

0564669

Liver

*A Fictional Organ with a
Surface Anatomy of Four Lobes*

By the same author

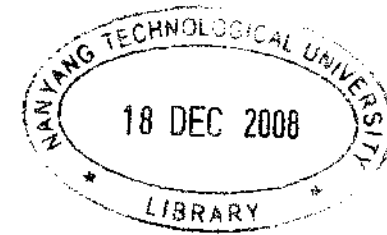
FICTION

- The Quantity Theory of Insanity
- Cock & Bull
- My Idea of Fun
- Grey Area
- Great Apes
- The Sweet Smell of Psychosis
- Tough, Tough Toys for Tough, Tough Boys
- How the Dead Live
- Dorian
- Dr Mukti and Other Tales of Woe
- The Book of Dave
- The Butt

NON-FICTION

- Junk Mail
- Sore Sites
- Perfidious Man
- Feeding Frenzy
- Psychogeography (with Ralph Steadman)

WILL SELF



VIKING
an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

PR
6069
E365
L784

GEN08/372

VIKING

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3

(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland

(a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia

(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand

(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published 2008

1

Copyright © Will Self, 2008

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Lines from *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett are reprinted
with permission by Faber and Faber Ltd
and the estate of Samuel Beckett

All rights reserved

Without limiting the rights under copyright
reserved above, no part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system,
or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior
written permission of both the copyright owner and
the above publisher of this book

Set in 12/14.75pt Monotype Dante

Typeset by Rowland Phototypesetting Ltd, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-670-88997-6

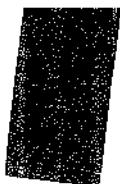
www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Books is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet.

The book in your hands is made from paper
certified by the Forest Stewardship Council.

For Marc, Georgia and family



Leberknödel

Introitus

Joyce Beddoes – Jo, to her friends, Jo-Jo, sometimes, in frank intimacy, to her late husband, and also to her daughter, Isobel, when she was a child – wanted to get her head down between her knees.

‘Are you all right, Mum?’ Isobel – who insisted on the ugly sexlessness of ‘Izzy’ – asked her, maybe for the fiftieth time that morning. It was an inquiry, Joyce felt, that was aggressively pleading, devoid of any true concern.

‘I-I just want . . .’ She was going to say ‘to bend down’, but the fruitlessness of this desire – the seat was too cramped, she was too frail, and the sound of her own voice, more the hiss and cluck of a barnyard fowl than anything human – overwhelmed anything but the blunt articulation of need itself.

However, that didn’t mean the sentence was incomplete, because Joyce did *just want* everything: the tray table, the fake tortoiseshell hairgrip in the stewardess’s honey hair, the glossy magazine she could see through the gap between the seats in front. She *just wanted* that magazine – and what was pictured on it: the corner of a table set for a leisurely breakfast with elegant white crockery, a basket of croissants and a glass of orange juice. Joyce *just wanted* the shapely hand of the model in the photograph, a hand that held a teaspoon with studied poise.

Instead, Joyce had these things that no one wanted: nausea, sickly-sour and putrid; a painfully swollen belly and a hot wire in her urethra. Overwhelming all of them was a dreadful – near criminal – lassitude.

‘Is it water, Mum, d’you want some water?’ Isobel said; except

to Joyce it sounded like 'warter', and what was that? A fifth element, a lumpy substrate on which they all thrived and died, like bacteria?

How she loathed Isobel's affected common accent – it made the young woman ugly or, rather, not young at all any more. She was, Joyce realized, increasingly resembling her father. Isobel had always been Derry's girl – and that was lovely. For Joyce, the great joy of motherhood had been to discover that the young man who had courted her with Stan Getz 78s and Turkish delight, and who had been as slick and assured as his Brylcreemed hair, was back again; but re-cast, played now by an adorable little girl.

But in the past couple of years Isobel had leapfrogged her father's mature good looks – his firm dimpled chin, his level brown gaze – and gone straight on to his middle age, when, *to be perfectly frank*, Derry had *run to fat*. Isobel, who was only thirty-three, had a dewlap beneath her own dimpled chin. Her brown hair – thick and straight to begin with, exactly like her father's – had been hacked about and dyed so much that it crackled like candyfloss on her round skull.

No, Joyce didn't want water – and besides, they had none. At Security their plastic bottles had been dumped in a bin – a sudden scare. And, although Joyce had asked Isobel to go and get some more, it was too late because the younger woman had already spent too long in the ladies.

They had only recently taken off and the plane was still climbing sharply: a tilted tube full of humdrum. At last, Joyce succeeded in wrestling her face to the window. The outside world would, she hoped, play the part of knees: she could press her burning cheeks against cool clouds, take deep breaths of fresh air and quell the nausea.

In the frame of the aircraft servomotors whined, the ailerons jerked, the wings' tips waggled, rivulets of moisture bleeding across them. Joyce noticed that each pimple of a rivet head was surrounded by a ring of infective rust.

The plane slammed into an air pocket. Joyce gasped, then

clamped her hand to her mouth, imprisoning the metallic bile that had sprung up her throat. Down below, way below, wheeled the English Midlands, their jigsaw of brownish towns and greenish fields bucked and then scattered. Joyce saw the slick beading of row upon row of new cars, fresh off a production line. Thousands of feet yawned between her wasting flesh and their toughened windscreens; she was – she realized, as once more the plane rocked and rolled – absolutely terrified.

Terrified of plummeting into a superstore's car park on the Coventry bypass. Terrified of her meagre hand baggage – a change of underwear, useless make-up, unspent money – being strewn over a rutted field. Terrified of being disembowelled by a pylon, or her limbs amputated by humming cables. Terrified, despite her, of all the forty-odd passengers on this flight from Birmingham to Zürich, having the least reason to fear death.

Even so, Joyce hunched up whimpering, while self-made homilies – *What will be, will be* – came to her parched lips. Joyce wanted her distant and yet jovial father – one side of his face bulgy with the gutta-percha used to replace the cheekbone that had been pulverized in France, the other smoothly benign. Joyce wanted to be on his knee, in a dappled woodland before the Second World War. But he was dead – her mother and Derry, too. And there could be no comfort in the arms of the dead: you couldn't feel them – and they felt nothing.

God, then – he would stop her from falling; God and the pure sounds of uncorrupted humanity.

Until the end of January, when she had felt too ill to continue, Joyce had been one of the Bournville Singers, who were rehearsing Mozart's Requiem in the canteen of the Institute. No one – including their insufferably vain director, Tom Scoresby – could have claimed that their performance was going to be either the most faithful or the most sonorous; yet, even with serving hatches for a backdrop, they had soared.

Requiem aeternam dona ets, Domine. Dumpy men in open-neck shirts – some former car workers, others retired middle-class professionals – their chests heaving; then Joyce and the other women panting up the scale: *et lux perpetua luceat ets . . .* She tried not to see Scoresby, his quaver of silver-blond hair bouncing as he whipped up his singers, but instead focused on those beautiful streamers of sound, chords looped over clouds so that the angels might haul her up. *Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and may perpetual light shine on them.*

It was so stupid to have got on this flight; and *cretinous* not to have appreciated *everything* before she left – the row of storage jars on the kitchen shelf, rice, pearl barley, flour, sugar – but taken all that wondrously dispassionate order for granted.

If I ever get down from this sky I won't be making that mistake again, oh, no.

The plane surfaced in a sea of cloudy islands, then broke through into unearthly sunlight. Relief rippled audibly along the fuselage. The stewardess unbuckled her harness and stood, swaying, straightening her skirt.

'Water, Mum?' Isobel asked again, her plump features stuffed with the gutta-percha of concern.

The immediate anxiety fell away from Joyce, a dark plume dispelled, leaving the black truth behind: the nausea, the wire, the distension, the lassitude. *How mad, how mindlessly bloody insane to care if I die now, when in a matter of hours I definitely will.*

The rest of the flight was uneventful. There was no question of Joyce accepting the white roll filled with cheesy sludge – an alcoholic drink was unthinkable. The stewardess – *maybe she knows* – kept hauling herself along the plane to ask, 'Is it . . . your mother? Is she OK, yes?' Then she and Isobel – both of them, Joyce thought, a little bovine – would low: 'Would you like some water?'

Water! Joyce was pretty sure she'd wet herself on take-off. When they left the house, and she had locked the door for the last time and handed the keys to Isobel, Joyce was gripped by an unworthy rage. *What will she do with the good drapes and the seat covers? Her father's LPs and the Venetian glass?* She saw it all – despite her meticulous instructions – dumped in cardboard boxes outside the Sue Ryder shop in Shirley.

By the time Joyce got a grip on herself, they were in the cab heading for the airport – and it was too late to go back for the incontinence pads. And now, well, there must be a dark patch on the pale blue airline upholstery. *Shameful.*

The plane, moaning, hunkered down towards the ground. Wooded hills, bare fields, arterial roads flowing between the metal barns of light industry. The housing was as samey as that which they had left behind. There was no sign of the Matterhorn – or grassy Alps. No snow – but this was March – or cuckoo clocks, or chalets with wide wooden eaves, or Heidi running with the goats, or chocolate bars stacked like lumber. The only clichés were the airport, the runway, the plane braking to a halt, the co-pilot announcing: 'Welcome to Zürich, ladies and gentlemen, where the local time is 11.48. I hope you enjoyed your flight with us today, and on behalf of the crew I'd like to wish you a safe onward journey.'

Joyce, who had always been a tall woman – a *rangy* woman, Derry's expression, and she had liked it from him – couldn't extract herself from the window seat without Isobel pulling, and the stewardess, who had slid into the seat behind, pushing.

A moment before she got up, with a colossal effort, Joyce lifted her behind and slid the paper napkin beneath it. Fleeting, she had a touching faith in the napkin's absorbency, but when she looked back there was an obvious pool of urine. The stewardess must have seen it, but she was tactful – a Swiss characteristic, Joyce supposed

– and offered to help Joyce on with her coat, indicating that she understood the need to hide the spreading stain on the back of Joyce's skirt.

Dr Phillimore – whom Joyce had first met when he arrived at Mid-East, a year before she retired – had known full well why she wanted a letter setting out the details of her cancer, its likely progression and definite prognosis. Although she had no great respect for him as a practitioner – Phillimore's manner was brusque and self-satisfied – at first Joyce was merely grateful that he didn't try to dissuade her; this implied that, despite the scant attention he had paid her when he could have been expected to keep her alive, now she had stoically chosen death he would aid her in the Ancient way.

So, no mention of the excellent palliative care team – which anyway would have been an arrant falsehood. Although Joyce hadn't had a direct hand in the hospital's administration for a decade now, she kept in touch with old colleagues at Mid-East and knew the threadbare condition of these things. Nor did Phillimore remind her of the many hospices with which the hospital had good working relations; nor yet still did he speak of the tremendous advances in pain management, which would allow Joyce the lucid repose of a Socrates up until she breathed her last.

It was only as Joyce shuffled off down the corridor – grateful for the handrail that she herself had arranged to have installed – that it occurred to her that Phillimore, far from being disengaged, might actively support her decision: not for philosophic reasons, but only because her removal would lighten his own caseload, enabling him – a plump arrow with white coat fletching – to stay within the concentric rings of his allocated budget and hit his targets.

Isobel insinuated under one arm, the stewardess tucked under the other, Joyce scraped her ankle boots over the concrete pan to the

shuttle bus. Inside it black-clad businessmen and women urgently gripped their mobile phones. Ignoring their impatience and the damp chafing of her own underwear, Joyce paused, savouring the mineral tang of aviation fuel, the beat of heat and the echoey howl from taxiing aircraft. She looked back at the plane that had brought her, shackled now by gravity. On its tailfin the stocky white-out-of-red cross glowed: it was the opposite of an air ambulance, Joyce thought, bringing her here with great dispatch so that she might be lost, not saved.

Kyrie

Lord have mercy upon numbered bank accounts, neutrality and Nazi gold . . . Joyce shivered in the shiny arrivals hall, then shook as they shuffled along the shushed shopping concourse. She had no option but – *Christe eleison* – to allow her daughter to *get on with it*. Of course, they had taken only carry-on. Joyce may have been intending to stay for ever, but she could make do without a change of shroud; while Isobel would be flying home the following day.

Be that as it may, with her mother to tote, Isobel had to find a luggage cart and ask for directions – tasks she performed, in Joyce's eyes, poorly. Her daughter was at once loud and ineffectual; she moved with a mock-triumphant roll of her wide hips. Her outfit of high-heeled boots, tight jeans and cropped leather jacket seemed designed to emphasize how overweight she was. She had – Joyce thought, not for the first time – her father's bullishness but none of his charm.

Finally, they were in a cab, a Mercedes as snug and black as an *orthopaedic boot*. *You don't see those any more – all the victims of the polio epidemics after the war; grown up – dead, I suppose*. As the cab rolled away Joyce admonished herself. *Stop criticizing Isobel: this is harder for her than it is for you, because she's not like you. She'll have to go home alone – and there is no home for her, really. No boyfriend – or lover. What's she doing with her life? A photographic project of some kind – an installation, she calls it. Peculiar term, more military than artistic*.

Neubahn Birchstrasse. Glattalbahn. Flughafenstrasse. The very words on the signs looked heavy, with their dumpy vowels and chunky consonants. The blocks of flats and factory buildings lining the roadway were as fat as the back of the cab driver's neck.

