

A Difficult Thing

I believe I can count among my virtues an uncommon level-headedness. I am able to anticipate chemical pathways in my own brain—feedback loops liable to generate unpleasant emotional states—and control them, cool them, like a nuclear reactor. This, I am sure, has facilitated my adjustment to the new dispensation.

But I confess that on this particular afternoon I felt nervous. It was a very difficult thing I was to do. I have always hated confrontation, the possibility of a scene, and in this respect there was something especially awful about my brother, something all but impossible to encounter head-on. Indeed, as I walked down the high street the mere idea of Roger's existing in the world, at that very moment, on a path entangled and soon to collide with my own, became almost too much to bear.

It was in this somewhat feverish state that I stopped at his favourite bakery. I bought two unhealthy-looking buns and then, obeying a sudden impulse, four large boxes of chocolate. These I stowed in my deep coat pockets. I felt fortified, somehow, by my purchases. Rounding the corner I slowed my pace to a stroll, and restricted my trembling to my pocketed left hand. The car was there at the end of the road, but I knew better than to give it more than a glance.

I approached the door like a condemned man, calmed by the certainty of what was to come.

‘Michael, what a surprise!’

Roger's pear-shaped body swayed in the doorway and his smiling eyes drooped to the edges of his face. He resembled some obsolete satirical type, in a typically horrible vomit-green cardigan, his glasses nesting academically in his hair.

‘Can I come in?’

‘Please! Such a rare pleasure. It's a little untidy I'm afraid.’

As we entered the kitchen the dogs joined us from the back garden and immediately began to slobber Roger's feet and hands. I saw their hairs

suspended in the air beneath the lamp and felt them cling to my face as I moved in the room. I began to sweat.

‘Biscuit?’

‘Um, thanks.’ I took one from the proffered bowl and nibbled it against a wall, as far from the dogs as possible. This was not very far. The kitchen was tiny. Into it bulged cupboards covered with yellowing postcards and with peeling, toothpaste-coloured paint; this jarred hideously with the orange floor tiles and with the greys and browns of a filthy gingham tablecloth. Every surface was layered with grease, crumbs, and dog hair. The one clean object was a stopped clock high on the wall.

‘I brought you these.’ I dropped the iced buns heavily on the table, then retreated back to my wall like the wary keeper of some wild animal. Roger bent theatrically to peek into the bag. The buns were of a kind I myself detest but he evidently adored. He took a bite at once.

‘What a treat!’ he exclaimed, still chewing as he attended to the kettle. ‘Somehow I’m always slightly amazed these things are still allowed. They were so much a part of our childhood, I’d almost expect them to go the way of poor Uncle Harry, or Wilde, or the library back home. After the libraries closed I was never able to find those ginger biscuits Miss Crispin used to keep behind her desk—they seemed to disappear with everything else. Sorry, I’m being silly.’ Turning he raised his bun with a sheepish smile and toasted me with it—a gesture so characteristic that I returned his smile instinctively. This precipitated a wave of nausea. A dog began chewing my trouser-leg.

What on earth was I doing? I should have come right out with it, but the domestic preliminaries had caught me off guard, entangled me in the revolting intimacy of the kitchen. The dogs and the biscuits and the tablecloth sticky with marmalade were all frightfully real and close—and yet so alien to my intention. It felt absurd to say, while holding a digestive and a mug of milky tea, what I *had* to say. I had fallen straight into Roger’s trap, and I stared at his broad back almost with terror. He was humming the *Wombles* theme as he searched overstuffed drawers for clean teaspoons.

I decided to resign myself provisionally to this state of affairs and in the meantime recoup my mental resources.

‘How have you been, Roger?’

‘Oh, still chugging along.’ He triumphantly cast two spoons upon the table. ‘I’ll show you the garden after tea. But do sit down!’

I sat automatically, steeling myself. Roger began addressing the dogs in plaintive and cajoling tones as he rubbed further clouds of hair from their backs. They were oppressing me now to an intolerable degree.

