

‘Look,’ said the doctor sharply, ‘this is all a lot of morbid nonsense. It's everybody's duty to live. That's what the National Health Service is for. To help people to live. You're a healthy man with years of life ahead of you, and you ought to be very glad and very grateful. Otherwise, let's face it, you're
5 blaspheming against life and God and, yes, democracy and the National Health Service. That's hardly fair, is it?’

‘But what do I live for?’ asked Enderby.

‘I've told you what you live for,’ said the doctor, more sharply. ‘You weren't paying attention, were you? You live for the sake of living. And, yes, you live
10 for others, of course. You live for your wife and children.’ He granted himself a two-second smirk of fondness at the photograph on his desk: Mrs Preston Hawkes playing with Master Preston Hawkes, Master Preston Hawkes playing with teddy-bear.

‘I had a wife,’ said Enderby, ‘for a very short time. I left her nearly a year ago. In Rome it was. We just didn't get on. I'm quite sure I have no children. I think I can say that I'm absolutely sure about that.’

‘Well, all right then,’ said the doctor. ‘But there are lots of other people who need you, surely. Friends and so on. I take it,’ he said cautiously, ‘that there are still people left who like to read poetry.’

‘That,’ said Enderby, ‘is written. They've got that. There won't be any more. And,’ he said, ‘I'm not the sort of man who has friends. The poet has to be alone.’ This platitude, delivered rhetorically in spite of himself, brought a glassy look to his eyes; he got up stiffly from his chair. The doctor, who had seen television plays, thought he descried in Enderby the lineaments of impending
20 suicide. He was not a bad doctor. He said:

‘You don't propose to do anything silly, do you? I mean, it wouldn't do anybody any good, would it, that sort of thing? I mean, especially after you've been to see me and so on. Life,’ he said, less certainly than before, ‘has to be lived. We all have a duty. I'll get the police on to you, you know. Don't start
30 doing anything you shouldn't be doing. Look, I'll arrange an appointment with a psychiatrist, if you like.’ He made the gesture of reaching at once for the telephone, of being prepared to tap, at once, all the riches of the National Health Service for the benefit of Enderby.

‘You needn't worry,’ said Enderby soothingly. ‘I shan't do anything I'd consider silly. I promise you that.’

‘Get around a bit,’ said the doctor desperately. ‘Meet people. Watch the telly. Have the odd drink in a pub, all right in moderation. Go to the pictures. Go and see this horror film round the corner. That'll take you out of yourself.’

‘I saw it in Rome,’ said Enderby. ‘The world première.’ Here in England
40 L'Animal Binato or The Two-Natured Animal had become Son of the Beast from Outer Space. ‘As a matter of fact,’ said Enderby, ‘I wrote it. That is to say, it was stolen from me.’

‘Look,’ said Dr Preston Hawkes, now standing up. ‘It would be no trouble at all for me to fix up an appointment for you. I think you'd feel a lot happier if you talked with Dr Greenslade. He's a very good man, you know, very good, very sympathetic. I could ring up the hospital now. No trouble at all. He could
45 probably see you first thing in the morning.’

‘Now,’ said Enderby, ‘don’t worry. Take life as it comes. Live it by the square yard or whatever it was you said.’

50 ‘I’m not at all happy about what you might do,’ said Dr Preston Hawkes. ‘It wouldn’t be fair for you to go back home and do yourself in straight after coming to see me. I’d feel happier if you’d see Dr Greenslade. I could ring up now. I could get a bed for you straight away. I’m not sure that it’s right for you to be going off on your own. Not in your present state of mind, that is.’ He stood
55 confused and young, mumbling, ‘I mean, after all, we’ve all got a duty to each other -’

‘I’m perfectly sane,’ soothed Enderby, ‘if that’s what you’re worrying about. And I promise you again not to do anything silly. You can have that in writing if you like. I’ll send you a letter. I’ll write it as soon as I get back to my digs.’ Dr
60 Preston Hawkes bit his lip from end to end and back again, as though testing it for durability. He looked darkly and uncertainly at Enderby, not liking the sound of “letter” in this context. ‘Everything,’ said Enderby, with a great smile of reassurance, ‘is going to be all right.’ They had exchanged roles. It was with a doctor’s jauntiness that Enderby said, ‘Nothing to worry about at all.’ Then he
65 left swiftly.