Isobel had told her mother that she was meticulously photographing the contents of some rooms in the Soho district of London, rooms that had been left sealed up decades before. She had grown animated as she described Mr Vogel's abandoned office, which was cluttered with Gestetner machines, rubber stamps, typewriters and all sorts of other office equipment from the 1950s – and even earlier – all of it still boxed up.

Joyce had nodded, making encouraging noises, while Isobel explained that hers was a visual inventory of objects that had, sort of, defied time. But really, her mother had thought, this was a *nonsense*, not proper work at all – and certainly not art – more a kind of *play* that the grown-up girl indulged herself in, and that various public bodies – colleges, councils, libraries – were prepared to indulge her in as well, by supporting it with grants.

Christ have mercy upon us! So dull this was: the plunge of the underpass beneath the haunch of the wooded hill.

When, up in the sky, Joyce had been *ridiculously scared* of dying – while not for a second considering the bursting of all those other bubble-worlds of thought, each so fragile and entire, each brilliantly reflecting the entirety of the others – the fear had blanked out the mundanity of her own well-administered death, which was all about her now, like cold dirty snow blanketing the verges.

Isobel got out her mobile phone and switched it on. Joyce blurted, 'Please, Isobel, we agreed –'

'I was only checking it worked, Mum,' she began calmly enough, then choked up the scale: 'I. Might. Need to make a call – later. Tomorrow. Y'know', before hitting the high note of tears. Isobel was suddenly a little girl once more, sitting on her bedroom floor, the minute displacement of a tableau of tiny dollies having provoked this huge grief. Then, it came – or, rather, Joyce moved ever so slightly towards it. Out from the shadow of her own death, Joyce crept into the wan sun of her love for the daughter she had borne and beared.

The two women cried in one another's arms, oblivious to the Mercedes's progress, which swept downhill between prosperous villas, then apartment blocks, then past the green splash of the university's grounds. A tram clang-ting-whooshed in the opposite direction, and to the right of the road the Limmat River shone, touched with the same golden lambency that played upon the domes, steeples and towers of Zürich's old town.

Joyce had read – because that is what she had been taught to do – a selection of the relevant literature. The liver cancer and the imminence of death itself – these would, she had been informed, take up all her energies. The workaday world would, almost comfortably, recede, milk deliveries and tax returns taking on the character of metaphysical abstractions, now that the most important unknowns were on the point of being known.

And yet . . . and yet, it hadn't been like that at all. True, she did find herself caught up – lost even – in the roomy soutane of death, its folds at once heavy and invisible, but there remained no escape from the trivial, the ugly, the banal.

Back in Birmingham they had argued about the hotel. Isobel favoured somewhere with all the four-star trimmings, while Joyce was set on thrift: not because she wished to deny herself – why bother? – but because she wanted, even at this late hour, to deliver a final homily to her only child on the virtues of parsimony.

'Why, Mum? Why do you want to spend the night in a shitty little guest house?' Isobel had been sitting in front of the PC, which was on the rolltop desk in the small room that used to be her father's study. 'This place', she tap-pinged the screen, 'is meant to be very nice –'

'Nice?'

'Well, stylish.'

Stylish. Joyce grimaced. Yes, she understood that this was hard

on her daughter, but must she organize every single particular herself? This may have been a small administrative problem – renting the antechamber to death – but beyond it Joyce sensed Isobel's psychic hinterland as office suite after office suite, all staffed by time-serving incompetents, not one of whom would have had the *gumption* to order a toner cartridge for the photocopier, were it not for Joyce's assiduous management.

Phillimore's detailed assessment had to be obtained, and Joyce's birth certificate. There were the first phone calls to Switzerland, followed by the to and fro of emails arranging dates and details. Then the home visits had to be set up. Trained hospice nurses came, who acted as outreach workers. 'Suicide assistants', they called themselves, with what Joyce thought of as typically Swiss practicality. All of this she had had to do herself, the unspoken truth being that were Joyce to leave it for too long, Isobel would prove utterly incapable.

Joyce had been initially diagnosed in September of the previous year, but then, just before Christmas, she was given six months to live. Some present. Given them grudgingly, by Phillimore, in a way that, on reflection, she imagined that he considered flattering to her no-nonsense demeanour: 'Even with further chemo, Jo, 50 per cent of people with this kind of cancer will be dead in six months.' *Jo! Jo! The nerve of the man.* Some present. Some time. No hope.

Although it was now the beginning of March, Joyce didn't feel *too bad*. She might, under other, easier-to-delegate circumstances, have lingered into spring, to see the bulbs she had planted – a prayerful act, on her knees, hands pressed together in the wormy earth – come up in the garden. Lingered to see the cherry blossom sprounce up the suburb. Lingered to hear Scoresby's – and her own – Requiem performed at the Adrian Boult Hall. *Kyrie eleison.*

Might have, were it not that Joyce had seen enough people dying from terminal disease not to appreciate its awful, creeping normalcy: despite the black abyss being clearly in view, there was

still this cup of tea close at hand, to drink or disdain; and so they nursed it – until it was too late.

Might have, were it not for her professional experience of doctors and their manner, which was nothing but the irrelevant furnishing of death, the shelves and bookcases installed in the earthen sides of the rabbit hole you tumbled down. As for treatments – what were they? A jar of marmalade you took up in falling – then dropped.

Might have, were it not that Isobel was incapable of filling in a form properly, and had to bring her grant applications – together with her laundry – home to Mummy in Brummie.

Standing on the cobbles of the Rennweg outside the Widder Hotel, Joyce felt the chill grit of her own soiled underwear and flipped into compassion for the *dumpy thing*, who was paying off the cab with burnt-sienna Swiss francs. Isobel, who tried to convince her mother that she lived an exciting bohemian life in London, but whose breathless accounts of hanging out at the notorious Plantation Club fell on sceptical ears: ‘And Trouget, y’know, he was the presiding spirit for, like, years . . . until he died.’

The Christmas before last Isobel had brought home Hilary, the club’s proprietor, who, although not nearly as inter-sex as his name, was *an obvious pansy*. He drank the best part of a bottle of brandy, while remaining perfectly polite. Isobel, *quite gone on him*, had done for the rest.

Hilary had then wet the bed in the spare room, and at 6 a.m. on Boxing Day morning Joyce came down to find Isobel in the utility room, sponging the mattress while the sheets moiled in the washing machine. ‘Why?’ is all her mother had said. ‘Why can’t you do this for yourself?’

These bitter ruminations occupied Joyce while her daughter completed the check-in formalities: dealing out her mother’s credit card, copying out their passport numbers. The receptionist was no

flinty-eyed Alpinist but a black-haired *chap* with sallow skin. He glanced once at Joyce, verifying that she existed, and she thought *he knows*: his sallow skin *spake unto* her jaundiced one.

The Widder was a terrace of old houses that had been knocked through by architects armed with steely beams and chequered marble tiling. The corridors morphed into walkways that traversed glassed-in cists; at the bottom of these were hunks of masonry, preserved under spotlights. *Stylish*. Isobel led her mother here and there, her heels clopping; she’d declined the services of a porter, then got a little lost finding the lift.

Joyce’s *stylish* room was at once frigid and stuffy. There were four broad windows on the street side, and opposite them blond-wood cabinets with glass doors and mirrored shelves. In the seating zone, at one end of the long, squat room, shone the cold puddle of a mirror-topped coffee table. There was a mirror-topped desk cascading in the middle of the room; beyond it the white bed had a mirrored headboard. With impersonal funerary goods laid out for its occupant – chocolates, wine, fruit and flowers – Room 107 was an awful box in which to be penultimately alone.

Joyce watched her little old lady body totter into the bathroom. Then watched some more as she turned on the taps and slumped on the toilet; she watched herself take a quarter of an hour to struggle out of her reeking clothes, then roll her yellow body into the yellow bath.

Isobel kept calling: it made her anxious to be shut out. *Nervous of what? She can’t be afraid that I’ll die?* Joyce lay in her favourite nightie, cold in the bed, the phone’s receiver beside her on the pillow: love reduced to a black plastic *dildo*. *Would it, Joyce wondered, shock my bohemian daughter to learn that I’d once used one?*

It seemed unnecessarily cruel to Joyce that these last few hours of her life should be spent not simply alone but divorced from anyone who had known her as truly vital, properly sensual; anyone who had touched and held her. *That’s all I want*, Joyce gripped the

black rod, *to be held one more time. I don't even care who it is. Just held.*

'Have you taken a sleeping pill, Mum?' The receiver resonated with tinny concern. 'Or morphine?'

For want of anything better, Joyce had taken both. Not that she really needed the painkiller, but in the last fortnight she had discovered that it dulled the anxiety of falling to sleep. Without the temazepam she couldn't sleep – and with it her narrowing vision was a catacomb hung with wind-dried cadavers, leading to a dark plain strewn with skulls.

'I'm all right, Isobel,' Joyce whispered. 'I just want to sleep now, please . . . Please let me alone.'

Why did she begrudge her only child any reassurance at this late hour? Why couldn't she be a good mother? True, it had been difficult to get between Derry and Isobel – who'd been every bit as close as loving father and only girl child should be – but it was Joyce who had sewn the name tapes, put the dinner money in the envelope and been there to comfort the cygnet in tutu and tights when she cried because she didn't get the part.

It was far too late for a re-evaluation of all this now. The gap between the narcotics was getting narrower and narrower . . . Joyce could no longer see the telephone; her visual field was a cranny, in which lay the Cartier watch Derry had given her for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, a digital clock, the plastic tub of pills with her *name tape sewn on to it*, the brown bottle labelled 'Oramorph 5 mg solution', the bedside lamp – a clear tube, its filament a glowing worm – the window, which was ajar.

From the street below came the click of well-shod feet over the cobbles and the chesty cough of Schweizerdeutsch. Joyce had supposed – what? That she might venture out? That she and Isobel would visit the Fraumünster, admire Chagall's stained-glass windows? Then, later – what? A heavy meal in an oak-panelled restaurant, a plank of beef with a knob of butter on top?

After the spat they'd had about the hotel – and Joyce's troubled

concession – she'd read the guide. So she knew what to expect from Zürich: well made, orderly – pretty, almost, with its setting between wooded hills and either side of the Limmat, the swift little river that flowed into the long lake. The Zürichsee, with its pleasure boats, its bathing beaches, and its islets hollowed out by reclusive millionaires.

Zürich, Joyce gathered, was a country town masquerading as a global financial capital – or perhaps the other way round. At any rate, here the deep, cold current of money was obscured by surface ripples of tepid liberality, while the Zürichers hid their avarice beneath polite masks.

The benzodiazepine stroked Joyce's frontal lobes, the morphine caressed her cortex. In the cranny, the red numerals on the digital clock blinked from 14.18 to 15.18.

Zwingli, preaching at the Grossmünster, sways gently in a long black robe, his pale face uplifted to a vertical beam of still paler light.

Baptism is a covenant between God and Man, he says, making of faith a contract; it's a notion that appeals to the hard-nosed burghers who sit in the pews. The sacrament is symbolic, Zwingli says, a memorial rather than a re-creation. Again, this recommends itself to the Zürichers, geared into time's progress as they are, the ratcheting of moment to moment. As for music in church – isn't it the most obvious distraction, Zwingli asks. Why, you'd never countenance a lutenist in the counting house, or a drum being struck in time to the heavy beat of the coinage, now would you?

This, too, the City Fathers swallow – because he's a charismatic fellow, this priest, his holiness as unimpeachable as his own instrumental talents – for he can play like an angel upon the flute and harpsichord. At the same time as he preaches against liturgical music, Zwingli cannot prevent his angular frame from swaying in its natural spotlight.

Ba-ba-ba-ba-baaa. Babba-daaa . . . Zwingli swings. What were they called? The girls with long, ironed-down hair, the men in matching roll-neck pullovers. The Swingle Singers, that was it – but that was later, on Top of the Pops, in the bright fuzzy fog of black and white television. I want earlier – the skiffle night at the Locarno Dance Hall. Derry said it wasn't real music, but, preachy as he was, he still liked to swing me around, crackling handfuls of crimplene. Later, cocoa at the Kardomah on New Street. Later still, smuggled past his landlady into his bedsit, the tremendous gift of his hands . . . Kyrie eleison . . . Christe eleison.

14.21. Joyce slept. Half an hour later the pass key turned in the lock and Isobel tiptoed in. She leant forward at the head of the bed, holding her dyed-blond hair to her neck, and listened to her mother's monochrome breathing. The porter stood in the doorway, massively indifferent in his striped hotel livery.

Isobel turned to him. 'She's asleep,' she said, and, taking the handset from the pillow, replaced it on the cradle. 'But I'll sit with her for a while.'

He left, and that's what she did. She sat, and, as the footfalls outside grew more and more scattered, she wept. The fog oozed up from the surface of the lake, infiltrating the narrow winds of the old town, pressing against the plate-glass windows of the underwear boutiques along the Rennweg, imposing its grey shroud of modesty on the brazen plastic models.

In the morning the fog was still there; daylight struggled to illumine the stony façades and blank windows. As she woke, Joyce recalled what the minicab driver who'd driven them to the airport had said.

The A45 was its usual coagulation, and he kept switching lanes, speeding up, then braking so hard that Joyce's bloated middle pressed uncomfortably against the door handle. 'Please,' she gasped. 'Please, really, there's no hurry – we're in plenty of time.'

'It's true,' he replied; the fight went out of him and he slumped over the steering wheel. 'You're a long time dead.'

