam their shields with their riot sticks.

He meant to walk to the Borghese Gardens. As he approached the Trinita dei Monti, he saw excited people ahead. The vantage-points, usually crowded with tourists, were occupied by groups straining to get a view of what was happening directly below. The police had blocked off the Spanish Steps. At the top, vans and lorries were lined up in front of the church. Below, more vehicles were jammed around the column of the Immacolata. As the police moved slowly up the Steps, forcing the crowd before them, tourists were allowed to escape. They straightened their clothing, smoothed their hair,

and moved away as casually as they could manage. Hundreds of youngsters were left. Forced up the Steps towards the vans at the top, they stumbled backwards becoming more alarmed as the crush increased. A river of people flowed uphill among banks of flowers, with eddies of violence appearing and disappearing in the surge.

They were pressed to the top and channelled between rows of police towards the vehicles. Above the helmeted heads Aidan saw the occasional baton swing and someone fall between the uniforms. He became aware of a noise he had never heard before - a prolonged sigh resolving into a wail. He looked over the balustrade and saw the police three-quarters of the way up. Behind the cordon the tourists were already moving back onto the Steps

Aidan thinks about God

If God knows everything, then everything is knowable. What must the universe be like if it can be totally known? What must knowledge be like if it can be completed? Here's an idea for a start. The world, Wittgenstein tells us, is the totality of the facts. God is omniscient because looking down on the world he can see all those facts. When he peeks into your private diary, he sees more facts, shameful facts which you have unwisely committed to paper. But when he looks into your mind, what does he see there? More of the same perhaps? That's the question. Can personal experience be understood as yet more facts? Is what we make of the world another set of facts that go into the making of the world? If not, then even if God does know all the facts he still wouldn't know everything there is to be known.

But experience itself cannot be a fact in this sense. An experience cannot be independent of the having of it. Not everything involved in knowledge can be put down to the known object. So, if God knows everything, he knows more than the totality of facts.

What more? Let's say: knowledge of all experiences, real and possible, of any imaginable creature. He knows what you and I are thinking and feeling. He knows what the fly sees. He knows what the mermaid would have loved, if only he had created mermaids. He experiences the world as I do, as you do, as the fly does, as the mermaid would - without being any of us (we do not wish to embrace the pantheism of the subtle atheist, Spinoza, do we?) How are we to conceive this?

God sees what is in my heart, or in the uncreated heart of the mermaid, but not in the way he sees what is in my locked drawer. The problem here has nothing to do with Divinity or Omniscience, but with the concept 'in'. We can guess at what the inside of a matchbox is like, from its outside. The Tardis, Dr. Who's Time Machine, amuses us precisely because its internal dimensions do not correlate with its external dimensions. Aquinas says the same about the consecrated host. Being the body and blood of Christ, it has his dimensions. But these dimensions are not correlated to the physical world. The host, if you like, is an inch in diameter on the outside, but five foot eleven on the inside. Aquinas was a great science fiction writer.

If you find this weird, why are you not more amazed that a body, a physical object like any other, has an inner life? The lack of fit in the case of the Tardis or the consecrated host at least remains at the level of physical dimensions. Though it is physically impossible, we at least know what we mean when we say that the larger or heavier object is contained in the smaller or lighter. But do we know what we mean when we talk about consciousness being *in* a body?

I know what you experience because you express yourself to me, not by picturing to myself what is going on inside your psyche. All personal knowledge is rooted in disclosure. It is through expression that persons become objects of knowledge. God knows everything, therefore he must understand all possible expressions. But Divine Understanding does not await the activity of any creature; he cannot be on the receiving end of anything. If God is omniscient he has known from eternity what, at any given moment, each of us thinks and feels and intends, not because he sees into our minds, but because he has more right than we do, to give expression to our inner lives. Therefore God's Omniscience includes not just his knowledge of all the facts, but his right to speak for us and all creation. He is the total expresser. We must think of him as closer than we ourselves are to our own experiences. 'What could come between pain and its expression?' asks Wittgenstein, the great Doctor Neuroticus. Answer: God.

