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| Briony was hardly to know it then, but this was the project’s highest point of fulfillment. Nothing came near it for satisfaction, all else was dreams and frustration. There were moments in the summer dusk after her light was out, when she burrowed in the delicious gloom of her canopy bed, and made her heart thud with luminous, yearning fantasies, little playlets in themselves, every one of which featured Leon. | Her theory about Ernest was that he had got himself sent to the Front under another name, and never returned. Otherwise, his lack of curiosity about his son was inhuman.Often, in the minutes she had to herself each day as she walked from the bungalow to the house, she would reflect on the benign accidents of her life. She had always been a little frightened of Ernest. Perhaps they would not have been so happy together as she had been living alone with her darling genius son in her own tiny house. If Mr. Tallis had been a different kind of man . . . Some of the women who came for a shilling’s glimpse of the future had been left by their husbands, even more had husbands killed at theFront. It was a pinched life the women led, and it easily could have been hers |
| One word contained everything he felt, and explained why he was to dwell on this moment later. Freedom. In his life as in his limbs. Long ago, before he had even heard of grammar schools, he was entered for an exam that led him to one. Cambridge, much as he enjoyed it, was the choice of his ambitious headmaster. Even his subject was effectively chosen for him by a charismatic teacher. Now, finally, with the exercise of will, his adult life had begun. There was a story he was plotting with himself as the hero,and already its opening had caused a little shock among his friends | He thought of himself in 1962, at fifty, when he would be old, but not quite old enough to be useless, and of the weathered, knowing doctor he would be by then, with the secret stories, the tragedies and successes stacked behind him. Also stacked would be books by the thousand, for there would be a study, vast and gloomy, richly crammed with the trophies of a lifetime’s travel and thought—rare rain forest herbs, poisoned arrows, failed electrical inventions, soapstone figurines, shrunken skulls, aboriginal art. Onthe shelves, medical reference and meditations, certainly, but also the books that now filled the cubbyhole in the bungalow attic—the eighteenth-century poetry that had almost persuaded him he should be a landscape gardener, his third-edition Jane Austen, his Eliot and Lawrence and Wilfred Owen, the complete set of Conrad, the priceless 1783 edition of Crabbe’s The Village, his Housman, the autographed copy of Auden’s The Dance of Death. For this was the point, surely: he would be a better doctor for having read literature. What deep readings his modified sensibility might make of human suffering, of the self-destructive folly or sheer bad luck that drive men toward ill health! Birth, death, and frailty in between. Rise and fall—this was the doctor’s business, and it was literature’s too. He was thinking of the nineteenth-century novel. Broad tolerance and the long view, an inconspicuously warm heart and cool judgment; his kind of doctor would be alive to the monstrous patterns of fate, and to the vain and comic denial of the inevitable; he would press the enfeebled pulse, hear the expiring breath, feel the fevered hand begin to cool and reflect, in the manner that only literature and religion teach, onthe puniness and nobility of mankind . . . |
| He opened his eyes. It was a library, in a house, in total silence. He was wearing his best suit. Yes, it all came back to him with relative ease. He strained to look over his shoulder and saw only the dimly illuminated desk, there as before, as though remembered from a dream. From where they were in their corner, it was not possible to see the door. But there was no sound, not a thing. She was mistaken, he was desperate for her to be mistaken and she actually was. He turned back to her, and was about to tell her so, when she tightened her grip on his arm and he looked back once more. Briony moved slowly into their view, stopped by the desk and saw them. She stood there stupidly, staring at them, her arms hanging loose at her sides, like a gunslinger in a Western showdown. In that shrinking moment he discovered that he had never hated anyone until now. It was a feeling as pure as love, but dispassionate and icily rational. There was nothing personal about it, for he would have hated anyone who came in. | Of the four dolphins whose tails supported the shell on which the Triton squatted, the one nearest to Cecilia had its wide-open mouth stopped with moss and algae. Its spherical stone eyeballs, as big as apples, were iridescent green. The whole statue had acquired around its northerly surfaces a bluish-green patina, so that from certain approaches, and in low light, the muscle-bound Triton really seemed a hundred leagues under the sea. Bernini’s intention must have been for the water to trickle musically from the wide shell with its irregular edges into the basin below. But the pressure was too weak, so that instead the water slid soundlessly down the underside of the shell where opportunistic slime hung in dripping points, like stalactites in a limestone cave. The basin itself was over three feet deep and clear. The bottom was of a pale, creamy stone overwhich undulating white-edged rectangles of refracted sunlight divided and overlapped |