Isobel winced, while Joyce thought: why is it that even those closest to me regard my dying as socially awkward?

Rising in slow stages, Joyce ran through the checklist that confirmed she was unfit for duty: the banging headache and the wire in her urethra, the painful numbness of fingers and toes, the cruel blockage in her oesophagus and the malevolent gravity of her internal organs.

She limped to the bathroom and pulled the cord. The woman in the mirror, with her sparse skullcap of grey-white hair, looked like Death's mother.

Not long after she had been diagnosed, while she was undergoing the useless chemo and radio, Joyce had begun marvelling at this aspect of her illness. All her life she had been engaged in a secret conversation with her body; whispered talk concerning the removal of her mucus, the blotting of her blood, and the evacuation of her bowels; consultations regarding the squeezing of her blackheads and the plucking of her hairs. In this, Joyce supposed, she was no different to anyone else. But now this chit-chat had been shouted down. Joyce's body had revolted. The respectable working-class liver cells had gone berserk, smashing the chemical refinery they laboured in, then charging down the bloody boulevards to carry their fervour to gall bladder, bowel and lungs. They would not stop until they had toppled the sovereignty of consciousness itself, and replaced it with their own screaming masses of cancerous tissue.

Peeing, then wiping herself, then fighting to brush her teeth, Joyce reeled once more under the revolutionary terror, and so remembered what day this was, and why she was in her familiar purple nightie, shaking in this strange yellow bathroom.

The imminence of her death – and the fact that she, herself, had booked the abattoir – pole-axed the *poor cow*. So she sat, stupidly

sullen, while her milkmaid daughter helped dress her for the slaughter.

Isobel, who had barely slept, despite four massively overpriced gin and tonics in the hotel bar, was equally stunned. Ridiculously, they were late, and the continental breakfasts she had ordered for them lay untouched on white linen covered trays.

'Mum, I've asked them to get us a cab,' she said. 'It should be here in a few minutes. I'm sorry there's no time . . .' She gestured helplessly at the croissants, the furled Emmental and smoked ham, the freshly squeezed orange juice. Joyce ignored the breakfast gaffe (*Still, how many times have I told her that I mustn't eat before . . .*), 'Well, dear, you'll need to make up some time later if you want to pack and check out in time to avoid paying a supplement.'

Her parsimony, Joyce knew, was inhuman – and yet all too human.

Isobel had begun to sob uncontrollably. *But we have been over all this time and again!* Just as Joyce had forced her daughter through several tutorials in the study, so that she would be able to find all the papers required for probate, so Joyce had also rehearsed these last few hours and minutes, blocking out every move with precision and care, all but scripting lines for both of them.

Joyce understood intuitively what every executioner soon discovered: perfect choreography is essential if messiness and hysteria are to be avoided. So, although hustled towards extinction by her daughter's poor time-keeping, Joyce was determined to keep her cool.

For the facts were these: apart from Isobel's preschool years – the early 1970s, a good time to take a rest on the career ladder – Joyce had spent her entire working life as a hospital administrator; she had ended up running a large trust, responsible for many staff and patients. She had, she hoped, brought all this professionalism to bear on her own death.

Joyce struggled upright. She was wearing her comfortably lined

ankle boots, a smart tweed suit, dark tights and a cream silk blouse. The emerald brooch Derry had given her on their twentieth wedding anniversary was pinned to her lapel. She hadn't troubled with an incontinence pad; *there's nothing left now*. Her mouth was fearfully dry; they had said no liquids or solids before arriving at 84 Gertrudstrasse, *but that can't possibly include Polos, can it?* Joyce fingered out one of the small white rings and slid it between her chapped lips; then, as they moved to the lift, she worked it with her tongue, savouring the dissolution of its minty wash.

Around her was the lift clunk and then the lobby chill. The Widder staff who opened the doors *knew. They know*. At each encounter there was a familiar *Grüezi* or a haughty *Guten Tag*. Then Isobel and the doorman were in hushed consultation regarding their destination.

'To live with dignity, to die with dignity.' That was their motto. What Joyce had appreciated most during her dealings with the executioners she had appointed was their commitment to best practice. All communications had been brief and to the point. She had made the 3,500 Euro deposit weeks before. The doctor's prescription for 25 grammes of natrium phenobarbital, together with his attendance and that of the suicide assistant, had been brusquely and competently organized.

Joyce chided herself, for had she not loved and been loved? Had she not run, swum and smelt? She might not have had all that she'd wanted – but there had been all that she'd needed. But then there was Isobel, unmade-up, her handbag a gaping straw basket in which the disorder of her life – multiple packets of chewing gum, cigarettes *and* nicotine lozenges, loose change, dumb trinkets – was on view for all to see.

As the Mercedes tumbril rolled over the cobbles of the Rennweg, then jolted into Sihlstrasse, Joyce marvelled at her own cold detachment: Isobel and all her disordered passions – her drinking and, no doubt, her drug-taking, her queer boyfriends and unpaid debts –

was an administrative problem that Joyce had been unable to shift to her out tray before she died. Isobel, who was crying again – although her mother, meanly, felt certain it was self-pity alone – remained PENDING. Joyce had so little faith in her that she had decided to do without a funeral: no matter how careful her instructions, Isobel would be bound to *muck it up*.

The fog lay low over the city, so that the tram cables underscored its obscure notation.

Joyce had read in the tourist guide that the Zürichers enjoyed the best quality of life in the world. They didn't look as if they were enjoying it much this morning, these black-clad revenants hurrying through the grey. Nevertheless, the cleanliness of the streets, the orderliness of the populace, the efficiency of the infrastructure – *you are never more than a hundred metres from the nearest bus, tram or train stop* – were there for all to see. It was utterly unlike the splurge of Birmingham, a city, Joyce thought, that no matter how much it *primped itself up*, always looked like it had got out of civilization's bed on the wrong side and was shambling across Middle England kicking housing estates and retail parks out of its roadway.

Put simply: Joyce hadn't wanted to live any more with this metastasized town, any more than she'd wanted to suffer the torment and indignity of her cancer. But if she could have continued with this dispassionate order? *Well, maybe . . .* However, such speculations were massively beside the point – *far too late*, because they had turned into Gertrudstrasse, a street of forgettable five-storey apartment blocks, and the cab was now halting in front of the dullest: a pedestrian exercise in the ruling of straight lines, which wouldn't have looked out of place in the Bull Ring.

'At every step of the procedure it is, how you say, practice – as well as our legal responsibility – to remind you of exactly what you are doing. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

'This liquid is an anti-emetic, it is necessary for you to drink all of it, yes, and also to eat as many of the chocolates as you can; otherwise you may, how you say –'

'Vomit.'

'Exactly so, vomit the phenobarbital. Unfortunately with this particular drug you must take a lot, yes?'

Dr Hohl's accent was slight and his English of good cloth stretched over German syntax. He appeared unremarkable, the kind of vaguely rotund man – in his late fifties, his brownish-grey hair shaded in above his neat ears, his charcoal-grey suit jacket pushed apart by his paunch – that could be encountered in any side office, anywhere in the developed world. His medicalization was effected by gold-rimmed bifocals and a small gold caduceus lapel badge.

But this wasn't an office; it was a one-bedroom flat on the fourth floor of a Zürich apartment block; and, while everything had been done to make it seem, if not lived in, at any rate liveable, the air-freshened atmosphere remained determinedly commercial. It was, Joyce thought, the work place of an osteopath, a New Age healer or perhaps – although she had never seen such a thing – the better kind of prostitute.

The walls were papered pale yellow, the curtains were blue chiffon. Through an open door she could see a small bedroom. An Alpine landscape hung over the bed, which was a single with a thick mattress and a green coverlet.

The three of them were sitting at a round table, upon which stood a fresh candle, a garland of dried flowers at its base. The legal papers were spread out on the blue and white check tablecloth. Beside the official registration of her birth sat a camcorder, inside of which was a tiny Joyce trapped for all eternity, saying: 'I wish it to be known that my death has been entirely voluntary, and that I was subject to no pressure or duress by anyone.'

Treu und Glauben, that, she knew, was the Swiss's conception of

themselves. Every contract was entered into with full faith and the required credit; to go over the small print was to impugn the other party's character. Anyway, she had read the papers already – there were copies posted on the organization's website – so she had signed them all – all except her will, which she had brought from England herself.

'So,' Dr Hohl said, fetching a silvery cardboard box from a wall-mounted cupboard, 'you will have a chocolate, yes?'

They were pimply truffles bedded in tissue paper. Joyce thought back to the Widder Hotel and the complimentary chocolates on the coffee table in her room. They had also been truffles – but white ones, caught in a cage of spun sugar. *Very stylish*. She and Derry had lived in Bournville for almost thirty years. Then, after his death three years ago, she was left alone in the idealized home. On days when the wind was in the east, the smell from the chocolate factory fell across the privet hedges and the lawns that had been mown into stripes. *Everything was sweet, sweet, incredibly sweet . . .*

The absolute horror of suicide gripped Joyce like a palsy: its mundanity and its profundity. The bulk of life, she now understood, was a succession of erasures, one action cancelling out the last. Not now. Everything that she was doing had a machined finality – *if only . . . if life could've been like this . . . such intensity*; and now to die with people *not much liked*, let alone loved.

She took one of the truffles and placed it in her mouth. It began to dissolve immediately. As if a spell had been broken, Dr Hohl went back to the cupboard, got out a plastic canister, opened it and began spooning the contents into a glass, while counting out in an undertone, '*Eins, zwei, drei, vier, fünf . . .*', all the way to '*fünfzehn*', when he was somehow back at the table, seated, and looking at Joyce with his gold-rimmed green eyes.

Dr Hohl put the glass full of poison down beside the papers and said, 'Now, the anti-emetic, yes?'

It tasted vile – at once ferrous and organic. Joyce almost brought

up the stuff meant to stop her retching. This was why the chocolates were needed – to fill her mouth with sweetness, so that the bitterness wouldn't overwhelm her.

'Und now, another chocolate, yes?'

Joyce couldn't fault Dr Hohl's manner: he was devoid of any inappropriate levity, yet not solemn; deeply concerned and altogether *present*, while by no means intimate. He had managed to weld all three of them into a highly effective team within minutes of their entering the flat. The evidence of this was that Joyce wanted to please him, so took another truffle – although she didn't feel like it.

Only Isobel, Joyce felt, was letting the side down. Her daughter sat sideways on the straight-backed chair, her shoulders rounded in powder-blue cashmere (Joyce's own) and shaking. She had a wad of Kleenex pressed to her eye, while a second sent out soggy tendrils from where it was lodged in the sleeve of her cardigan. Isobel – who had hardly spoken to Dr Hohl – was being *barely polite*. Her hair, Joyce noted, was *a mess*: Medusa snakes of various blonde hues, and it was *far too long for a woman of her age*.

Joyce washed down the chocolate sludge with a second gulp of the bitter anti-emetic. 'Do please to remember', Dr Hohl said, 'that at any of these times, Mrs Beddoes, you are able to make the mind change, yes?'

He had said this at least three times before, and on each occasion Joyce had replied, 'I understand.' It was, she grasped, the very call and response of assisted suicide: Dr Hohl was the priest, announcing the credo, and she was the congregation of one that affirmed it.

Then, suddenly, the anti-emetic was all gone and there were only three truffles left in the box. Joyce couldn't recall all this eating and drinking, but the pads of her fingers were sticky, and her lips were tacky.

Dr Hohl poured water into the glass heaped with phenobarbital, then stirred it: ting-ting, ting-ting. It would've been better, Joyce

thought, to've brought Miriam, or even Sandra – anyone, in fact, other than Isobel, *who simply can't cope.*

'Perhaps,' Dr Hohl ventured, 'you would be finding yourself more comfortable in the bedroom?'

'No, thank you,' Joyce said. 'I'd as soon stay here for the meanwhile.'

'In that case' – he held up the cloudy glass – 'I must tell you that if you drink this you will die.' He handed it to Joyce.

The glass was deadly cool to the touch; she hated her shaking jaundiced hand that held it. A memory came to Joyce, not of her beloved husband, her Derry, about to press his lips to hers, nor even of Isobel's slathered newborn features, but of a wasp batting against a windowpane.

It had been late the previous October, a mere six weeks after the diagnosis. The chemo had its own miserable side effects, yet they only partially masked her real symptoms; she knew it wasn't working. The stop-go of her bowels, the waves of fatigue and dread, the acid bile that rose up when she sang, '*Confutatis maledictis, Flammis acribus addictis, Voca me cum benedictis!*' And the insomnia. Sitting in the study, the curtains open, she had marvelled at the washed-out world without; it looked as if the greens and reds and blues would never return. Then, a tiny tapping at the pane. It was the wasp – tired, cold, its summer done – struggling for admission to the warmly coloured room.

'M-Mum.' Isobel had got her act together. 'Mum.' She slid a document out from the pile. 'You haven't signed this yet and we need someone else to witness it.'

It was the will; unless Joyce's signature was on it, her legal heir, Isobel, would be stalled and for the meantime *nothing could be done.*

Oh, oh – ooooh! This is why none of it has been as I expected. Where was the fast-approaching darkness? The series of mighty contractions she had imagined, clenching and then releasing, clenching and then releasing her from the world?

Joyce set down the glass and picked up the will. She folded the pages neatly in half, then began tearing them into small square pieces. 'I am not', she said, addressing Dr Hohl alone, 'going to go through with it.'