‘Roger, would you mind putting them outside?’

‘*Sssh*. You do offend them so.’

‘I can hardly breathe.’

‘Okay, okay. Come on darlings. You never did like dogs. Mama remarked on it sometimes. She knew you hated Ginny, poor thing.’

‘I did not. Christ. Just because I don’t want them right on top of me. They make me hot and irritable. As you can see.’

‘Goodness, yes.’ Roger laughed. ‘But they’ll win you over. Won’t you, my dears?’ He allowed each a last beseeching lick of his hand, then closed the back door. Returning to the table, he exuded an air of such impregnable goodwill that I was driven almost to frenzy.

‘I must say,’ he sighed, ‘it’s wonderful to see you. I know we’ve had differences, but I think often of our childhood. Actually, I more or less live in it. You know, I remember *The Happy Prince* practically by heart, and in Mama’s voice, too—though that’s naughty of me to say, isn’t it? My apologies. But do you ever remember these things? I was thinking the other day about when you saved my life: when you were riding on my handlebars and we both toppled into the reservoir. Actually, I think about it often. To have been so close to death. It helps me feel that the mere fact of life, whatever that life, is an enormous stroke of luck. It’s a trick, a sort of charm, but—Michael? What’s the matter?’

I had been listening in a kind of impotent panic, casting my mind about desperately for some defence against this onslaught. But just as I teetered on the verge of speechlessness, I found myself able to say: ‘Roger. I’m afraid this is going to upset you.’ And then I told him, as quickly as possible.

For a while he simply stared past my ear. During this phase I was, of course, in an agony of suspense, mingled with a qualified pride and relief at having surmounted the initial hump. But before I could make a reliable

mental foothold of these feelings Roger spoke in a whisper: ‘How could you?’

I was baffled and upset by this question. ‘Roger, you clearly haven’t understood.’ I struggled to eliminate the exasperation in my voice. ‘This is painful for me, too. Mine is the hard part—this part. Never to have come here—that would have been the selfish thing. It would have made my life much easier, my day much more pleasant, I can tell you.’ I forced a dry laugh, which I immediately regretted, and swallowed. ‘But there are higher goods.’

Roger was moving his lips in dumb, cud-chewing circles. ‘Why *did* you come?’ he wailed at last. ‘Why would they send *you*?’

‘They wanted...’ I began. My eyes were fixed intently on the iced bun before me. ‘They wanted me to see. They like one to be present at what they call moments of fragility. They say one can learn from them. Anyway it doesn’t matter, Roger, for goodness’s sake.’

‘Oh God. Oh God.’ Something must have sunk in, for he began to shake, and his speech became an awful nonsensical babble which cast saliva across his chin, the table, and my person. It was extremely difficult to endure, but I maintained, bar my own shaking hand, a dignified stillness. It takes great willpower to assume in such situations a pose of disinterested spectatorship, but it helps if one remembers the experience of attending the theatre, say, or church. ‘How— How—?’ Roger stuttered like a broken toy. ‘You must realise. How can you—*sit* like that, on that fucking... chair?’

‘I *do* realise. Look: my hand’s shaking. I could be sick, seeing you like this. You’re my brother, after all—you’re like a part of me. And I know you never meant any harm. It’s just a very difficult thing: one of those situations where no one’s really at fault. Please let’s both be reasonable. These outbursts do neither of us any good.’

“‘Reasonable...’” Roger echoed uncomprehendingly. ‘What are you *talking* about? Do you even realise what you’re doing? Michael, look at me. Look at me.’

I saw he was beginning to babble again, and worse. ‘For God’s sake don’t cry. Please, I can hardly bear it.’ He did stop, oddly enough, and I felt bound to continue. ‘I am sorry,’ I said more quietly. ‘I don’t want you to think too badly of me, Roger.’

I was slightly unnerved to recognise an unfeigned catch in my throat, but felt it could only be to my advantage. I offered Roger a sad sort of smile, turning down the ends of my eyebrows in what I afterwards realised was an unconscious imitation of his own perpetually apologetic expression. It seemed to subdue him temporarily and we faced each other in silence, he breathing heavily like a stunned bull, I endeavouring to balance in my outward demeanour the cool assurance of him who knows best with a warm, brotherly sympathy.