A night out

He rang the bell. A few moments later the lock opened. Three flights of stairs were cluttered with books, paintings, and sculptures. Charles was waiting at the top, a small, plump American. His silver hair, the pendant round his neck and the rings on his fingers caught the late sun. He wore a bright, loose shirt, white trousers and sandals.

'Welcome, dear boy. You look wonderful. *Non Angli sed Angeli*'

'Not more bloody angels. I spent all morning reading Aquinas. Cherubim and seraphim are flapping all around me. Did you know there are millions of kinds of angel, but only one individual to each sort. Each angel is the first and last of its kind.'

'Not much sex life. Do you like the new Sardi?'

He pointed to a painting propped up on the landing.

'How much are you asking for it?'

'Oh, ten thousand dollars, maybe. Are you making an offer? No, pity. It might have helped. I am going bankrupt.'

'Don't say that. I thought we were going out on the town.'

'So we are. Going bankrupt doesn't mean running out of cash, you innocent child. One can always find money to spend.'

‘Not if you have taken a vow of poverty, you can’t.’

‘Can a monk go bankrupt?’ asked Charles, as he led Aidan through the flat onto the roof-garden.

‘I suppose not.’

They sat at a wicker table and Charles poured white wine into two huge glasses.

‘So the bottom has fallen out of the art market?’

‘The bloody strikes haven’t helped. Rome has come to a halt. No post. No transport.’

‘I hadn’t noticed.’

‘Christ, the economy has collapsed, the social fabric is in tatters and you haven’t noticed. What have you noticed? Tell me what you have been up to since I saw you last, apart from wading through the slurry of western metaphysics. Any adventures?’

‘Last week I met a beautiful woman.’

‘You fascinate me, dear boy.’

‘It was great. I made up a song about her. She was called Vida’.

I saw Vida, but she didn’t see me,

‘Cause she’s short-sighted as she can be.

But her legs are long, her jeans are tight,

Who is caring about her eyesight?

Oh, she really looked a peach,

Short-sighted Vida on the Lido beach.’

Charles reached for his pack of cigarettes, it was empty. He asked Aidan to fetch another from the bedroom. When he entered the room he saw a new picture hanging over the bed. It was a painting of himself he was sure, the same hair, the square, thin shoulders, face looking down. Walking up a beach, a dream beach. He was wearing shorts and a blue shirt, the blue shirt he always wore, the blue shirt he was now wearing.

‘This new picture,’ he called through to Charles, ‘It’s me, isn’t it.’

‘I am surprised you recognised it.’

‘Who painted it?’

‘Panuncio. Alberico Panuncio.’

‘Who's he?’

‘You had dinner with him, here, last year. Don't you remember him - dark, thin?’

Aidan returned to the table.

‘Do you mean that all through the meal he was sizing me up for a picture?’

‘Yes. At my request. He wanted me to exhibit his work, so he did me a favour. Do you like it?’

‘You know I have no opinions about paintings.’

‘Everyone has opinions about paintings of themselves.’

‘It looks like me somehow but what have the beach or the shorts got to do with me? It's a lie in the soul.’

Charles was enjoying himself, ‘Well, I, a lover of carnal pleasure and a man with a fine opinion of himself, find it difficult to know where the body ends and the soul begins. If that picture embarrasses you, it is just as well that Panuncio refused to paint the picture I actually asked for.’

‘Which was?’ asked Aidan, wearily rising to the bait.

‘A pastiche of the *Pieta*, with you as Christ and myself as the Madonna. Can't you see yourself naked, dead, across my lap? And wouldn't I, with a nice, blue veil, make a wonderful Queen of Heaven?’

Aidan threw the cigarettes at him.

‘I am not the first in my family to be painted. My great grandfather had his portrait done. Badly, by an obscure, local artist. He was just a family butcher but he had the picture done in oils and set in a gold frame. He had a wall large enough to take it, in a room long enough for the spectator to keep his distance. Come on, let's go out, if we are going to go.’