He was unruffled – so impressively so that Joyce nearly relented. 'I understand exactly, Mrs Beddoes,' he said. 'I have been thinking already this morning that it is too soon for you, yes?'

'Maybe, maybe too soon,' Joyce acknowledged, although she already knew that, having refused the poison once, she might never muster the courage to take it.

Dr Hohl got up and, wheezing a little, carried the phenobarbital over to the kitchen units in the corner. He put it on the draining board, took down a funnel and a plastic bottle marked GIFT from a cupboard, then poured the liquid into it. 'You appreciate', he called over his shoulder, 'that the payment you have made is non-refundable.' He came back and sat down. 'But it may be left as a deposit for if you will be making the mind change.'

'Yes,' Joyce said, choosing her words carefully, 'I do appreciate that, Dr Hohl, and I also appreciate the way everything has been organized by you this morning. Now, if you don't mind, would it be possible for you to call us a taxi?'

There was an old woman waiting for the lift. She had a matching hat and coat in synthetic brown material that looked *sweaty*, and as if the wearing of it would make you sweat. The three women stood in the breakfast-smelling lobby, listening as the building regurgitated the lift. The doors opened, and the old woman, peering intently at Joyce with glinting-coal eyes, said '*Bitte*' and ushered them in.

'*Dankeschön,*' Joyce replied, summoning up the remains of an evening class in German from two decades before.

On the way down the old woman scrutinized Joyce. Her gaze was disconcertingly vivacious: a much younger woman looked out at the world, through two eye holes that had been cut in the

parchment of her face. *She knows . . . She's seen, what? Body bags slumped in this lift? She knows – and she approves. I've won a hand against Death.*

In the hallway, the old woman left ahead of them, pulling a wheeled shopping bag. Joyce watched her go and hated the kinship that she felt. *So what if I live a few weeks longer? I'll still be like her, trapped and used up.* Only moments before Joyce had been a heroine – *but now what am I?*

An ambulance and a police car were parked outside in the street. Their crews stood chatting and smoking. They were *surprisingly scruffy*: a paramedic's blouse unbuttoned to expose her bra strap; one of the policemen was unshaven. *They were waiting for me.* Joyce wondered if they were annoyed by this interruption in their schedule, or on permanent call, and therefore would remain in Gertrudstrasse until Dr Hohl – this time with more success – had methodically assisted another terminal case to drink up her phenobarbital.

A wave of exhilaration had pushed Joyce from the fourth-floor flat, sluiced her down and out of the building. In the street it broke: she was a sick woman, and, while not as old as the one with the shopping bag, old enough. She groped for Isobel's arm. Isobel, her daughter, who had yet to speak – to acknowledge this astonishing reprieve.

'What', Isobel said, 'are you going to do now, Mum?'

The tone was *not quite right*; the hand that closed over Joyce's felt at once diffident and *disapproving*. *She wanted me to go through with it – she's annoyed that I didn't go through with it!*

'What d'you mean?' Joyce said. 'Are you asking what am I going to do with the time left to me before I die, or whether I'm going back to the hotel? You don't, I may say, Isobel, seem that overjoyed to have me still with you.'

'No . . . Mum, that's not what I meant, it's –'

'Which? Which of those two options didn't you mean?'

'It's just . . . It's a shock – the plans you'd made, so carefully. I dunno – I mean –'

'You'd've rather I'd gone through with it, wouldn't you, my girl? That would've suited you fine, wouldn't it? Let me guess: you'd already decided what you were going to ask for the house, you'd already spoken to a broker about selling off your father's stock, you'd already thought about all the things you were going to do – is that it?'

'Mum, please . . .' She gestured to the emergency workers. They were staring at the two women – Joyce realized she had been near to shouting. She stared back at them, hard; and they kept on staring back. This must, Joyce thought, be the flip side of Helvetian rectitude, this unselfconscious *rudeness*. *Kyrie eleison.*

Sequentia

They didn't talk in the cab, which was an identical Mercedes, with another taciturn Swiss at the wheel. Isobel was crying again, and, even though Joyce had calmed down and was prepared to forgive her daughter (*It's shock – I'm shocked. She may be self-piteous – but then, she is pitiable*), she still left her to steep in her own brine. *It's all too irritating . . .* Despite which, there was an odd element of excitement: instead of being dead on that *ghastly coverlet*, Joyce had the whole day ahead of her; she felt as a schoolgirl does, when some confusion in the Olympian time-tabling of the adult world leaves her with a free double period.

At the Widder Hotel, the doorman, the concierge and the receptionist *Teste David cum Sibylla* looked at the two English women with ill-concealed surprise, as, arm in arm, they made their halting progress across the lobby to the lift.

'Mum,' Isobel said as she unlocked the door to Joyce's room, 'I – I mean, we. I mean, you have a return ticket, too. You remember – it was cheaper. The flight's booked for two o'clock, we've gotta pack up now . . .' She trailed off: her mother was giving her a censorious look.

'I don't know what your father would've said about your behaviour today.' As she spoke Joyce knew this was a low blow; Isobel, for all her self-centredness, had been unswerving in her love for *him*.

'M-Mum, that's not fair!'

Isobel had loved Derry more: *it was only to be expected*, but it still *hurt*. She had been so attentive during his last, *dreadful* illness; while since Christmas she'd spent *at best* three weekends in Bournville.

Joyce had had to ask friends to go with her to the hospital – a shaming thing.

'I don't know what's fair, Isobel,' Joyce hectored her underperforming subordinate. 'All I do know is that I'm tired' – through the open doorway she spied blobs of underwear on an armchair, beside it a plastic bag that she knew contained a sodden incontinence pad – 'and I'm going to lie down for a bit. If you want to take the flight, then it's your own affair. I haven't decided what I'm going to do yet, but, rest assured, whatever I do decide, I'll be fine without you.'

Joyce went into the room, shut the door firmly behind her and locked it. Then she fell against it and listened to her daughter snuffling like a *pathetic puppy* requesting admission. Eventually, Isobel went away.

The mirror behind the sink doubled the pill pots, the bottles, the tubes and the blister packs that Joyce had shakily laid out when she arrived the previous afternoon. It was the same device that cocktail bars used to convince drinkers of their alcoholic largesse.

Diuretics and antacids, sleeping pills and drugs to tamp down anxiety, painkillers and dietary supplements – *marmalade snatched while falling*. She had never properly questioned the justness of all these before: this was *what you did*, you took what you were told to take.

In the window of a pet shop at the shabby shopping parade in Selly Oak, she had seen them: *Scottie's Liver Treats*. Shrivelled, blood-dark excrescences packaged in cellophane. *That's what's going on inside me*. To begin with she had been accusatory of her own body as she watched it wasting in the pier glass she had inherited from her own rangy mother. *Is it you, or you, or you?* Breasts and bones and blood. But then Phillimore had confessed: he had no real idea where Joyce's cancer had originated.

'Although the most obvious, ah, tumour is in your liver, this is not where the cancer began – primary liver cancer is almost unknown in the developed world, Jo.' Phillimore seemed to be taking personal responsibility for this. 'Except among alcoholics and people with Hepatitis C.'

'So . . . where?' She was dreamy during these day-mares.

'Usually, when – as with you – we've done a biopsy, we can analyse the cancer cells and discover their origin, but in anything up to 15 per cent of cases this will remain occult.'

'Occult?' What was he talking about? A silver-bearded wizard? A voodoo priest?

Phillimore smiled at her consternation – how she loathed him. 'That's merely a medical term for something we don't know – yet.'

Yet, looking at all these useless salves and inadequate physics, then recalling the lead apron, the scattered footfalls, the spooky hum – it struck Joyce that 'occult' was precisely what Phillimore's treatment of her had been. *I . . . I . . .* It was difficult to grasp – peering through the eye holes of her old woman mask, at the woman in the mirror wearing the old woman mask – but in the suicide flat Joyce had somehow *begun talking again* with her body; they had recommenced a conversation that was reassuringly prosaic, full of itchy chatter and punctuated by companionable burps. This was a dialogue that excluded Joyce's questioning mind – for all her body demanded was a compliant listener, prepared to sit and nod, and occasionally mutter, 'Yes, yes, of course, dear' in response to its own moany self-absorption.

The capsules popped from their blisters straight into the toilet bowl; the pills plopped after them, followed by coils of ointment and splashes of linctus. Then she flushed five times, until the whole *business* was done.

There was one thing left: the Oramorph, a sticky solution in a squat bottle. *I'm in pain, now* – the pain of having to lug Isobel around with her, *she even has Derry's mouth. His mouth!* Decisiveness

mutated into a deadly impulsiveness; she clenched and twisted the safety cap until it yielded, then took a swig.

What? To cease upon the Swiss lunch-time? She tittered, then wove through the Teutonic symphony of blond wood and clashing mirrored surfaces to where clean white linen offered quiet sanctuary. She fell across the bed and directly into her own fugue. *Mors slopebit et natora, Cum resurget creatura, Judicanti responsura . . .* Scoresby, naked, working himself up into a *right old tizzy*, bearing down on Joyce, quiff flicking like a baton; his blue-veined marble torso smashed against the bedside table and crumbled into dusty chunks. *He's only plaster!* Her horsey neigh took her back and back to the paddock of puberty, where she watched with a *queer hot thrill* older, richer girls posting *up and down*. Their jodhpurs stretched into hide, the girls transformed into centaurs with ponytails, their ponytails fanned out, iridescent, becoming peacock tails. The peacocks' beaks thickened into dolphins' snouts, the dolphins arched and dived into oceanic tea cups that shrank into dancing Disney crockery. Scoresby chased the string section up a spiral staircase, while ahead of them scampered the Singers. *Liber scriptus proferetur, In quo totum continetur, Unde mundus judicetur . . .* Even in drugged sleep, it seemed to Joyce that such a fantasia was pitifully wasted on a dying woman.

Her watch said it was five when she awoke; she didn't look at the 24-hour digital clock, and so assumed it must be the following morning, so deeply refreshed did she feel. She picked up the phone and dialled Isobel's room: no answer. She got up and opened the curtains: fog still nuzzled the panes. She dressed carefully, then further adjusted her clothing in the mirror, turning this way, then that, paying strict attention to the lie of her skirt – was it *becoming*? She had brought hardly any make-up, only lipstick, and blusher to give life to her moribund complexion; but it didn't really work, not on such jaundiced skin. Nevertheless, in the bathroom she applied

these, marvelling at her own girlishness. *Death and Nature shall be astonished, When all creation rises again, To answer to the Judge.*

Going along the carpeted gantry to the lift, Joyce discovered Isobel slumped on a leather-padded bench. She was plainly drunk, her mascara smudged, her lipstick smeared, and her cheeks – without the assistance of blusher – as pink as any Heidi's. There was a stiff paper bag between her slack calves. *I see, a little retail therapy.*

'Mum, oh, Mum,' she gasped. 'I wanted them – I didn't know. I wanted them to go into your room – but you'd locked it inside.' Then, using Joyce's own thrift in recrimination: 'We missed the flight.'

Joyce came straight to the point: 'Well, you'll have to get another one, then – and pay for it yourself.' *A book, written in, will be brought forth, In which is contained everything that is, Out of which the world shall be judged.*

'Mum . . .' Those grovelling tones. 'What's happened to you?'

'Nothing much, but I've decided to stay here. And, Izzy, I may not have killed myself, but I'm still dying.'

Isobel was too saturated to absorb her mother's news, or note the rare diminutive; she slid down further on the bench, a cashmere heap.

'You're thirty-three years old,' Joyce couldn't forbear from reminding her. 'I can't go on carrying you for ever – and I don't want to.'

After that, for a while, she stood and listened to her daughter's sobbing, and the heavy whoosh of the approaching lift.

At reception Joyce handed her key to the concierge. He wore a cod-antiquated waistcoat with gold facings and striped sleeves. He had a 17.00 hours shadow and regarded her with the detachment of hotel staff the world over. 'Madam,' he began, 'we tried –' but was interrupted by a manager, a wispy man with a high-domed forehead, who appeared at his shoulder.

'Your daughter, Frau Beddoes, wanted us to enter your room – but I was not wanting to do this; it would have been second time in your stay.'

Joyce said, 'I didn't realize there was a quota.'

'Madam – please?'

'Nothing – really, nothing. I'm going for a walk now.'

'Do you know how long you will be making the stay with us? Your reservation is for one night, only.'

'I-I don't know . . . not indefinitely; why, do you need the room?'

The manager consulted the screen that peered up at him from beneath the brow of the desk. With one waxy finger he picked out a monotonous tune on the keyboard. 'I can let you have the room until *Sonntag* – Sunday – but then there is a higher rate for the Friday and Saturday nights.' He gave Joyce an avaricious smile, top lip tucked under lower for safekeeping.

'Very well,' she said. '*Sonntag* it is.' And went out into the street.

Where it was chilly, Joyce realized, with the approach of evening. Swiss sat suppering in the candlelit window of a restaurant opposite, the plump men correct in jackets and ties, their wives restrained by decent couture. From thirty feet away Joyce could still make out the food piled on their plates, and she felt the first quickening of an appetite long in abeyance. Pulling her coat tightly about her and buttoning it, she headed off uphill between the bright windows of the bijou luxury goods shops that took up the ground floors of the hunched houses.

Her saliva tasted sweet; the rumbling of her belly was unthreatening. Although she had forgotten an incontinence pad, Joyce felt no seepage or ominous swelling. The wire had been yanked out of her.