He passed through a waiting-room full of people who, from the look of them, could not write poetry either. Some were in sporting kit, as if prepared to be tried out at the nets by Dr Preston Hawkes, wearing their ailments as lightly as a blazer-badge; others, dressed more formally, saw disease as a kind of
70 church. Enderby had to squint his way out. He had lost his contact-lenses somewhere; the glasses he had formerly worn were, he supposed, still in the Gloucester Road flat. Unless, of course, she had thrown out all that was his. Walking through the rich marine light he regurgitated the word ‘police’. If this doctor proposed to put the police on to him it would be necessary to act quickly.
75 In imagination he heard what the world called sanity as something in heavy clumsy hoofing boots. He remembered the boots that chased him when, just back from Rome, he had tried to break into the flat by the window and been suddenly transfixed in the beam of a copper’s lantern. He could have stayed to explain, of course, but the police might well, with their professional tendency to suspicion, have held him till the eventual arrival of Vesta. That mink coat, left
80 behind in the scamper, would have taken some explaining away. So he had swung his suitcase into the constable’s groin and, between a starting-line and finishing-tape of whistles, dodged about till — to his surprise, for he had thought such things only possible in films — he had managed to escape by skidding
85 down a sidestreet and into an alley, waiting there till the whistles peeped, like lost tropical birds, forlornly in the distance. (...)

On this lovely evening there were queues, Enderby peeringly noticed, for Son of the Beast from Outer Space. Next door but two to the cinema was a cool cavern of a chemist’s, full of the smell of soap, holiday laughter in a place of
90 medicines, the prints of beach snapshots being collected, sunburnt arms and necks. Enderby had to wait till a holiday woman had been served with hair-clips, skin-cream, hydrogen peroxide and other life-enhancers before he could ask for the means of death. At last the white-coated girl put her head on one side at him.

Anthony BURGESS, *Inside Mr Enderby*, 1963. New York: Carroll and Graf, pp. 170-173.

Sergeant Brent, the airgunner who made model aero-engines, told him as he went by his bed that he might be eligible for a pension when time for demob came. Brian laughed at the idea. Only those wounded in battle got pensions.

‘You were in Malaya, weren't you?’

5 ‘Nearly two years.’

‘So you'll get forty five bob a week, and twenty six bob National Health pay. A hundred per cent disablement.’

‘You're joking.’

10 ‘Three pounds eleven shillings. Better than a poke in the eye with a bit of burnt stick.’

The future seemed unreal, and a pension even more so. He hadn't expected anything.

‘People live on less.’ Brent beckoned. ‘Come closer.’

15 Brian sat by his bed, and the airgunner put down the tiny file with which he was scraping at a piece of metal over an ashtray. ‘When the demob officer comes to talk to you about your case, he'll ask you where you think you caught TB.’ He spoke softly. ‘So what will you tell him?’

‘That I got it in Malaya.’

20 His expression turned to despair. ‘If you say that, it'll lead to a dispute, and if it leads to a dispute they might try to prove you got it one day when you were on leave. Or they might not, but you never know. So when he asks, just look dumb and say you don't know. I don't suppose you'll find it difficult.’

‘Why not tell the truth?’

25 ‘Because there's no such bloody thing, Tosh. You'll only be giving an opinion, and in this mob it pays to keep your opinions to yourself. Why do you think they suddenly get friendly and invite you to give an opinion? Just listen to an old sweat who's heard a thing or two in his time.’ He scratched his short black hair, brought a few iron filings out in his fingernail. ‘A life of idleness and leisure will be much to your liking. From now on we're all pensioners not
30 decked out like ancient Chelsea blokes in red coats and funny hats, but pensioners nevertheless; not going around with a hook, a crutch and an eye patch, but careful of every breath and footstep nevertheless; Trenchard's shadows, a hundred per cent disabled but without a mark on us, except where the flies have been. The children of the Gods –eh? As for passing the time, there's
35 always self-improvement and self-education instead of self-abuse and self-degradation — to make a better man of you — Gunga Din. Ever thought of going to university?’

What a gift of the gab some sergeants had — though maybe the TB fever made him like that. ‘I didn't even go to grammar school.’

40 ‘Neither did I. I shan't go to university, either. But you look as if you could, always having your head in a book. Me I'll earn more this way. But if you want, you can go to night school to learn Latin. All them dud kids at Eton do it, so I don't see why you shouldn't. Then you can get a university grant as an ex-serviceman. Everything's coming your way, provided you don't cough your
45 lungs up. But then, you can't have everything.’

You certainly couldn't. Red patches flushed up Brent's cheeks as if death the invisible man was dabbing rouge there. He had already lost three ribs, but still went in and out of being positive. If anyone deserved a pension, he did. Two, in fact. Brian felt in his prime by comparison, and poured him a glass of water to
50 still the hacking beast. Sister Middleton, whose ear was so finely tuned she could

pick up a cough ten miles off, came and took away his work tray, and persuaded him to rest. 'You'd better go back to bed as well, Seaton. I know you're not supposed to be up.'