They drove out of Rome along the Via Appia. They ate at a restaurant in the open air, under trellis of vine. Cicadas and falling stars.

Aidan said ‘They ate a restaurant under trellis of vines, cicadas and falling stars.’

‘You like stories.’

‘Yes, they are small and safe.’

After midnight they returned to Rome. Charles was driving too fast, showing off. Aidan lay back enjoying the ruins rushing past against the night sky. They entered the city through the Porta San Sebastiano. They drove along streets that during the day were choked with traffic, round the Victor Emmanuel Monument, the Coliseum, the Station, the Campodoglio. Rome always seemed unreal but at night the streets were an empty stage-set crossed by displaced persons.

Charles had once said to him ‘You walk around Rome as if it was a bombed city because your inner drama is your only interest. You are wasting your life, an absurd cadet charging this way and that across a battlefield that is no longer contested. Futile. But it has a certain charm. And the second commandment is like unto the first: be charming’.

They crossed the Tiber and headed for the Borghese gardens. Charles was drunk. He drove wildly into a gravelled piazza, slammed on the brakes so the car slewed in a spray of pebbles and dirt. He switched off the engine and stared at the trees illuminated by the headlights. Nothing happened for some moments, then figures began to emerge from the wood. They shielded their eyes from the car lights, and walked crabwise out of the beam to get a clear view of the car. Then the cry went up ‘Charlie, it’s Charlie. It is only Charlie.’

They came running over, climbed on the bonnet and sat on the boot. A dozen young men crowded round shouting, pushing, exhilarated.

‘Charlie, you American bugger, we thought you were the police.’

‘You love the police,’ shouted Charles.

Aidan apologized for his poor Italian. They imitated his accent.

‘He is English. You are returning to the English in your old age, Charlie. Keeping the best until last. Bobby Charlton, James Bond, Prince Charles.’

‘Calm down, calm down,’ Charles held up his hand. When they were quiet, he said, ‘Don’t be cruel to Aidan. He’s a seminarian.’

There was a moment’s silence then one of the boys yelled ‘Don’t worry Aidano. Some of my best customers are priests.’

‘Bagarozzo!’ shouted a less pleasant voice.

In Love

Aidan had known her for more than a year. He saw her from time to time, by herself, but more usually with her friends. She moved in a circle of penniless and talented young men who spent a few months in the city before returning to university or taking up jobs in London or New York. She seemed to belong to all and to none of them. Occasionally he noticed a look of uncertainty in the face of one of the boys, the aftermath of a drama of which he knew nothing.

As they came and went, the plausible art students and the silent poets, they had to accept him, not only his company, but the touch on the arm or the smile - the occasional recognition of his special

position. So he acquired a certain status, although always outside the group, unable to share its daily life and excluded from its intimacies.

The first time he saw her had been in the English bookshop in Piazza de Spagna, tall in a black tabard amid the literary tat. She leant against a bookcase reading *Mrs Dalloway*, head-bowed so that her fair hair hid her face. As Aidan came in, she turned towards the door and looked directly at him. He watched as she picked her way between the piles of books on the floor. When she opened the door onto the street, she again turned her expressionless face towards him. He had to make a decision not to follow her out of the shop. It took him five minutes to find the book he was looking for. When he finally left, he looked around hoping that she might still be in sight. She was leaning against the wall not six feet from him.

‘Do you like Virginia Woolf?’

She spoke with assurance, making no attempt to hide the fact that she was waiting for him. ‘I need someone to speak English to me. Intelligent English. I am suffering withdrawal symptoms.’

‘You have come to the right shop for intelligent English.’

‘Yes, it’s a great shop. I was delighted when I found it.’

‘I wasn’t talking about the bookshop. I meant me.’

She did not understand his remark, but unconcerned she looked calmly at him, waiting for him to explain what he meant.