Leather goods as edible as milk chocolate; gold-nibbed fountain pens as suckable as teats; jewelled sweetmeats arranged on velvet-covered platters – Joyce gobbled it all up. She turned up a cobbled ramp, passed an inscribed Roman tablet set in a niche and reached

a small hilltop park where linden trees with their first green tips stood in raised beds, and a water feature dribbled into a pool surrounded by empty benches. A low stone wall drew Joyce to it; from here she could look out over the old centre of Zürich. Close to, in the fading light, the twin domes of the Grossmünster, the tapered spire of the Fraumünster, all the other high-gabled buildings, with their steeply sloping roofs, weathercocks and gilded clock faces, jostled along the banks of the Limmat. The fog was lifting, scudding up as the darkness streamed down from the woods of the Zürichberg. In the suburban streets, the street lamps came on, braiding the trees. The Limmat unwound, a vinous ribbon between glassy embankments.

Joyce drank in Zürich's peace and orderliness. The city gave her a curious sensation of *déjà vu*, as if it were a picture that she had stared at, sightlessly, in childhood: a reproduction of *Hunters in the Snow* on a classroom wall. The breeze was fresh, with a note of last year's leaf fall. There was hardly any noise – no police sirens, no shouts, no traffic grumble, only the carillon of a distant tram.

Later, as she made her way back to the hotel, Joyce passed by the open door of a small Catholic chapel. A young priest, closing up for the night, was ushering out two late worshippers; his face was chubby, although his soutane hung loose on his rail-thin body. The sparse blond hairs on his bare head caught the light shining from behind the altarpiece, which was an *undistinguished* modern diptych: the Virgin Mary on one side, a frumpy mummy in a magenta housecoat; Jesus on the other, *not a baby any more*, and really of an age when he should be expected to dress himself.

The young priest said 'Guten Abend' to Joyce, and she said 'Guten Abend' back.

Hearing her accent, the couple, who had been hurrying off, stopped, and the man turned. He was middle aged and solidly built; when he came back into the light, Joyce saw that his otter head

was sleek with dark-chocolate hair; he also had a rounded oblong moustache that was less groomed. It demanded, Joyce thought, to be waxed. He wore an Inverness-style coat, the cape fur trimmed. On most men this would have been an *affectation*, but, as he approached, Joyce saw that, somehow, he could carry it off.

'You are', the man said, 'English?'

'Yes.'

'If you were looking for a Catholic place of worship, I am sorry that this is only a shrine, joined now with the Benedictine monastery at Einsiedeln.'

'I'm not –'

The man rode over her denial; he was gently slapping the palm of his left hand with the gloves he held in his right, an insistent accompaniment to the information he had to convey. 'Father Grappelli und I' – he submerged his otter head; the priest smiled and half bowed, thumbs hooked in the cord at his waist – 'we are the committee people of the old parish here, we look after the restorations and these things.'

Joyce glanced at the man's female companion, expecting a complicit look, but the woman, whose features were pinched under tight curls, only stared back blankly.

Joyce tried again: 'I'm not a Catholic.'

'So, so' – the zealot wouldn't let her off the hook – 'but if you were wanting to be' – the moustache quivered – 'or are only needing the comfort of an English-language service during your stay, then Father Grappelli is one of the – *ein offizianten* at St Anton's in Minervastrasse. We' – he indicated the woman – 'are communicants there also.'

'P-Please.' Joyce held up a hand; she thought she was annoyed, but discovered that her voice bubbled with merriment. The priest and the cold woman chuckle-coughed Schweizerdeutsch over each other. Joyce assumed they were telling the natty man to *rein it in*.

'Please,' the man echoed Joyce, 'that is enough of it now, *Guten*

Abend, we are hoping to see you there.' He took the woman by the upper arm and escorted her away.

Joyce turned to the young priest, expecting him to say something – the scene seemed to demand it – but he only added his own *Guten Abend* and retreated inside the chapel.

Later still, Joyce sat on the sofa in her hotel room. She snapped off a spun-sugar span from the *stylish* confection that had sat on the coffee table since her arrival. Then, reaching inside the sickly cage, she took a white chocolate truffle.

Chocolate.

While the bonbon melted in her mouth, Joyce reflected on her odd journey; from one chocolate to another, from Bournville to here, to the Gertrudstrasse suicide flat, and now back here again. At every stop there had been a sweet treat.

After two more truffles Joyce dialled Isobel's room. There was no answer. She called reception: 'My daughter – Fräulein Beddoes – has she gone out?'

'She has checked out, madam, this evening at 17.00 hours, approximately.'

'Was it? Did she – did she leave a message?'

'Yes, madam, there is a letter here for you. Would you like me to send it up?'

Hoping this was generous, Joyce tipped the bellboy ten francs. She might need an ally. He smiled and bobbed his pillbox hat, but by no means obsequiously. Was it her imagination, or was there a certain brusqueness about everyone she had encountered since she had refused Dr Hohl's cup full of poison? An absence of the patronizing manner the living had towards those feckless enough to be dying; a manner that implied they were the parents of teenagers embarking on a permanent holiday, with very little luggage and inadequate preparation.

Joyce didn't open the envelope immediately. Instead, she lay on

the bed, which had been remade and turned down while she was out. She picked up the aluminium stick and prodded the flat-screen TV into life. Trevor Howard materialized, saying: 'Go home, Martins, like a sensible chap. You don't know what you're mixing in, get the next plane.'

But Joseph Cotten demurred, 'As soon as I get to the bottom of this, I'll get the next plane.'

Trevor Howard gave a tough, realist's grimace – all the more commanding, given his homely features and bat ears. 'Death's at the bottom of everything, Martins,' he clipped. 'Leave death to the professionals.'

Joyce shifted on the fresh white pillows, curling up her legs, resting on one shoulder and an arm – it was a posture she hadn't assumed in months. She opened the small box of chocolates the maid had left on the other pillow.

The Snow Hill Gaumont, the cigarette smoke thicker in the gloom than the Vaseline smeared on the lens when Alida Valli was in shot. *Whatever happened to her?* Clattering down alleys between ruined houses, scrambling over mounds of rubble, splashing through the cavernous sewers – there went the past in its square-cut suit. Then they were on the Ferris wheel, and Orson Welles – such a spendthrift with his talent, in the way that Death was a waster of human lives – was saying: 'In Switzerland they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.'

In the still stiller middle of the night, when the television had dwindled to news and tombolas, Joyce finally read Isobel's letter. It was only the orphaned wail she'd expected; the 'you don't understand', 'it's so hard for mes' and 'if only Daddy were still alive'. Of course, the ostensible cause of all these *histrionics* was her own dying state – *Quid sum miser tunc dicturus?* – and yet Isobel had abandoned her. She didn't say where she had gone, whether Birmingham, London or that villa in Majorca belonging to a *useless*

rich friend – one of her *favourite bolt holes*. There was only *silly omniscience*; Isobel wrote that she would be ‘watching out’ for her mother, that, despite having checked out, she would be ‘checking to see that you’re all right’. Really, Joyce thought, if it weren’t so pitiful it might be mystifying.

Over the next three days, Joyce called on the bellboy’s services often. He brought her snacks and, while she lounged in a bathrobe with *Widder* across its left breast, took her clothes away to be laundered. His name, Karl, was also embroidered on his left breast. Joyce tried her seized-up German on Karl, but he blanked this: his English was fine.

There was no call from Isobel. It had been agreed that it would be best if she went back to Birmingham immediately after Joyce died. There was no requirement for her to participate in her mother’s cremation, then the filing away of her dust – that could be *left to the professionals*. Isobel was needed for amateurish tasks: sorting stuff into boxes, humping some to charity shops, then asking Joyce’s friends if they wanted to ‘choose something’ from the superior residuum, that in a few years’ time their own friends would be asked to choose.

Late on the Friday evening Joyce called her home number and listened to the phone ringing in her own empty house. As it rang, she pictured the interior of the fridge, empty except for non-perishables: chutneys that wouldn’t die and low-fat spreads awaiting Judgement Day.

The undertakers had been recommended by Dr Hohl’s organization. Joyce called them on the Thursday morning – twenty-four hours after her reprieve – and their response had been as dispassionate as Hohl’s: her deposit was non-refundable, as was the one for the columbarium niche at Fluntern Cemetery. Both orders could, however, be reactivated when necessary.

Joyce had let the phone ring in her own house for a long while,

half convinced that Isobel was hiding from her mother, crouching in the walk-in cupboard in her parents’ bedroom, her small shoulders shaking between polythene-sheathed dresses, her Start-rite feet planted between rows of shoes, all stretched by shoe trees. This was where Izzy had secreted herself when she was a little girl and evading elocution lessons or piano practice; but the phone only trilled on, duetting with the dunked-biscuit contralto of the Radio 4 continuity announcer, which had been left on to simulate the departed householder.

At long last Joyce had replaced the handset and gone back to the TV, which broadcast a succession of films – *Rebecca*, *National Velvet*, *It’s a Wonderful Life* – that were a reassuring background to her resurrection. For, while to begin with Joyce was able to persuade herself that the numbness was due to her under-dose, by Thursday evening, when she felt hungrier than she had been in months, there was no denying that change was under way.

She didn’t feel particularly well – how could that have been? But she wasn’t not well: this dullness of body and mind was wholly unfamiliar, a state of suspension. There was no medication for her to take, yet she remained continent. On Sunday morning, when she put on her clean underwear and stood in her slip in front of the biggest of the many mirrors, Joyce was jolted from her inertia by the sight of her own flesh.

Which was no longer jaundiced. It sagged, certainly, but only in the way expected of an older woman who had once been *rangy*, with *beautiful high-rising breasts* – these last, Derry’s words, not her own vanity. And while for two decades, the jibe between white lace and pleated skin had struck Joyce as the worst turn-off of all, she now found herself turning a little this way and a little that to admire the new-old birthday suit.

After four days of reclusion, the lobby was an alien planet. Floating from the lift to the reception desk, Joyce marvelled at the miraculous

bubble-worlds of other people: an American mulling over a tourist map with his wife, a squat black maid struggling with an industrial vacuum cleaner.

With her cream blouse, neat brown tweed suit and her good coat from the new Selfridges in the Bull Ring – fake-fur trim, unlike the Inverness worn by the odd man she'd encountered outside the chapel – Joyce looked, she thought, *perfectly nice*. Around her neck was a heavy Victorian gold chain, given to her by Derry for their fortieth anniversary. *Perhaps a little premature, but . . .* he had said, presciently.

She placed her lilac carpet bag on top of the desk. Embroidered with gold fleur-de-lys, it was possibly *too young* for Joyce, but it was exactly the right size. Once the bill had chattered from the printer, it chewed Joyce up. Of course, there was Isobel's added on – including many and pricey spirits miniatures – but her own snacks, teas and laundry were also, in the normal course of life, *prohibitively expensive*. She did well to hide her consternation, giving away only her Visa card.

'You are wanting a taxi to the airport?' the receptionist asked, and, when Joyce denied this, she suggested instead: 'The Hauptbahnhof – the train station, maybe?'

'No.' Joyce shut the clasp of her bag with a definitive click. 'Thank you, I'll walk. It's' – she glanced at the revolving door which spun sunlight into the lobby – 'a lovely day.' She made to leave, then stopped. 'You wouldn't happen to know how to get to the Catholic church – St Andrew's I think it's called?'

'St Anton's,' the receptionist corrected her, 'on the Minervastrasse.'

At first hesitantly, then with increasing confidence, Joyce made her way down through the cobbled streets of the old town, then across the Münster Bridge. The fresh air was heady, and when, to the south-east, at the far end of the cobalt-blue lake, she saw the seven

snowy peaks of the Churfistern, she gasped, then stood at the balustrade for several minutes, drunk with their *loveliness*.

It was only ten minutes' walk to the church; the tramp down Seefeldstrasse, between dull five-storey houses and apartment blocks, wearied her, but Joyce got there feeling *all right* – not nauseous. She hadn't thought ahead, and was oddly disappointed to realize she'd arrived at the end of a service. Father Grappelli was standing on the front steps, together with an older priest. Both wore snowy-white modern vestments, and long scarves embroidered with naive standard-bearing lambs. Joyce – despite not being a believer – thought the scarves demeaning of their office.

The priests were chatting with their parishioners: prosperous families of burghers – the adults had the *self-satisfied* expressions of the recently shriven. Joyce scanned the throng for the otter-headed man and his tight-faced friend, but was partially relieved not to see them. Then, affecting an interest in a plaque on the wall, she made her way along the side of the church. Here, she came upon the blockhouse of a 1960s vestry. The door was open, so she went in.

A teenage girl was bent over directly in front of Joyce, her long chestnut hair hanging down to the parquet floor, which was spread with newspaper. A woman of almost Joyce's age – but plump, ruddy-faced, and squeezed into *woeful* jeans – was aiming a spray can at the silky cascade.

'OK,' the old-hippieish woman cried, '*jetzt – aufstehen.*' The girl straightened up, and with her clawed hands vigorously backcombed her laquered hair until it rose up in a great ruff. '*Und . . . nächster!*' the woman cried, and the girl scampered away to be replaced by a second, who adopted the same posture and was duly sprayed.