| By the time he had told her that boys would be boys and raised a search party of half a dozen local men from their beds, an hour would have passed, and the twins would have come back on their own, scared into their senses by the immensity of the world at night. In fact, it was not the boys who were on her mind, but their mother, her sister, or rather her incarnation within the wiry frame of Lola. When Emily rose from the dining table to comfort the girl, she was surprised by a feeling of resentment. The more she felt it, the more she fussed over Lola to hide it. The scratch on her face was undeniable, the bruising on her arm really rather shocking, given that it was inflicted by little boys. But an old antagonism afflicted Emily. It was her sister Hermione she was soothing—Hermione, stealer of scenes, littlemistress of histrionics, whom she pressed against her breasts | “A letter!”She was about to open it. Robbie could not prevent himself asking, “Who’s it addressed to?”“It says, To everyone.”Lola disengaged from her aunt and wiped her face with her napkin. Emily drew on a surprising new source of authority. “You will not open it. You will do as you are told and bring it to me.”Briony caught the unusual tone in her mother’s voice and meekly walked round the table with the envelope. Emily took one step away from Lola as she pulled a scrap of lined paper clear. When she read it, Robbie and Cecilia were able to read it too. We are gong to run away becase Lola and Betty are horid to us and we want to go home. Sory we took some frute And there was’nt a play |
| Two years ago her father disappeared into the preparation of mysterious consultation documents for the Home Office. Her mother had always lived in an invalid’s shadow land, Briony had always required mothering from her older sister, and Leon had always floated free, and she had always loved him for it. She had not thought it would be so easy to slip into the old roles. Cambridge had changed her fundamentally and she thought she was immune.No one in her family, however, noticed the transformation in her, and she was not able to resist the power of their habitual expectations. She blamed no one, but she had hung about the house all summer, encouraged by a vague notion she was reestablishing an important connection with her family. But the connections had never been broken, she now saw, and anyway her parents were absent in their different ways, Briony was lost to her fantasies and Leon was in town. Now it was time for her to move on | Ominously, she did not vary her tone. Leon shrugged and forced an apologetic smile—what possible objection could he have?—and Emily’s mild gaze settled on the two inspectors. She belonged to a generation that treated policemen as menials, whatever their rank. Obedient to the nod from his superior, the younger inspector crossed the room and presented the letter to her. At last Cecilia, who must have been a long way off in her thoughts, was taking an interest. Then the letter lay exposed on her mother’s lap, andCecilia was on her feet, then moving toward them from the harpsichord stool.“How dare you! How dare you all!” |
| Then everyone could hear it, and there was a collective murmur and shifting of weight as they caught sight of an indefinable shape, no more than a grayish smudge against the white, almost a hundred yards away. As the shape took form the waiting group fell silent again. No one could quite believe what was emerging. Surely it was a trick of the mist and light. No one in this age of telephones and motorcars could believe that giants seven or eight feet high existed in crowded Surrey. But here it was, an apparition as inhuman as it was purposeful. The thing was impossible and undeniable, and heading their way. Betty, who was known to be a Catholic, crossed herself as the little crowd huddled closer to the entrance. Only the senior inspector took a couple of paces forward, and as he did so everything became clear. The clue was a second, tiny shape that bobbed alongside the first. Then it was obvious—this was Robbie, with one boy sitting up on his shoulders and the other holding his hand and trailing a little behind. When he was less than thirty feet away, Robbie stopped, and seemed about to speak, but waited instead as the inspector and the other policemen approached. The boy on his shoulders appeared to be