But I fear the latter may have predominated a little, for when Roger spoke his voice was suddenly urgent, conspiratorial. ‘Michael, Listen. Listen. It’s not death I’m afraid of, it’s the pain. I won’t be able to stand it. You know what they do. Please just let me—give me a moment. You can say I was too quick, you couldn’t stop me. Spare me the pain, only. For the sake of our childhood. We were so close. When Mama used to read to us, and we’d both lean against her knees...’ His voice faltered. ‘This *bore*s you.’

My apparent boredom was the result of my rapidly recalibrating my expression in the hope of stopping this excruciating outburst in its tracks. I don’t mind admitting, now, that I was in fact highly disturbed by Roger’s speech. I nearly did break when I realised, with something like dread, that he actually believed I might. I saw belief in his pleading bovine eyes and heard it in his grotesquely unconvincing tone of measured, rational appeal. Such things can so easily get the better of one, and I am not a heartless man. I am subject as much as each of you to those involuntary revolts of sentiment that are so basic and intractable a part of our animal being.

But we are not, after all, animals: our reason consists in our freedom, in the decisive moment, to resist our baser urges. That had always distinguished me and Roger. He had retained throughout our childhood—and seemed actually to nurture in his lonely adulthood—a fragility that was almost physically repulsive: always trembling beneath his ugly cardigans and thick glasses and leaky newborn’s face. Meanwhile, I had grown up.

He was screaming now, in his sloppy childish way, but his words reached me as if through water, or in a dream: words like ‘pain’ and ‘hate.’ So much for brotherly feeling, I thought: this is what it all comes down to, really. Beneath the biscuits and Mama and Oscar Wilde and all that, runs

the same thin current of hate. It was an odd relief to hear it so purely expressed.

He was making a mad lunge for a butter knife when the others came in. They went to him unhurriedly and took him away, while I remained in the kitchen. His screaming had become a sort of blubbering gasping howl, which came to me still, as a faint gurgle, even after the front door had closed. And then it ceased.

There, I thought flatly. It had taken a good deal of courage, a lot of worry, but now, at last, it was done. The hunger kept at bay by anticipation returned as I stilled my body and mind. I stretched an automatic hand to the bun untouched on my plate and ate it in large mouthfuls. Roger had left his half-eaten. At some point it had flipped icing-down upon the tablecloth. I ate that too.

I became aware as I licked my fingers of a whine from the garden. I rose slowly and opened the back door a fraction. Removing a box from my coat pocket I ripped it open, thrust my arm through the gap, and cast the contents out over the dogs. The chocolates bounced across eager faces and fell among stamping feet. They began frenziedly to scoop them from the ground, swallowing without chewing. The second, third, and fourth boxes followed. For some time I watched them fight muzzle to drooling muzzle in the mud. I felt a curious mixture of relief and disgust, not unlike the gruesome pleasure one takes in being violently sick. But much as one sometimes experiences after such episodes a resurgence of nausea, and knows one's stomach has been but incompletely purged, so, as I stared at the dogs, some residual dissatisfaction sloshed in me still like an acid.

But all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well: a favourite maxim of Roger's, which came to me then unprompted. Closing the door quietly, so as not to disturb the feast, I passed from the stinking simmering kitchen air into a fragrant spring afternoon. The car had already disappeared; it might never have existed. Coming onto the pavement I felt the sunshine suddenly upon me, and an overwhelming sensation of freedom. I quickened my pace. I almost felt like running.

But I paused at the corner of the street. There was relief, yes, but no real cause for joy. I reflected with sadness that had I never known Roger, shared a childhood with him, I would not have had to do so painful a thing.

That love is the condition which makes cruelty possible—which makes it, in the end, necessary—is unfair, of course, and difficult. But life, I suppose, is full of difficult things.