'Well, so, you *have* converted, yes?' said a voice right behind Joyce. She jerked round. *Quantus tremor est futurus, Quando judex est venturus, Cuncta stricte discussurus. Breath on my neck, moustache prickle; night presses against a cold black pane, vast, impersonal, yet alive.*

'Uh – y-yes; sorry – I mean, no.'

The otter-headed man laughed. 'I'm sorry,' he corrected her. 'I gave you a jump. Marianne always says to me' – his nut-brown eyes slid away from hers, to where the tight-faced woman was examining a noticeboard – 'that I am too on your face.'

'I think,' Joyce said, 'the expression is "in your face".'

The moustache pouted. 'Exactly so, in your face.'

He was in a loden coat today, olive with horn toggles. *He really ought to have a Tyrolean hat as well* – its absence made his hydroplaned head seem that much sleeker.

'You must allow me to introduce myself,' he said. 'I am Ulrich – Ueli for shortness – Weiss, and this is my – how do you say it? – partner, Marianne Kreutzer.'

Hearing her name, the tight-faced woman came across and all three shook hands formally. Joyce put her in her mid fifties – older than Weiss – and with her gaunt, angular figure, she hardly seemed *mistress material*.

Joyce found herself co-opted by Weiss and the Kreutzer woman. They introduced her to some people: 'Frau Beddoes, she is visiting from England.' And showed her round the church. 'An undistinguished building,' Weiss said, 'you will agree.'

Joyce did. Anglican churches were *bad enough*, with their tepid air of state-assisted piety, but Catholic ones had always seemed *far worse*: musty battlefields, where lust and repression fought it out, in the process torturing wooden effigies, then nailing them to the walls.

The trio stopped in front of a headless figure that stood in a spot-lit embrasure. It wore a blood-spattered toga, and its head rested at its sandalled feet like a gory football. Joyce stared at the severed head; it stared back, the Aztec eyes maniacal.

'You would say,' Weiss lectured, 'St Antoninus, but here St Anton for shortness. He was the public executioner at the time of Emperor

Commodus, second century, and responsible for the execution of St Eusebius, among many other martyrs . . .'

Joyce registered that Weiss was trying to make all this interesting to her, but she was bored already. Sacred objects, she had always felt, needed to be so much more powerful and affecting than even the greatest artworks; if, that is, they were to perform the tasks assigned to them. Otherwise, what were they? *Useless tat*; and what did that make God? Only a fervent bargain-hunter in a long white dress.

Marianne – the Kreutzer woman – had strolled to the next embrasure along. Here she lit a candle and stuck it on a blackened spike spattered with waxy rime. Joyce searched the tight face – its grey eyes closed, its long top lip vertically creased – for evidence of prayer, or yearning, but saw neither.

Weiss droned on: ' . . . then this fellow, this executioner, he is having a dream, you know, a vision thing, Christ comes in his face, yes? And he repents.' He brought his hand up abruptly, then dropped it. 'Then it is his turn for the chopping, a martyr also now.' Except that this sounded like 'Allzo nao'. Weiss smiled, and upper canines slid from beneath his walrus moustache.

'We Catholics have so many of the saints.' He took Joyce by the arm and led her on. 'Sometimes I think too many. No longer is there the selling of indulgences and all those corrupt practices; but the saints, I think this non-believers find hard to . . . accept: that a man, the Pope, can decide that the *naturgemäss* – the natural law – has been – how do you say it – suspended.'

Clearly, Weiss expected a response. Joyce said, 'I had no idea there were so many Catholics in Switzerland; in England we think of the Swiss as very Protestant –'

'No music, yes? No dancing. All in the black, yes?' He laughed. 'In exact fact there are more Catholics here in Zürich than the Zwinglians. Many Old Catholics allzo; y'know, who, ah, say mass in the Latin.'

They reached the end of the nave and went into the vestibule. Father Grappelli was seeing off the last of his communicants: an elderly couple, both with ski sticks, both swaddled in full-length quilted coats, who were haltingly making their way down the shallow stairs.

Seeing them, Joyce remembered that she was ill – *dying, in point of fact*. Felt, too, Derry's absence – as acutely as any human presence. Church bells were pealing across the valley of the Limmat, glockenspiel notes struck on bronze. Pigeons wheeled, Joyce's head spun. She staggered a little, and Weiss tightened his grip.

Marianne Kreutzer came up beside them, her face betraying little concern. 'But you are not well, so?' she said. 'I think this other time.'

'I'm all right, really.' Joyce detached herself from Weiss – his cologne was lemony, alcoholic, *Father's bay rum*.

'Perhaps you are hungry? It is lunch-time, we would' – he sought confirmation from his partner – 'be delighted if you would like to join us.'

'Off course,' Marianne said.

'Oh, I don't know.' Joyce gathered her carpet bag into her arms. 'I wouldn't want to impose.'

'It is not imposing.' Again, the wolfish smile. 'You are a guest in our country. Normal times we go to a bistro near to here – but of course you have visited the Kronenhalle?'

Joyce looked blank.

'No? But really this is too bad, this is the most famous eating place in Zürich; to be here and not to visit, it is almost a crime – you will please to be our guest.'

Father Grappelli was lingering, rolling and unrolling his scarf of lamb. He had a tentative expression on his boyish face, and Joyce guessed he was hoping the invitation would be extended to him. It wasn't. Weiss, coughing Schweizerdeutsch, took the priest's hand and shook it. Then he explained to Joyce, 'I will get the car',

before skipping off down the steps while pulling on his suede gloves.

Joyce turned to Marianne: 'Please, it isn't necessary for all this . . .'

Her tight face clenched still more. 'Frau Beddoes,' she said, 'Ueli is not so ordinary Swiss person. He is *ausländerfreundlich* – you say, friendly to the aliens. That is his . . . thing, so, come, please.'

Not deigning to take his hand, Marianne Kreutzer nodded to the rejected priest, then indicated to Joyce the car that was already idling by the kerb, as compact as a travel iron. As he leant across to open the passenger door, Weiss's otter head dived out of it.

In the oaken burrow of the Kronenhalle, the Zürichers – sleek, black and dapper as moles – tunnelled their way through mounds of food. Many of them blinked from behind tinted Christian Lacroix glasses, as if even this subterranean ambience were too bright. The Zürich guilds' coats of arms were painted on to the creamy plaster of the walls, up above the wood panelling. Waitresses bustled among the crisply laid tables, while the hunched maître d' slowly propelled a trolley up and down the aisles, the silvery lid of which was rolled up, exposing a glistening joint of beef: the meaty pupil of a steely eye.

Stripped of his loden coat, Weiss was disconcertingly exposed in a black roll-neck pullover that was so sheer Joyce could see his nipples.

'So, here, you see' – the lecture was resumed – 'the most celebrated Zürich restaurant. Here in this place since the 1800s. Haunt of the writers – Dürrenmatt, Keller, Mann, Frisch. Music-makers also – Strauss, Stravinsky, Perlman . . .' He rattled out the names with scant feeling. 'I think maybe the artists' presence more obvious still – Miró, Braque, Chagall . . .' As he pronounced each name he pointed to their respective efforts: small canvases, their oils tastily effulgent beneath downlights. 'Und there, by your back, Frau Beddoes, Picasso.'

It was a blue boy on a lighter blue foreground, seated, with his

naked arms encircling his bare legs. There was a pierrat's conical hat on his tousled head.

'Same family, see, the owners – two generations now – have been very clever.' Weiss leant forward, his black breasts resting on the white linen. 'Some are saying they took the paintings from the escaping Jews in the war . . . I think this is but only gossip. See, the, ah, presiding spirit of the place' – he gestured to a portrait of a formidably beaky matriarch that hung up high by the curved cornicing – 'Madame Zumstag, by Varlin.' He snatched at his own snub nose with all five of his plump digits. 'She does not, I think, look like an anti-Semite.'

Marianne sighed and rattled her menu card. She's bored, Joyce thought; *bored, disapproving and hungry. All three.*

A waitress halted at their table; in her trim uniform of black dress, white cap, black hose and white apron, she was perfectly timeless. A stilted bilingual interchange began, as Weiss – unnecessarily, as these were printed in English as well as German – explained the dishes to Joyce: 'Mistkratzerli . . . gebraten, mit gebraten . . . Mit Knoblauch und Rosmarin – it's, you would say, a little bit of baby chicken, yes, with the garlic, yes, and rosemary.'

Joyce was fully intending to decline the food, or to have any drink besides sparkling mineral water. But Weiss prevailed upon her: 'Please, this is a Lattenberg Räschling, an '05 from a local vineyard; we are right to have the pride, I think.' A moist and red lower lip pouted from the luxuriant moustache.

Because of its very rarity, the foody aroma of cigarette smoke in a confined space seemed a *special treat*. The hushed munching of the diners and the priestly garb of the efficient staff, all of it felt so . . . *enormously pleasing*. Then there were Joyce's insides, which were talking to her again, although not with the barely suppressed hysteria of incontinence, nor oedema's plummy nastiness. *I'm hungry, her stomach blared. A trumpet spreading a wondrous sound.*

The cerise wine was clearer than complete transparency. It smelt

of fresh-cut hay. Joyce had to restrain herself from glugging. She had never been a drinker – or, rather, Derry had been a whisky drinker, and it always seemed *a waste* for Joyce to open a full bottle of wine, then leave it in the fridge, expiring beside the mayonnaise.

She ordered the baby chicken for a main course, and some of the *Leberknödel* soup to start. She hadn't consulted the English translation, so Joyce didn't know what *Leberknödel* was – or were – but soup was *always comforting*.

The Swiss ordered as well; then, after grudgingly asking whether Joyce minded, Marianne Kreutzer lit a long slim menthol cigarette. The minty acidity suited the woman, while the smoky threads pulled her face still tighter. Weiss began – gently enough – to probe Joyce concerning her widowed status, her former career and the rest of her life back in England. She was happy to impart; however, she remained vague when he asked her the reason for her being in Zürich, and the likely duration of her stay.

Their entrées arrived. Joyce's soup smelt so *heavenly* that she shifted uneasily on her seat: surely the hot wire would still be there, only buried deeper? But there was nothing; only the companionable rumble of her stomach, so she took a sip of the soup. It was meaty, herby . . . *tasty*. Fleshy dumplings floated in the life-giving broth, and Joyce spooned one up and bit into it, releasing tangible pulses of flavour.

'Mmm,' Joyce couldn't restrain herself from exclaiming, 'this is absolutely lovely!'

Weiss, who was digging at a tall seafood cocktail with a long-handled spoon, peered at her with his lustreless hazel eyes. 'I'm glad you are liking it; it is not a very typical Swiss dish – more the German, I think.' (Bye zink.)

'And what's in these dumplings?' Joyce asked, biting into a second.

'The dumplings? Ah, so, *die Bouillon mit Leberknödel*, yes, you would call them liver dumplings.'

Scottie's Liver Treats. Occult origin. Her body, sad and lonely, tossed without regard across the middle of the bed they had shared for ten thousand nights. Her own middle, a mass of alien tissue, revolting, poisoning her with its blind and senseless growth.

Joyce was laughing; a full-throated guffaw, the like of which she hadn't experienced in months. She laid down her spoon and picked up her napkin to cover her mouth.

'You – is everything all right for you, Frau Beddoes?'

Imagine that thick fur against your neck – or your thigh!

Marianne, having shuffled the lettuce leaves and slices of smoked meat on her plate, resumed smoking her lungs.

'I'm f-fine, really, thank you, Herr Weiss.'

She recovered herself – but only partially. Some blockage had been swept away by her hilarity, and now Joyce found herself telling the moustache – for the man was only a whitish growth hanging off the back of it – far too much: her illness, her loneliness, her pathetic and inadequate daughter, her miserable decline and Phillimore's indifference.

Then Joyce told Weiss how she had heard about Dr Hohl's organization because of a high-profile case in England: the woman with motor neurone disease haranguing TV news reporters and chat show audiences, then departing for Switzerland and the after-life, her wheelchair carried shoulder-high on to the airplane, the litter of a crippled warrior queen.

As she spoke, Joyce noticed that Weiss – whom she had mentally pegged as a *cold fish* – was becoming more and more agitated: his manicured fingers tugged at his napkin, he spun his wine glass by its stem. As she described her own decision to come to Zürich prematurely, Weiss stilled, grew intent; and Joyce played to this solo audience – for Marianne Kreutzer's attention was elsewhere, her cold eyes frosting the convivial quartet at the next table: elderly parents, thirtyish son and daughter-in-law; all hale, all hearty, all pink and flaking in a way suggestive of a recent skiing trip.

Joyce slowed down and, as any good storyteller should, took her listener by his figurative hand, led him on to the plane, sat him beside her while she lost control of her fear and her bladder, then led him off again, into the cab, on to the Widder Hotel, sat him at her bedside throughout the sedated night, then took him on again, to Gertrudstrasse.

When they were actually in the suicide flat, and Dr Hohl was mixing the phenobarbital with water, Weiss's white face swam up from behind his moustache, transfigured by a joyous agony. He was muttering, '*Schrecklich . . . schrecklich . . .*' and when Joyce told him how she had, at the very last moment, refused the poison, Weiss took his otter head in his hands, shook it, then exclaimed: 'Oh, but Frau Beddoes, this is so very wonderful!' Before urging his disengaged companion, 'Isn't it, Marianne, so very wonderful to be hearing?'

Setting her cigarette down on the edge of the ashtray, Marianne Kreutzer said, 'These are very bad people, Frau Beddoes; you have done something truly brave and important, we thank you for that.' Although her frigid tone suggested that she might just as well have administered the poison herself.