asleep. The other boy let his head loll against Robbie’s waistand drew the man’s hand across his chest for protection or warmth | The Parents. Whatever institutionalized strength was locked in this plural was about to fly apart, or had already done so, but for now it could not be acknowledged, and bravery was demanded of even the youngest. Briony felt suddenly ashamed at what she had selfishly begun, for it had never occurred to her that her cousins would not want to play their parts in The Trials of Arabella. But they had trials, a catastrophe of their own, and now, as guests in her house, they believed themselves under an obligation. What was worse, Lola had made it clear that she too would be acting on sufferance. The vulnerable Quinceys were being coerced. And yet, Briony struggled to grasp the difficult thought, wasn’t there manipulation here, wasn’t Lola using the twins to express something on her behalf, something hostile or destructive? |
| It should have ended there, this seamless day that had wrapped itself around a summer’s night, it should have concluded then with the Humber disappearing down the drive.But there remained a final confrontation. The car had gone no more than twenty yards when it began to slow. A figure Briony had not noticed was coming down the center of the drive and showed no intention of standing to one side. It was a woman, rather short, with a rolling walk, wearing a floral print dress and gripping what looked at first like a stick but was in fact a man’s umbrella with a goose’s head. The car stopped and the horn sounded as the woman came up and stood right against the radiator grille. It wasRobbie’s mother, Grace Turner. She raised the umbrella and shouted. The policeman in the front passenger seat had got out and was speaking to her, and then took her by the elbow. The other constable, the one who had saluted, was hurrying over. Mrs. Turner shook her arm free, raised the umbrella again, this time with two hands, and brought itdown, goose head first, with a crack like a pistol shot, onto the Humber’s shiny bonnet. As the constables half pushed, half carried her to the edge of the drive, she began toshout a single word so loudly that Briony could hear it from her bedroom. | Her spirits were not particularly lowered by these commonplace reflections. She floated above them, gazing down neutrally, absently braiding them with other preoccupations.She planned to plant a clump of ceanothus along the approach to the swimming pool. Robbie was wanting to persuade her to erect a pergola and train along it a slow-growing wisteria whose flower and scent he liked. But she and Jack would be long buried before the full effect was achieved. The story would be over. |
| Beyond the compass were his copies of Auden’s Poems and Housman’s A Shropshire Lad. At the other end of the table were various histories, theoretical treatises and practical handbooks on landscape gardening. Ten typed-up poems lay beneath a printed rejection slip from Criterion magazine, initialed by Mr. Eliot himself. Closest to whereRobbie sat were the books of his new interest. Gray’s Anatomy was open by a folio pad of his own drawings. He had set himself the task of drawing and committing to memory the bones of the hand. He tried to distract himself by running through some of them now, murmuring their names: capitate, hamate, triquetral, lunate . . . His best drawing so far, done in ink and colored pencils and showing a cross section of the esophageal tract and the airways, was tacked to a rafter above the table. | The cost of oblivious daydreaming was always this moment of return, the realignment with what had been before and now seemed a little worse. Her reverie, once rich in plausible details, had become a passing silliness before the hard mass of the actual. It was difficult to come back. Come back, her sister used to whisper when she woke her from a bad dream. Briony had lost her godly power of creation, but it was only at this moment of return that the loss became evident; part of a daydream’s enticement was theillusion that she was helpless before its logic: forced by international rivalry to compete at the highest level among the world’s finest and to accept the challenges that came withpreeminence in her field |