‘Nicholas Nickleby? Mr. Squeers recommends Dotheboys Hall as “the right shop for morals”. I recommend myself as the right shop for intelligent English.’

‘And for morals? Are you also the right shop for morals?’

‘You will have to see what I have in store.’

‘What did you buy?’

‘Pavese’s *Among Women Only*.’

‘I haven’t read him.’

‘Neither have I. Not really. I have been searching for this translation since I came across a sentence of his which stuck in my mind, “I consoled myself by thinking of the Via della Basilica and that I could be as independent as I liked and that, after all, these were people whom I might never have seen”.’

As he recited the quotation he noticed the frank curiosity with which she stared into his face trying to discern the solution to a puzzle.

He seemed to see her always from a distance, through intricacies of sunlight and shade, moving past windows, disappearing momentarily behind the columns of a courtyard, reappearing, head bent. Always arriving or leaving. Her movements appeared slowed as if she was passing through a medium

of a different density. Her beauty had its strange existence somewhere in the privacy of the space created by the inclination of her head and the movement of her hands about her face. Such delicacy is generated by a conversation between fingers and jaw, hair and shoulder.

Now he was walking up the stairs of the Nurses Hostel where she lived.

‘May I come in?’

She released the chain from the door.

‘Can I get a wash. I’m a mess.’

She showed him into a tiny bathroom

‘Have you been drinking?’

When he returned to the main room, there was a mug of coffee on the table and beside it a couple of tablets

‘Is it so obvious I need to calm down. I thought I was doing quite well, keeping up appearances

‘Take them. They might do you some good.’

‘Why on earth did you take it into your head to become a priest?’

‘Right now I can't remember.’

‘No, be serious. Tell me why. Or if you can't do that, at least say something about it. You must have given it plenty of thought.’

‘A dream of a crazy, religious life. Something extreme. If, after all the self-dramatization, there was an element of self-destruction, so much the better.’

‘You wanted to be a hero?’

‘Or a slave?’

‘It is quite easy to want to be both, to want to be a hero of slavery.’

‘And look what I have become, a slave to heroism.’

‘If you leave - when you leave - will you regret the years spent in a monastery?’

‘Regret is for small things. If I had not spent ten years here, what? Who knows? The range of possibilities is too wide.’

‘Having a faith is having a world. Ground beneath your feet, sky above, mountains in the distance. All existing from ages past. When you lose it, the density leeches away. The ground sounds hollow like a stage. You find yourself standing on boards, before a crudely painted backdrop. Elaborate devices, hidden behind flats and wings, make smoke and thunder – intriguing, but just stage machinery, grinding away. And you wonder how it could ever have been captivating. Losing a faith is coming back to an empty house after a funeral - a bereavement; it is not a matter of changing your mind.’

‘I don't believe in God’ she said, ‘I believe in lots of gods. My gods are of the household sort. More goblins than gods really. Crazy, anarchic goblins. The goblin of buttered toast, warm baths, music.’

‘Such a troupe of household gods and they all live in these tiny rooms?’

‘They take up very little space. There is room left for you, if you want. You could hide here for weeks.’

‘Thanks. But it would end in tears.’

‘I have a goblin for them as well. He lives under my pillow.’

‘Very prettily said.’

She had once or twice come to the religious house where he lived. But it made her unhappy and angry.

‘This queer old house you live in is just like any other institution. It makes you behave like a courtier - the servility, the watching. From where I stand, the power structure that has such a hold on you doesn't appear the least formidable. All these characters, the Prior, the Master, the Bursar, the Sacristan sound to me like something out of a court dreamed up by Gilbert and Sullivan. If you are waiting for someone to give you permission to leave, you'll wait for ever. Go, for Christ's sake. Can't you see the game is up.’

‘If I left, would you come back to England with me?’

‘Oh, don't be an idiot. It is going to be ages before you're fit for anything. I wonder how much of yourself you will leave behind, leave behind deliberately. How often will something suddenly catch your attention, and send you back here, to find a small part of you still where you carefully left it?’