Weiss ran on: 'I am not very involved myself in this thing – but we have friends who are, *gegen Fanatiker* – who, you would say, make the campaigning against this dreadful thing that they do.'

Joyce stared at him – she felt foolish and vulnerable; of course, they were Catholics – she should've kept her mouth shut. *Mors slopebit et natara, Cum resurget creatura, Judicanti responsura. Death and Nature shall be astonished, When all creation rises again, To answer to the Judge.* She began back-peddalling. 'I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you, Herr Weiss.' Her tone was correct, off-putting. 'My decision was impulsive – and nothing to do with Dr Hohl's ethics – I am still terminally ill, I may want to avail myself of their . . . of this service at a future date.'

Weiss was not to be deflected so easily. 'Please, Frau Beddoes,

do not think we are *das fanatisch* – the fanatics – I understand, truly I do; my first wife died of cancer ten years ago. She was still a young woman –’ He stopped short and asked Joyce: ‘And you?’

Taken aback, Joyce found herself confirming, ‘Cancer.’ Then added, ‘Of the liver.’

Marianne Kreutzer appeared to catch this very English irony; at any rate, her creased lips furrowed a little more – but Weiss missed it. Licensed by the revelation that they were both members of the *not very exclusive* cancer club, he began, energetically, to fill Joyce in on the local resistance to the goings on at Gertrudstrasse. Weiss confirmed her suspicions: there had been such grotesqueries as body bags propped up in the lift. Then there were the emergency vehicles in near-constant attendance, while the arrival – often by private ambulance – of the suicides seeking assistance created a despairing atmosphere.

‘It is not helpful,’ Weiss said, ‘that there is a cemetery next to this building. The people who live there are not best-off type, but the city council – the canton, also – are thinking about taking the action. I think they will be made to move soon. (Moov zoon.)’

‘There is also Hohl. He is, you know, well – he is *ein Fanatiker*. He is offering now to the people with clinical depression his poison – nothing wrong in their body, only the head.’ Weiss massaged his own smooth forehead, mussing his hair. ‘This is making the difference – even non-Catholics understand this to be wrong.’

While these very weighty matters were being discussed, Joyce tidily dissected her chicken. The Swiss couple were equally methodical eaters, *although where she can be packing it away is a mystery*. When Joyce laid down her cutlery, Weiss responded as if this action were a diagnostic tool and bluntly asserted: ‘You are in much pain, yes? On the drugs? So. I have talked too much; we can drive you to your hotel if you like this.’

The hunched maître d’, whose short white jacket and cranky manner reminded Joyce of a lab technician at Mid-East, had aban-

doned his roast trolley for a copper pot, from which he was ladling large dollops of cream on to the strudels and tartes tatin of the diners. Observing this wanton consumption of criminally unsaturated fats, Joyce gingerly patted her belly beneath the table. There was no pain, or watery intimation of flux to come, only the tight sensation of healthy plenitude. The Leberknödel were in there, she thought, happily being digested.

‘No, please,’ she said. ‘I am feeling quite all right. If it’s not too much trouble I think I would like some dessert.’

After the cream pot had done two rounds and they had all been served with tiny cups of espresso, Weiss finally called for the bill. Joyce reached for her bag and began rummaging for her purse, but her host was having none of this. ‘Please, please,’ he said, warding off the threat of her contributing with open palms. ‘You are our guest, we would be the most upset, wouldn’t we, Marianne?’

Marianne Kreutzer didn’t look as if she would be in the least upset; she had a compact out and was retouching her foundation. Even as a girl, Joyce had found such public attention by a woman to the appearance of her own flesh a *distinctly lewd* performance. Seeing this elegant – and slightly hostile – Swiss woman doing it, caused Joyce to speculate on the nature of her relationship with Weiss. The sex, she imagined, was necessary – but by no means the most important thing. Despite his assured manner, Weiss was a man-boy, gripped by his enthusiasms – and presumably by childish anxieties as well. Joyce found it easy to imagine his pink, freshly shaven cheek resting between her tired breasts.

Marianne Kreutzer dispelled her reverie by launching into this curious speech: ‘Lenin,’ she began, ‘when he lived in Zürich, in the First War, he said of us Swiss that we could not be having the revolution, because when it came the time to attack the Hauptbahnhof – the train station – the crowd would be stopping to buy the ticket to go on – Ueli, *was ist der Name fur Gleis?*’

'The platform.'

'That is it, the platform. But now, well, you are taking time to see Zürich and our beautiful buildings, our pretty lake, maybe also you are seeing our new kind guests. Black guests, brown guests. People are not so friendly with them; they are invited only by the Government in Berne, I think. There are some times not so long now, when the Swiss in the crowd are not buying the platform ticket!' She snapped her compact shut for emphasis.

Joyce didn't know how to respond; it wasn't at all clear whether Marianne Kreutzer's remarks had been an endorsement of this revanchism, or simply a description. Pointing out from her severe curls were ears as thin as a fish's fins; in place of lobes they had diamond studs.

'What is your hotel?' Weiss asked, twining his credit card with the strip of receipt.

'I was staying at the Widder, but, well, to be frank, I've decided to stay on for a while in Zürich, and . . .' Joyce bowed her head; she didn't want Marianne Kreutzer's accusing eyes on her: she didn't want to be kin of the uninvited guests. 'It's not that I can't afford it, it's just that it seems too expensive if I'm going to be here that much longer.'

Weiss looked at Joyce's bag. Its pattern of fleur-de-lys didn't, she thought, seem out of place in the Kronenhalle. *Perhaps I should stay here?* 'So,' he said, 'you are without a pension or hotel?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'We have a new kind of taking tax here, you know.' The waitress had brought Weiss's loden coat and was hovering by the table, but he showed no inclination to rise. 'If you are a tourist from European Union country, you may stay as long as you like, but only in a hotel. To rent – just a room only – you must register with the Fremdenpolizei, and then . . . well, so on and so on, they will check up on you; we know' – the moustache drooped shamefacedly –

'the reputation we have abroad. There will be many forms and stamps – too many, I think.'

Joyce rose to this: 'That doesn't concern me. I was a professional administrator myself for many years, I'm accustomed to that sort of thing; and if it's a matter of assets, well, I can produce evidence of sufficient.'

'Maybe so, maybe so.' Weiss wasn't taking Joyce's competence well. *He wants to hang on to me!* 'But foreigners can find it very hard to get the flats and rooms; they are always the last in the line, often times when they are the first – you understand?'

Joyce nodded.

'I have a friend – she is a member of our church. She has a very nice room. She would be happy, I think – I know – to have you as the *Pensionsgast* –'

'Really, Herr Weiss, you've been kind enough –'

'One call, one call . . .' He had his mobile phone out already, unfolded, the panel tucked up under his hair. He had taken the coat from the waitress, draped it over one arm, and now began tangoing it towards the door.

'Please.' Most unexpectedly, Marianne Kreutzer had placed her long elegant fingers on Joyce's sleeve. 'Let Ueli be the helper for you. I said one time, he is *ausländerfreundlich* – it is his *Natur*.'

The sky was still bright, although long shadows fingered the bolt of grey tarmac that was woven with tram lines. The compact Mercedes pulled up to the kerb and Joyce got out. *Antiquariat der Literatur* was stencilled on the window of a small bookshop, and a clothesline strung across this was pegged with different editions of a periodical called *Du*. Below them lay rows of German-language books with paper covers.

Coming up beside her, Weiss said: 'This is the university quarter, many culture people are living here. This lady, her husband is – was – a professor.'

Marianne Kreutzer extracted herself from the back of the car, but it was only to wish Joyce *auf Wiedersehen*. 'I am waiting,' she said to Weiss.

Opposite the bookshop stood a large, faintly ugly, Italianate building. It had a four-storey tower, and a three-storey wing with cast-iron balconies; two dismal dormer windows protruded from the tiled roof. 'Frau Stauben is on the top. Very good views, I think.' So saying, Joyce's protector led her across the road.

The views from Frau Stauben's apartment were an irrelevance – or so she seemed to believe. Her living-room windows were covered with both straw blinds and heavy, dark green velvet curtains that were half drawn. The furniture was dated, yet still of the wrong period: padded European Modernist slabs with tapered poles for legs and arms. The nylon covers of these chairs and sofas were time-faded beige and mauve, plush with moulted cat fur.

Frau Stauben – or Vreni, as she insisted on being called – was the ruddy-faced woman who had been doing the girls' hair at St Anton's. Upon Joyce and Weiss's arrival, she had first imposed a plate of pastries on her guests, then put them on one of the bigger slabs. While she hustled in and out of the adjoining kitchen preparing coffee, Frau Stauben chattered away in heavily accented English. 'It is *Gründonnerstag* soon now – that's what we say; in English, "Green Thursday", I think. The children will do their playing then – the day before *Karfreitag* . . . Good Friday.'

Weiss hadn't taken his loden coat off. He sat awkwardly on the edge of the sofa. There were patches of icing sugar on either knee of his immaculately creased black trousers. A large cat came padding into the room; it was – Joyce dredged up from some sink hole of memory – a Birman. A strip had been shaved out of its thick, smoky-blue coat, exposing disturbingly human skin and the fresh stitching of an incision. The cat advanced halfway across the furry carpet, then sat and stared at Joyce with malevolent yellow eyes.

Weiss accepted a cup of coffee and said, 'Frau Beddoes, please allow me to explain your situation to Frau Stauben in German.' Joyce fluttered her hand – a gesture she wasn't aware of having in her repertoire – and the two Swiss began spitting and liting Schweizerdeutsch over one another.

Through the kitchen door Joyce could see wind chimes dangling above the sink; spider plants in string harnesses had parachuted into the corners of the living room; in the corridor there were framed homilies illustrated with tow-headed cherubs. It all reminded her of the drop-in centre at the hospital, where, together with a troop of other sufferers, Joyce had lain in vest and tracksuit bottoms on a tatami mat, as a tranquillized tape recording urged them all to *go into the garden*.

Joyce had wondered *why?* The garden at Mid-East was a *concrete waste land*, its only blooms *polythene*. But maybe the voice meant her own garden, which, although no *show-stopper*, had afforded her so much pleasurable absorption: the crumble of loam between fingertips, while she stared intently at the rippling ultramarine of an iris petal.

Or perhaps the voice had meant her to recall weekends in the garden with Derry. He hadn't been that attuned to the natural world – every seasonal change, right until the very end, remained a source of mild surprise – and yet he still dutifully assisted her, because her pleasure was his own. *In the last year or two, like a walrus in his old grey cords, pulling himself up from the weeding, elbows on to the seat first, then so slow and ungainly to stand. In bed at night the awful gurgling: everything draining away.*

And here was his widow, listening while one foreign stranger explained to another that, despite the fact that she, too, was dying, she also had to rent a room. *Hardly what you want in a prospective tenant.*

'She had – *was sagt man für Gebärmutter?*'

'A . . . well, *ich weiss nicht, eben* . . . She has had her womb – is it womb? – cut out of her.'

Joyce smiled. She hadn't realized how intently she had been staring at the cat; nor that the cat had continued to glare at her. 'Frau Stauben,' she asked, 'might I use your bathroom?'

Braced, Joyce voided herself. A smooth sensation: pleasing distension, holding on and then letting go. A rounded 'plop', a single cool splash on her left buttock. The shabbiness of the rest of the apartment was absent from this tiled confinement; the open window admitted fresh air and birdsong. *Maybe that's why I was relaxed enough?* Joyce mused, for if there wasn't diarrhoea, there was usually its hardened opponent.

But when she rose, wiped herself and looked back at the healthy brown bracket encapsulating the greenish water, she comprehended that the true explanation lay within: the vicious antagonisms – bowel screeching at stomach, gall bladder howling at liver – had been subsumed by a low hubbub, as of parish councillors mildly debating in a musty hall.

Joyce rearranged her clothes, flushed the toilet and checked her face in the mirror. Going back along the dim corridor, she noticed a ceramic name plate on a door; it was decorated with edelweiss and read *Gertrud's Zimmer*. The door was ajar and she could see candlelight blinking on a skirting board.

Joyce pushed the door open. It was a perfectly ordinary teenage girl's bedroom – or, rather, had once been. The pink flounce around the padded headboard of the bed was dusty and mildewed, the mattress was bare except for a quilted under-sheet. On the walls, the puncture marks of withdrawn drawing pins, and the tacky marks of ripped-off Sellotape showed where pop posters and hobby certificates had resided. The window was tight shut, the blind half drawn.

This was not a room that had been recently vacated; tiny temporal jibes – the cartoon decal stuck to the wardrobe door, a fluffy slipper sticking out from under the bed – informed Joyce that the

girl who had once slept here was long since grown. Or dead, because the candlelight came from two rows of nightlights that had been arranged on a makeshift shrine.

Three planks, set like stairs on supports of increasing height, were cluttered with snapshots, drawings, glass figurines, china dogs and kittens. Among these were amateurish handicrafts, while in pride of place, in the middle of the highest plank, was a missal with a gold-tooled cover and a rosary looped around it, one bead a smooth football at the feet of a plastic ballerina. On the wall above the clutter hung an ornately framed photograph of the goddess of these small things: Gertrud herself, on skis, wearing a bright pink ski suit, and with a vanilla ice cream Alp over her shoulder. Her portrait was flanked by a crucifix: Jesus, hairless legs in white pants, and with a brasserie waiter's goatee, hung casually from the cross, having simply *dropped by*.