| Just as the swimming pool pavilion behind the stable block imitated features of the temple, so the temple was supposed to embody references to the original Adam house, though nobody in the Tallis family knew what they were. Perhaps it was the style of column, or the pediment, or the proportions of the windows. At different times, but most often at Christmas, when moods were expansive, family members strolling over the bridges promised to research the matter, but no one cared to set aside the time when the busy new year began. More than the dilapidation, it was this connection, this lost memory of the temple’s grander relation, which gave the useless little building its sorry air. The temple was the orphan of a grand society lady, and now, with no one to care for it, no one to look up to, the child had grown old before its time, and let itself go. There was a tapering soot stain as high as a man on an outside wall where two tramps had once, outrageously, lit a bonfire to roast a carp that was not theirs. For a long time there had been a shriveled boot lying exposed on grass kept trim by rabbits. But when Briony looked today, the boot had vanished, as everything would in the end. The idea that the temple, wearing its own black band, grieved for the burned-down mansion, that it yearned for a grand and invisible presence, bestowed a faintly religious ambience. Tragedy had rescued the temple from being entirely a fake. | It was not about thanks, she knew that, it was not about rewards. In matters of selfless love, nothing needed to be said, and she would protect her sister, even if Cecilia failed to acknowledge her debt. And Briony could not be afraid now of Robbie; better by far to let him become the object of her detestation and disgust. They had provided for all manner of pleasant things for him, the Tallis family: the very home he had grown up in, countless trips to France, and his grammar school uniform and books, and then Cambridge—and in return he had used a terrible word against her sister and, in a fantastic abuse of hospitality, used his strength against her too, and sat insolently at their dining table pretending that nothing was different. The pretense, and how she ached to expose it! Real life, her life now beginning, had sent her a villain in the form of an old family friend with strong, awkward limbs and a rugged friendly face who used to carry her on his back, and swim with her in the river, holding her against the current. That seemed about right—truth was strange and deceptive, it had to be struggled for, against the flow of the everyday. This was exactly what no one would have expected, and of course villains were not announced with hisses or soliloquies, they did not come cloaked in black, with ugly expressions. |
| She had read the note standing shamelessly in the center of the entrance hall, immediately sensing the danger contained by such crudity. Something irreducibly human, or male, threatened the order of their household, and Briony knew that unless she helped her sister, they would all suffer. It was also clear that she would have to be helped in a delicate, tactful manner. Otherwise, as Briony knew from experience, Cecilia would turn on her. | For the second time that evening, Briony felt a flowering of tenderness for her cousin. Together they faced real terrors. She and her cousin were close. Briony was on her knees, trying to put her arms round Lola and gather her to her, but the body was bony and unyielding, wrapped tight about itself like a seashell. A winkle. Lola hugged herself and rocked |
| Back in the house at last, there began a dreamlike time of grave arrivals, tears and subdued voices and urgent footsteps across the hallway, and her own vile excitement that kept her drowsiness at bay. Of course, Briony was old enough to know that the moment was entirely Lola’s, but she was soon led away by sympathetic womanly hands to her bedroom to await the doctor and his examination. Briony watched from the foot of the stairs as Lola ascended, sobbing loudly and flanked by Emily and Betty, and followed by Polly who carried a basin and towels. Her cousin’s removal left Briony center stage—there was no sign yet of Robbie—and the way she was listened to, deferred to and gently prompted seemed at one with her new maturity. | When it was her turn to give an account of recent months, it was impossible not to be influenced by Leon’s tone, though her version of it came through, helplessly, as mockery.She ridiculed her own attempts at genealogy; the family tree was wintry and bare, as well as rootless. Grandfather Harry Tallis was the son of a farm laborer who, for some reason, had changed his name from Cartwright and whose birth and marriage were not recorded. As for Clarissa—all those daylight hours curled up on the bed with pins and needles in her arm—it surely proved the case of Paradise Lost in reverse—the heroine became more loathsome as her death-fixated virtue was revealed. Leon nodded and pursed his lips; he would not pretend to know what she was talking about, nor would he interrupt. |