They left the flat and walked to the Borghese Gardens. They sat side by side in the shade of cypress trees watching a horse being trained in dressage. Its rider in military uniform sat unnaturally still in the saddle as the horse beneath him, all muscle and suppressed energy, picked its precise way across the sandy arena.

At the café by the lake a family sat round a table drinking mineral water and eating dolce. The children relaxed at the table with languid grace. Their father spoke slowly and quietly. Their mother looked calmly from beneath the brim of her white hat as they passed.

By the pool

The college's folk group was invited to perform at a discreet party given by Contessa Santobrandini, at her villa on the Via Antica. They picked up their singer, the daughter of the Irish ambassador, and drove out of the city in the community's transit van.

As they set up their instruments beside the swimming pool, limousines drew into the gravelled courtyard. Security men opened doors. The Contessa curtsied, kissed hands, and gestured expansively towards the villa.

'Ottaviani.' someone whispered, as a purple skirt swung out of a Mercedes.

'Andreotti.'

'Dopfner.'

'Moro'.

Young men in dark glasses walked through the garden and stared at the singers by the pool.

They performed into the evening, watching groups assemble and reassemble at the windows, huddles form and dissolve under the portico, heads incline together in the arched doorways. Business suits cut dark, vertical lines between the curves of ecclesiastical robes.

The French windows opened and Father Mel Keegan, financial adviser to the Boston diocese, came running out of the villa in swimming shorts. He threw his overweight body into the pool and swam four lengths, violently and effectively. He pulled himself out of the water and lay on his back. He ran his hand over his crew-cut hair and sent a fine spray of droplets into the evening light.

'How's life at the Embassy, Siobhan?'

He didn't wait for her answer.

'And your father? Give him my regards.'

He turned towards Aidan.

‘So you're Aidan. I have heard about you. I read your article in *Vestigia Dei*. God is the voice of the cosmos; the inside of the universe, if it has an inside. Clever stuff. Useless but clever. Have you ever been to the States? I thought not. You must go. You will see the future of the Church there, as you will see the future of everything else. Let me tell you, it has nothing to do with the inside of the universe.’

He nodded towards the house,

‘Oh God, here comes Muncaster, the old English sheepdog. Can't stand him.’

He rolled clumsily into the pool and thrashed his way to the far end.

Bernard Muncaster was abbot of a Benedictine monastery in the Yorkshire dales. When he was elected, the place was bankrupt. In five years he had turned the community into a prosperous dollar earner. He advertised on American TV, exploiting his monastery's principal asset, his gentle face and soft Scottish accent. He featured in the business section of *Time Magazine*. His success meant the end of his monastic life. He was summoned to Rome in the hope that he could extend his success to the Universal Church.

He waved to the American in the pool and sat next to Aidan.

‘Mel is not talking to me. He is trying to change the Church and I am making a fortune out of nostalgia. Drives him mad.’

‘I read your article. Very good. It's Hegel really isn't it? Well no harm there. But remember you are spinning imaginative pictures around the life of the soul. That's fine but don't think you can manhandle the imagination. *Deducant te Angeli*. Allow the angels of the imagination to lead you. Remember, Aidan, you can take what you desire; but you can love only what you are given.’

‘I wish I was back home. I wish they would let me go home before I die. I want to say my prayers in the Lady Chapel and dig with the lay brothers in the potato field. Instead here I am in Rome, advising these ecclesiastical gentlemen how to play their naughty little games.’

Without invitation he said ‘Think of your sins and ask God's forgiveness.’ There by the edge of the pool, among the suspicious young men in dark glasses, the whispering cardinals, the businessmen and politicians who walked slowly past arm in arm, he stretched up his hand towards Aidan's head and made the sign of the cross, ‘*Ego te absolvo, in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritui Sancti, Amen.*’

A funeral

When Aidan finally decided to leave he went into his room. He stayed there for three days.