'I was on my way back from the bathroom, Sister.'

55 'I know. But don't tempt fate.'

The registered envelope from his mother had eighteen pounds instead of twenty-six, though her letter said the full sum had been sent. He had enough in his locker to make up the amount when the salesman brought the typewriter, but what had happened to the rest? He wrote to ask, and meanwhile speculated that
60 having so much cash in hand she had been tempted into a Saturday night out. His father had seen her putting it into the envelope. 'What's all that money for, duck?'

'It's our Brian's. He asked me to get it out of his bank and send it to him at the hospital.'

65 'What does he want all that for, lying in bed? He's got nowt to spend it on. Let's go and have a jar or two at the White 'Oss. He wain't mind. Just write that we wanted a bit o' fun at the boozier.'

It made no sense. She would have told him. Maybe they were in arrears with the rent, though his father earned enough, and they didn't need to be. The rent
70 man had threatened to bring the bailiffs and have them thrown into the street. They wanted eight quid to save themselves. 'He'll understand,' his father said. 'We'll send a quid a week out of my wages for the next two months to pay him back. I'm sorry we have to do it, but we've got no option, have we Vera, duck?'

75 He would have given it to them, if that had been the case. They were feckless enough to get into such a situation, but you couldn't curse human nature, at least not theirs. On VE Day his father had been so blindoe he had lost his false teeth down the lavatory when he was sick, so Brian gave him nine pounds to get another set.

80 Yet to rob him now that he was in hospital was uncharacteristic. They'd never robbed him so he didn't complain in his letter, but only asked Vera why she hadn't sent all of the twenty-six pounds. Something was wrong, he didn't know what. The registered envelope had been sealed, the blue cross of pencil indelibly intact, and guaranteed by the Royal Mail, so he would never know how he had been robbed.

85 He didn't worry. He didn't care. Don't care was hung, his grandmother called out, but there had to be a cut-off point, because worrying got you nowhere, and what else could you worry about if you'd already got TB? Life was so simple he laughed himself to sleep.

Alan SILLITOE, *The Open Door*, 1989. (Paladin Grafton Books, 1990, pp. 121-123)

That morning Arvo's wife had rung her at the theatre, where she was directing the rehearsals of Ostrovsky's *The Dragon*. At the end of much abuse she shouted, 'You're nothing but a whore,' and then began to sob hysterically. Eva used the old defence of silence and put down the receiver, and told the doorman that no matter how urgent any call claimed to be she was not to be interrupted in rehearsal. She was having particular difficulty with one of the leads, an actress of some genius who needed directing with a hand of iron since her instinct was to filch more importance for her own part than had been allotted to it. She had seen her ruin several fine plays by acting everybody else off the stage and was determined that it wasn't going to happen in this production. Once she began to rehearse again she put the call out of her mind but was able to think of nothing else during the midday break, and rang Arvo at his office. He was a journalist, with political ambitions on the Left, who had almost got into parliament at the last election and was almost certain to get in at the next. When he apologized for the call and blamed it on his wife's drinking she lost her temper.

'That makes a pair of you then,' and went on to say that she wanted a life of her own, preferably with him, but if not — without him. She had enough of to-ing and fro-ing, of what she called his Hamlet act. This time he would have to make up his mind, one way or the other. He countered by saying that it wasn't possible to discuss it over the phone and arranged to call at her flat at eight. As she waited for him in the blue woollen dress after showering, she determined to have that life of her own. The two sentences *The word Oysters was chalked on the wagon that carried Chekhov's body to Moscow for burial. The coffin was carried in the oyster wagon because of the fierce heat of early July* echoed like a revenant in her mind and would not stay still.

There was snow on Arvo Meri's coat and fur hat when he came and he carried a sheaf of yellow roses. Once she saw the flowers she knew nothing would change. She laid them across a sheepskin that covered a large trunk at the foot of the bed without removing their wrapping.

'Well?'

'I'm so sorry about this morning, Eva...'

'That doesn't matter,' she stopped him, 'but I do want to know what you propose to do.'

'I don't know what to do,' he said guiltily. 'You know I can't get a divorce.'

'I don't care about a divorce.'

'But what else is there to do?'

'I can take a larger flat than this. We can start to live seriously together,' she said, and he put his head in his hands.

'Even though there's nothing left between us she still depends on the relationship. If I was to move out completely she'd just go to pieces.'

'That's not my problem.'