| Her accusations would be all the more powerful for being muttered. They had moved closer, and now Robbie spoke briefly, and half raised his locked hands and let them fall. She touched them with her own, and fingered his lapel, and then gripped it and shook it gently. It seemed a kindly gesture and Briony was touched by her sister’s capacity for forgiveness, if this was what it was. Forgiveness. The word had never meant a thing before, thoughBriony had heard it exulted at a thousand school and church occasions. And all the time, her sister had understood. There was, of course, much that she did not know aboutCecilia. But there would be time, for this tragedy was bound to bring them closer. | But hidden drawers, lockable diaries and cryptographic systems could not conceal from Briony the simple truth: she had no secrets. Her wish for a harmonious, organized world denied her the reckless possibilities of wrongdoing. Mayhem and destruction were too chaotic for her tastes, and she did not have it in her to be cruel. Her effective status as an only child, as well as the relative isolation of the Tallis house, kept her, at least during the long summer holidays, from girlish intrigues with friends. Nothing in her life was sufficiently interesting or shameful to merit hiding; no one knew about the squirrel’s skull beneath her bed, but no one wanted to know. None of this was particularly an affliction; or rather, it appeared so only in retrospect, once a solution had been found. |
| Robbie moved in such a way that her view of her sister was completely obscured.Then Cecilia was struggling free, and he was letting her go. Briony stopped and said her sister’s name. When she pushed past Briony there was no sign in Cecilia of gratitude or relief. Her face was expressionless, almost composed, and she looked right ahead to the door she was about to leave by. Then she was gone, and Briony was left alone with him. He too would not meet her eye. Instead he faced into the corner, and busied himself straightening his jacket and arranging his tie. Warily, she moved backward away fromhim, but he made no move… | There was a two-inch scratch, Robbie noticed, from the corner of Marshall’s eye, running parallel to his nose, drawing attention to the way his features were set high up in his face, bunched up under the eyes. Only fractions of an inch kept him from cruel good looks. Instead, his appearance was absurd—the empty tract of his chin was at the expense of a worried, overpopulated forehead. Out of politeness, Robbie too had moved back in his seat to hear the remark, but even in his state he flinched. It was inappropriate, at the beginning of the meal, for Marshall to turn away from his hostess and begin a private conversation. |
| Even when he reached the front door, his mind was not made up, and he loitered several minutes under the porch lamp and its single faithful moth, trying to choose the less disastrous of two poor options. It came down to this: go in now and face her anger and disgust, give an explanation which would not be accepted, and most likely be turned away—unbearablehumiliation; or go home now without a word, leaving the impression that the letter was what he intended, be tortured all night and for days to come by brooding, knowing nothing of her reaction—even more unbearable. And spineless. He went over it again and it looked the same. There was no way out, he would have to speak to her. He put his hand over the bell push. Still, it remained tempting to walk away. He could write her an apology from the safety of his study. Coward! | She brought herself under control and said, “It’s been there for weeks . . .” Her throat constricted and she had to pause. Instantly, he had an idea what she meant, but he pushed it away. She drew a deep breath, then continued more reflectively, “Perhaps it’s months. I don’t know. But today . . . all day it’s been strange. I mean, I’ve been seeing strangely, as if for the first time. Everything has looked different—too sharp, too real. Even my own hands looked different. At other times I seem to be watching events as if they happened long ago. And all day I’ve been furious with you—and with myself. I thought that I’d be perfectly happy never seeing you or speaking to you again. I thought you’d go off to medical school and I’d be happy. I was so angry with you. I suppose it’s been a way of not thinking about it. Rather convenient really . . .” |
| The doors slammed, and the one constable left behind touched his helmet in salute as the car moved forward. Cecilia remained where she was, facing down the drive, tranquilly watching the car as it receded, but the tremors along the line of her shoulders confided she was crying, and Briony knew she had never loved her sister more than now. | . She would be well aware of the extent of her self-mythologizing, and she gave her account a self-mocking, or mock-heroic tone. Her fiction was known for its amorality, and like all authors pressed by a repeated question, she felt obliged to produce a story line, a plot of her development that contained the moment when she became recognizably herself. She knew that it was not correct to refer to her dramas in the plural, that her mockery distanced her from the earnest, reflective child, and that it was not the long-ago morning she was recalling so much as her subsequent accounts of it. It was possible that the contemplation of a crooked finger, the unbearable idea of other minds and the superiority of stories over plays were thoughts she had had on other days. She also knew that whatever actually happened drew its significance from her published work and would not have been remembered without it. |