He slept in short bursts. Every hour or so he awoke shaking from head to foot. He gripped the edges of the mattress to keep himself still in the bed. Being awake was unbearable, but some part of him found sleep equally intolerable and threw him back into a terror-ridden consciousness. Asleep, he was beset by nightmares. Some so ugly that all he could do was toss his head violently from side to side to dislodge them from his mind. Awake, he approached his thoughts and recollections, a criminal returning to the scene of a crime, irresistibly drawn, knowing that the place has been staked out and that his presence there was a confession of guilt.

As the hours went by, these invasions slowed and changed their nature. His exhausted body lapsed into periods of calm. In those quiet moments he tested his thoughts. He discovered some memories that he could tolerate, or rather he discovered memories that could tolerate him. They did not spew him out. If he kept quiet and still, he could remain in them, tolerated like a well-behaved child in the drawing-room. They became less like eruptions of unacknowledged tensions, and more like academic exercises, questions he put to the years gone by. They approached him from outside, riddles to be resolved, leaving him intact and untouched. The question that occurred to him after these recollections was no longer 'What am I to do?' but 'And then what?'

Behind his closed door he listened to the routines of the day. The swish of a broom on the tiled floor. Whispered conversations in the corridors. Retreating footsteps. The banging of doors. The silence. Damien brought him coffee each morning, and sat on his bed, 'You are going to be perfectly alright. Soon. So alright that you will be unable to remember how you have felt the last few days'.

On the third morning he awoke quiet. He lay in bed waiting for the voices to nag, the images to haunt. Instead he heard the sounds of the street. He lay quite still, suspecting that his anxieties were lying in ambush, waiting for him to betray his presence by even so much as a movement of his eyes. Nothing happened. He raised himself up on an elbow and invited back the feelings he dreaded. He challenged them to return. But nothing responded. There seemed to be nowhere left in him in which a threatening presence could lurk. He got out of bed, swung back the shutters and opened the windows. He was unsteady and light-headed. Looking down on the street he saw the salesmen outside the car showroom, arguing about yesterday's football match. Cleaners from the *pensione* across the road, leaned against the wall chatting, as they lit the first cigarettes of the day. At the road junction a car horn sounded and an angry voice replied.

He had only a few days left in Rome and it was likely to be years before he would have a chance to return. He had not even visited the Cornaro Chapel. He must have passed it dozens of times without bothering to go in. It was unthinkable that he should leave without seeing the Ecstasy of St. Theresa. He would have to hurry if he was to do all the things he wanted to do.

Decades later. Aidan went to the funeral of his great aunt at Felton. He waited in the hotel in the village for the family to gather. He looked out of the window at the two bridges side by side across the River Coquet. Cars drew up on the gravel strip opposite the hotel. Aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces got out of the cars, straightened their clothes, adjusted their hats, and when they saw a familiar face, came together in unstable clusters. They greeted each other with restrained smiles; talking quietly. They walked along the road, stopped to look down at the river. Gradually the different branches of the family formed two groups, one on each bridge. His mother's side of the family, the Catholic side, congregated on the old stone bridge; his father's side, the Protestant branch, on the new road bridge. A few non-conformists detached themselves to walk alone along the riverbank.

After the Requiem Mass at the tiny church among the trees the family returned to the hotel for lunch. Aidan sat in the window looking across the steep valley. One of his nieces sat down next to him. He had been struck by her elegance and self-possession at the graveside.

'I'm not sure which one you are. Sorry'

'Alice, David's eldest.'

After a few minutes of conversation she abruptly said 'My mother told me just now that you studied for the priesthood. Why did you give it up? I hope you don't mind me asking.'

'Do you want the long story or the short story?'

'Whichever'

'A friend of mine died, an American seminarian – well, he committed suicide. He suffered from depression, He went to Lourdes hoping for a cure and threw himself out of a hotel window, and I thought "Enough is enough".'

'Is that the long or short version?'

'The long. The short is - when I stopped believing in God, nothing else stopped, so I came home.'