'Can't we wait a little longer?'

'More than two years seems long enough to me. You go to Moscow by going to Moscow. If you wait until all the conditions are right you can wait your whole life.'

'I've booked a table at the Mannerheim. Why don't we talk it out there?'

50 ‘Why not?’ she shrugged with bright sarcasm, and lifted the yellow roses
 from the sheepskin. ‘I ask you for a life and you offer me yellow roses and a
 dinner at the Mannerheim,’ but he did not answer as he started to dial a taxi,
 and she let the roses drop idly down on the sheepskin and pulled on her fur
 coat and boots and sealskin cap.

55 Charcoal was blazing in the two braziers on tall iron stems on either side
 of the entrance to the Mannerheim. They hadn't spoken during the taxi drive
 and she remarked as she got out, ‘They must have some important personage
 tonight.’ She felt a sinking as in an aeroplane take-off as the lift went up. A
 uniformed attendant took their furs and they had a drink in the bar across
 60 from the restaurant while they gave their order to the waiter. The restaurant
 was half empty: three older couples and a very large embassy party. They
 knew it was an embassy party because of a circle of toy flags that stood in the
 centre of the table. Through the uncurtained glass they could see out over the
 lights of the city to the darkness that covered the frozen harbour and sea. He
 had drunk a number of vodkas by the time the main course came, and she
 65 was too tense to eat as she nibbled at the shrimp in the avocado and sipped at
 the red wine.

‘You don't mind me drinking? I have a need of vodka tonight.’

‘Of course not... but it won't be any use.’

‘Why?’ he looked at her.

70 ‘When I got pregnant you took me to the Mannerheim and said, “I don't
 know what to do. It's not the right time yet. That is all I know,” and drank
 vodka and were silent for hours, except every now and then you'd say, “All
 I'm certain of is that it's not the right time yet for us to have a child.” I had
 some hard thinking to do when I left the Mannerheim that night. And when I
 75 arranged for and had the abortion without telling you, and rang you after
 coming out of the clinic, you said the whole week had been like walking
 round under a dark cloud, but that I had made you so happy now. I was so
 understanding. One day we'd have a child when everything was right. And
 you came that evening with yellow roses and took me to the Mannerheim and
 80 later we danced all night at that place on the shore.’

She spoke very slowly. He didn't want to listen, but he didn't know what
 to say to stop her, and he ordered more vodka.

John McGahern, *Getting Through*, Faber
 and Faber, London [1978], 1988.

In the red-brick village of Aldermaston, there used to be a little tea-shop, of the welcoming but unassuming kind (a cool, oaky demureness, even on a hot summer's day) now virtually vanished from rural England; and there, one day in the first summer of peace, my mother took me and told me about the Williams pear.

We must have come in the new Armstrong-Siddeley: one of her madcap drives — hands fluttering over the steering-wheel — through pulsing tunnels of trees, hazy troughs of heat and the dry, ropey smell of harvest time. I don't remember if we stopped on the railway bridge — completing that child's encyclopaedia picture — to watch a train billow through beneath us. And I still don't know (I certainly didn't know then) whether this outing to Aldermaston held for her some special, extra *frisson*. But I remember the blatant fact that as we took our tea (lemonade for me) the top three buttons of her blouse were undone — there was a little sheen of sweat at the base of her throat — and I remember thinking (the first time, perhaps, I had had such thoughts) that this fact was not only remarkably compelling in itself but also remarkably complex, fraught with unsteady repercussions, such as : did she know that the buttons were undone, and if she did, why didn't she do anything about it? And was it more proper for me, as a gentleman, to point out this little omission or to say nothing?

The blouse was cream silk (even in those war-pinched days). A white strap, thin and shiny like a ribbon and lifting from her skin where it crossed her collar-bone, was visible. The just discernible fringe of the garment to which it belonged had a filigree tenuosity, curiously evocative of the doily that bore our angel cake and macaroons.

Who now connects Aldermaston with the Williams pear, first produced there in seventeen hundred and something by a local schoolmaster? But in those days it was one of Aldermaston's little claims to fame and it was the done thing, in season — and this year they had ripened very early — to buy them while you were there. My mother had bought two ('a pair of pears'), wrapped in a brown paper bag and for some reason, over our sticky and crumb-strewn tea plates, she chose to give a brief lecture on the local genesis of this distinguished fruit.