| Briony’s compassion made Lola’s eyes fill, and her voice went husky.“Everybody thinks they’re angels just because they look alike, but they’re little brutes.”She held back a sob, seeming to bite it down with a tremor along her jaw, and then inhaled deeply several times through flared nostrils. Briony took her hand and thought she could see how one might begin to love Lola. Then she went to her chest of drawers and took out a hankie, unfolded it and gave it to her. Lola was about to use it, but the sight of its gaily printed motif of cowgirls and lariats caused her to give out a gentle hooting sound on a rising note, the kind of noise children make to imitate ghosts. | Surely it was not too childish to say there had to be a story; and this was the story of a man whom everybody liked, but about whom the heroine always had her doubts, and finally she was able to reveal that he was the incarnation of evil. But wasn’t she—that was, Briony the writer—supposed to be so worldly now as to be above such nursery-tale ideas as good and evil? There must be some lofty, godlike place from which all people could be judged alike, not pitted against each other, as in some lifelong hockey match, but seen noisily jostling together in all their glorious imperfection. If such a place existed, she was not worthy of it. She could never forgive Robbie his disgusting mind. |
| They weren’t even awarding girls proper degrees. When Cecilia came home in July with her finals’ result—the nerve of the girl to be disappointed with it!—she had no job or skill and still had a husband to find and motherhood to confront, and what would her bluestocking teachers—the ones with silly nicknames and “fearsome” reputations—have to tell her about that? Those self-important women gained local immortality for the blandest, the most timid of eccentricities—walking a cat on a dog’s lead, riding about on a man’s bike, being seen with a sandwich in the street. A generation later these silly, ignorant ladies would be long dead and still revered at High Table and spoken of in lowered voices. | When her father was home, the household settled around a fixed point. He organized nothing, he didn’t go about the house worrying on other people’s behalf, he rarely told anyone what to do—in fact, he mostly sat in the library. But his presence imposed order and allowed freedom. Burdens were lifted. When he was there, it no longer mattered that her mother retreated to her bedroom; it was enough that he was downstairs with a book on his lap. When he took his place at the dining table, calm, affable, utterly certain, a crisis in the kitchen became no more than a humorous sketch; without him, it was a drama that clutched the heart. He knew most things worth knowing, and when he didn’t know, he had a good idea which authority to consult, and would take her into the library to help him find it. If he had not been, as he described it, a slave to the Ministry, and to Eventuality Planning, if he had been at home,sending Hardman down for the wines, steering the conversation, deciding without appearing to when it was time to “go through,” she would not be crossing the hallway now with such heaviness in her step. |
| This was a command on which he tried to confer urgent masculine authority. The effect on Cecilia was to cause her to tighten her grip. She had no time, and certainly no inclination, to explain that plunging vase and flowers into the water would help with the natural look she wanted in the arrangement. She tightened her hold and twisted her body away from him. He was not so easily shaken off. With a sound like a dry twig snapping, a section of the lip of the vase came away in his hand, and split into two triangular pieces which dropped into the water and tumbled to the bottom in a synchronous, seesawing motion, and lay there, several inches apart, writhing in the broken light. | …there loomed the greater challenge yet of Army Amo, the khaki bar with the Pass the Amo!slogan; the concept rested on an assumption that spending on the Armed Forces must go on increasing if Mr. Hitler did not pipe down; there was even a chance that the barcould become part of the standard-issue ration pack; in that case, if there were to be a general conscription, a further five factories would be needed; there were some on theboard who were convinced there should and would be an accommodation with Germany and that Army Amo was a dead duck; one member was even accusing Marshall ofbeing a warmonger; but, exhausted as he was, and maligned, he would not be turned away from his purpose, his vision. He ended by repeating that it was wonderful to find oneself “way out here” where one could, as it were, catch one’s breath.Watching him during the first several minutes of his delivery, Cecilia felt a pleasant sinking sensation in her stomach as sh |