Outside, the afternoon was a hot, chalky glare. A canvas awning kept it at bay. An arc of black lettering on the window, above the little skirt of lace curtaining, proclaimed in reverse the name, which I forget, of the premises within. Spoons clinked. A fly-paper twirled slowly beneath the ceiling. Doubtless there were other tea-takers at other tables and, doubtless, there was some bustling proprietress with a sugary smile, and a flustered teenage waitress. I don't know — why should I have noticed? — if any of them were giving my mother looks. I don't know if she still had, in the reckoning of country villages with limited horizons but long memories, a certain reputation...

And only now does an extraordinary thing occur to me. I can pinpoint, after all, the date and the purpose of this little jaunt exactly. It was my mother's birthday. That was the point of this tea-time excursion. I was 'taking her to tea'.

50 The past, they say, is a foreign country, and I fictionalize (perhaps) these memories of that afternoon. But then my mother is dead. With all the others. She doesn't exist. And fiction is what doesn't exist. Did she really, right there and then in the tea-shop, hold up before her by its stalk her Williams pear, as if inviting me to snatch it, or as if she might suddenly let it fall? A small age seemed to pass in which it dangled between us, like a hypnotist's watch, and in which my mother, her eyes swimming in and out of focus, seemed like a woman I was just beginning to know.

55 Then she bit, voraciously, into the plumpest part ...

She took a bite, a good, lip-splaying bite, out of the pear. Juice ran — a drop, a splash or two of pearly pear juice in that baffling opening of her blouse. Her tongue made slurpy noises, her eyes wallowed.

60 'Mmmm, darling — divine.

Graham Swift, *Ever After*, 1992.

Twenty-five minutes brought us to the Bryson Tower, a white stucco palace with fretted lanterns in the forecourt and tall date-palms. The entrance was in an L, up marble steps, through a Moorish archway, and over a lobby that was too big and a carpet that was too blue. Blue Ali Baba oil jars were dotted around, big enough to keep tigers in. There was a desk and a night clerk with one of those moustaches that get stuck under your finger-nail.

5 Degarmo lunged past the desk towards an open elevator beside which a tired old man sat on a stool waiting for a customer. The clerk snapped at Degarmo's back like a terrier.

10 'One moment, please. Whom did you wish to see?'

Degarmo spun on his heel and looked at me wonderingly. 'Did he say "whom"?''

15 'Yeah, but don't hit him,' I said. 'There is such a word.'

Degarmo licked his lips. 'I knew there was,' he said. 'I often wondered where they kept it. Look, buddy,' he said to the clerk, 'we want up seven-sixteen. Any objections?'

20 'Certainly I have,' the clerk said coldly. 'We don't announce guests at' - he lifted his arm and turned it neatly to look at the narrow oblong watch on the inside of his wrist - 'at twenty-three minutes past four in the morning.'

'That's what I thought,' Degarmo said. 'So I wasn't going to bother you. You get the idea?' He took his shield out of his pocket and held it so that the light glinted on the gold and the blue enamel. 'I'm a police lieutenant.'

25 The clerk shrugged. 'Very well. I hope there isn't going to be any trouble. I'd better announce you then. What names?'

'Lieutenant Degarmo and Mr Marlowe.'

'Apartment 716. That will be Miss Fromsett. One moment.'

30 He went behind a glass screen and we heard him talking on the phone after a longish pause. He came back and nodded.

'Miss Fromsett is in. She will receive you.'

'That's certainly a load off my mind,' Degarmo said. 'And don't bother to call your house-peeper and send him up to the scatter. I'm allergic to house-peepers.'

- 35 The clerk gave a small cold smile and we got into the elevator.
 The seventh floor was cool and quiet. The corridor seemed a mile long.
We came at last to a door with 716 on it in gilt numbers in a circle of gilt
leaves. There was an ivory button beside the door. Degarmo pushed it and
chimes rang inside the door and it was opened.
- 40 Miss Fromsett wore a quilted blue robe over her pyjamas. On her feet
were small tufted slippers with high heels. Her dark hair was fluffed out
engagingly and the cold cream had been wiped from her face and just enough
make-up applied.
- We went past her into a rather narrow room with several handsome oval
45 mirrors and grey period furniture upholstered in blue damask. It didn't look
like apartment-house furniture. She sat down on a slender love seat and
leaned back and waited calmly for somebody to say something.
- I said: 'This is Lieutenant Degarmo of the Bay City police. We're looking
for Kingsley. He's not at his house. We thought you might be able to give us
50 an idea where to find him.
- She spoke to me without looking at me. 'Is it that urgent?'
 'Yes. Something has happened.'
 'What has happened?'
- Degarmo said bluntly: 'We just want to know where Kingsley is, sister.
55 We don't have time to build up a scene.'
- Raymond CHANDLER, *The Lady in the Lake*, 1943.