Joyce stood planted in the doorway; she hated that she'd intruded, yet found herself unable to retreat. The black silhouette of a bird flapped by the bottom half of the window: out there, in the daylight, were the living; while in this fusty room there were only brain-dead girls, their souls kept alive on faith-support equipment.

Frau Stauben bustled along the corridor. Joyce turned, flustered. 'Please, I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean to intrude – the candles –'

But her prospective landlady was unfussed. 'It is a silly thing,' she said. 'My daughter,' she continued, pointing at the girl in the ski suit, 'she dies many of these years ago, it was a cancer in the blood.'

'Leukaemia?'

'Yes . . . so. I am always meaning to do the tidy' – she made sweeping motions with her sturdy hands – 'but . . .' Frau Stauben left this, and the hands, dangling. Joyce looked into her periwinkle-blue eyes and saw nothing unusual, only the cliché of humanity. All at once she decided she would try to like Frau Stauben – *Vreni*; trust her, maybe.

'So,' the other woman resumed, taking Joyce by the arm and leading her not towards the living room but further into the bowels of the apartment, 'Herr Weiss, Ueli, he had to be gone – you were a long time.'

'Really?' Joyce felt not abandoned but relieved.

'Yes, that Marianne –' Frau Stauben pulled herself up. 'So, this is the room I am hiring.'

It was large, clean and, in contrast to the others, well aired. Twin beds were pushed together beside one wall, the fitted carpet was an institutional tan, the wallpaper a pattern of trellises and climbing roses.

'It is' – she made reckoning on her stubby fingers – 'two hundred and ten francs for the weeks, and I can be giving you *le petit déjeuner* – an evening meal also, if you're wanting?'

Treu und Glauben. 'That's fine, Frau Stauben,' Joyce said. 'I'll take it.'

Frau Stauben's grey hair lay in a mass of spirals on her rounded shoulders, the links of her spectacles chain were buried in the fuzz of her cardigan; the spectacles themselves rose and fell on her massive breast. She was still holding Joyce's arm. 'Please, you will call me Vreni – and . . .'

Joyce touched her own breast. 'Joyce.'

'Joyce. Exactly. Are you very sick-feeling, Joyce?' Frau Stauben's eyes were too blue – doll's eyes with bags under them.

'No, not very sick at all . . .' She hesitated, wondering whether to speak of her odd feelings since the abortive visit to Gertrudstrasse, but decided against it. 'I came to Zürich early, to – well, presumably Herr Weiss explained? My cancer is not very advanced, I don't think I'll be any kind of problem to you –'

'No, no, you are not understanding, Joyce!' Vreni Stauben became animated. 'I am not having any problems with this – I have seen the very sick, the very sick. I only wonder . . .' She twiddled

an invisible dial, tuning in to her wonderment. 'But really, I am too rude!'

Vreni Stauben hurried about, breathing with the rumbling squeak of the obese. She fetched towels and sheets for Joyce, then made up the bed. She showed Joyce the kitchen cupboards with their plastic boxes of muesli, and the fridge with its quarter-litre tubs of yoghurt.

'If you are up first of time,' Vreni said, grinning conspiratorially, 'I will be frying the *Röschi* and the eggs.' Then she gave Joyce a set of keys and demonstrated the tricky manoeuvre required to turn the mortise lock. All the while, the smoky-blue cat with the shaved belly padded along behind them. 'She is the stupid animal,' Vreni contended indulgently – and Joyce, who didn't like cats, silently concurred.

When Joyce was alone in her new room, she sat down on the side of one of the beds, unzipped her ankle boots and eased them off. *You've been on us a lot today*, her sore feet complained. *We're not used to it.*

Well. Joyce bent forward to grasp first one ball, then the second. *I know that, but you may have to.* She lay back on the pillows, intending to rest for a moment, but unconsciousness mugged her with its soft cosh.

She dreamt of Isobel, a Tommy-girl in a khaki wool uniform, puttees wound round her milk-bottle calves, a salad bowl tin helmet on her crunchy dyed hair. Joyce's daughter was hunched up in a shell crater; illuminated by the bursting of *whizz-bangs*, one of her cheeks was shinily artificial. *Gutta-percha.* Ueli Weiss – in a full-length leather coat, Iron Cross at his high collar – stood smoking on the far side of a black pool, from the middle of which poked a skeleton's hand holding a pistol. Despite the shellfire it was eerily silent, except for Chopin's B Flat Sonata, played very softly by a

virtuoso who was out of sight in *no man's land*. The melody insinuated itself within the after-tone of each note.

The Angel of Mons slithered down out of the hot orange sky. It was wearing Marianne Kreutzer's tight face mask, and its billowing white silk robe looked *deliciously cool*. Even though the Angel was fifteen feet high, once it had grasped Isobel under her arms, it was unable to lift her.

'I'll miss the flight, Mum,' Isobel said. 'Don't leave me here.' She pawed at her mother's blouse, her *stupid manicured nails* catching in the fabric.

Joyce cried, 'Get off me!' And woke to the terrifying banality of Vreni Stauben's cat, which was trampling her upper body. It was dark. After she had switched the light on and been to the toilet, she checked her watch: 3.44 a.m. She undressed, put the cat out the door and returned to the twin bed. She fell asleep immediately, and in the morning was hungry enough for both the *Röschi* and two fried eggs.

Offertorium

Every day, after breakfast, Joyce left the Universitätstrasse apartment and walked the Zürich streets. Vreni Stauben tried to persuade her to take cabs – or at least the tram or bus. But Joyce told her she preferred to walk.

In the mornings, when she set out on her expeditions, there were still misty rags hanging from the trees on the wooded slopes surrounding the city; then, as the morning wore on, the rags were torn away. There was a succession of high, bright, chilly days. With each venture she made, Joyce unwound the thread of orientation, down between the dully neoclassical museum and library buildings, then across the Limmat Bridge, before trailing it round the edge of the old town.

Vreni told Joyce about Weinberg's, and the cheaper department store, Globus, both of which were on Bahnhofstrasse. She took her time shopping, far more than she would have done at the Bull Ring in Birmingham. The shop assistants were no more *presentable* than those at home, *but, to be frank* – and since she was addressing herself alone, why shouldn't she be – they were far more attentive, and polite, and spoke *markedly better* English as well.

Joyce realized she was *building a wardrobe*, and it was from this alone she deduced that her sojourn in Zürich would be for *quite a while*: the hours sheathed in good-quality cotton underwear, the days helped into a comfortable, yet stylish, navy two-piece – this in a lightweight wool, since Vreni had told her to expect warmer weather in April.

At Apartment 7, Universitätstrasse 29, Joyce adapted herself to the rhythms of her landlady's life. It was much as she had always

feared: the petty sumptuary rules, the cat-and-weather conversations, the talk of milk supply – and ailments. A pooling of sensibility with no sex barrier to prevent it: is that my support hose, or hers?

Joyce had always understood, rationally, that Derry would predecease her – the X chromosome, the single malts, the many cigarettes, the sedentary job – but worse than the fear of his absence was the idea of any other presence. In the darkest days of mourning him, when she didn't even dress herself, Joyce recoiled from the phone calls of even her closest and oldest friends, their very feminine concern. Her anxieties were half formed, and all the worse for it: the purgatorial doom of a shared scone in the café of a National Trust property, for ever and ever and ever. *Lord Jesus Christ King of glory, deliver the souls of all the faithful departed from the pains of hell . . .*

One morning, after Joyce had been a week or so at Frau Stauben's apartment, the two women lingered together over breakfast. Vreni was showing her photographs of the previous year's Easter play at St Anton's; this was, Joyce knew, her other way of memorializing Gertrud. Tossing aside the final photo – a particularly choleric cherub, tightly held by a long-suffering angel – Vreni said, 'Ueli – Herr Weiss – he called in the night before to ask me if you are being all good.'

Joyce didn't think this an inquiry after her moral welfare; she dug doughtily at the remains of her muesli. 'Oh, really,' she said, 'I'm perfectly all right – don't I seem all right?'

'It is – I – it is . . .'. As Vreni was not someone to whom tact came naturally, she mangled on: 'I am not knowing what is the stage of your treatments, Joyce. I am so sorry, you forgive me for not inviting this talk, but I am confused, I do not know what to say to Ueli –'

'You don't have to say anything to Herr Weiss!' Joyce snapped, and was going to add that her health was *none of his business*, had

not Frau Stauben tipped her glasses off the end of her long, veined nose and put the doll's eyes on Joyce. The morning sunlight was intense in the small kitchen, and a sort of nimbus edged her soft form. 'But I am thinking,' (Butt ai amm zinkin . . .) she mispronounced with great care, 'that you are not so ill at all. You have not the look' – she skidded into Schweizerdeutsch – '*Sie gsehnd nöd uus wie öpper wo Chräbs hätt*' – then back out – 'the look of a cancer person. I know this things, you see.'

The daughters of other women looked up at them from the table. Teenagers dressed as immaterial beings, their smiling faces blank and startled in the flash, waiting for experience to shade them in.

Without being aware of having taken her leave, or taken up her new coat, handbag and gloves, Joyce found herself outside in the street, the *fairly high* heels of her new shoes vigorously tapping on the paving. She followed the thread back towards the river; on the museum's portico a muscular goddess did dancercise with the globe. Joyce walked over the bridge, then climbed the stairs beside the gothic grotto to the Lindenhof, the small park she had ventured out to from the Widder Hotel on the first night of her resurrection.

Could it be true, what the fat lady said? Could Joyce be recovering from the cancer? Phillimore had said the origin of her cancer was 'occult'; might the dissolution of these tumours be equally mysterious?

In the dead of recent nights Joyce had awoken often, and looked across the empty twin bed to where the feline darkness rubbed against the jet windowpane. Was it outside, her cancer? Had it been *put out* there, to stare back in at her with eyes as round and black as an umlaut? Was it watching her body, huddled up in the duvet, for signs of defeat: the unruly cells, cowed, mending their own membranes, retreating into the milky opalescence of their cytoplasm? . . . *fac eas, Domine, de morte Iransire ad vitam . . . Allow them, O Lord, to cross from death into the life . . .*

Below her sun rays skipped, wavelet to wavelet. Pretty. Ordinary. Pretty. Beside her the Stadthäuser loomed. Sandy. Dull. Sandy. Joyce was beginning to read Zürich, a little; the individual buildings, the streets, the hills beyond – all were outlined. Some of these were filled in – with colour, texture and form – while others were simply labelled, e.g., ‘Rathaus’, and given a brief description. She went on, threading through side streets empty in the mid-morning. She had it in mind to pick up the bras she had ordered the day before yesterday – although she also knew that it was far too early.

In Bahnhofstrasse Joyce was arrested by a chocolatier’s window. Here was the inverse of the edible leather goods in the old town; the slick brown *stuff*, melted and poured into the moulds of quotidian things – books and biros, coins and watches. It was tempting, this parallel world of sweet substance, and Joyce tried casting herself as a little old English governess, stuffing a Gladstone bag full of it, before boarding the train that would take her home across Europe.

The train home, *maybe I could take that?* The plane was out of the question: *if I feared death when I was on my way to commit suicide, then what would it be like now?* Every jolt or jostle threatening to pop this bubble of shiny, reflective awareness? Joyce walked across the road towards the station, eyes fixed, unseeing, on the stony breasts of the gods and goddesses guarding its clock. *What does Weiss want?*

A group of street drinkers were clustered convivially beside a plinth, upon which a bearded patriarch was ever-striding towards an industrious Zion. Joyce thought that, *this being Switzerland*, they were going about the business of intoxication in a sober fashion, the only thing to distinguish them from still soberer citizens a certain lack of registration that recalled the transfers Isobel used to rub on to cardboard panoramas with a pencil. They stood – two men, two women, one brown, three white – in kinship with the drift of last autumn’s leaves. It was only when Joyce was within a few feet of them, and one of the women took a swig from her can

of lager, then looked round, that she recognized her own daughter.

‘Mum – Mummy!’ Too loud, the closest living relative cried: an egregious acquaintance forcing intimacy in a crowd. The man with her was Asian – *a Tamil?* His face smooth – firm, yet fleshy – his lips symmetrical, his thick blue-black hair pressed down on his brow by a cream-wool hat.

Isobel set her can on the ground and rushed to embrace her unyielding mother. ‘Oh, Mummy, I was so scared. Oh, Mummy, I thought you were –’

Dead. Joyce completed the sentence, internally, but it was Isobel she meant. She realized that Frau Stauben’s Gertrud and her own Isobel had become mushed up in her mind, both household goddesses, the objects of useless and chintzy cults.

‘Where’ve you been? I’ve been back to the hotel every day, I’ve waited there loads, they – they called the police in the end –’

‘I’m not surprised, Isobel,’ Joyce said firmly, disengaging herself from the beery embrace.

‘Are you all right? Are you going somewhere – d’you want me to come with?’ This, all in a rush. *Please take me with you, Mummy, please?* The teary little face imploring among the tricycles, *nurseries in those days, well, they were a bit like prisons.*

‘I hardly think we want to discuss this in front of your . . .’ Joyce eyed the Tamil man and the two others, who were *not so respectable after all*: the man had his front teeth missing, the woman an open sore by her ear. ‘. . . friends.’

Mother and daughter walked together into the front hall of the Hauptbahnhof: an enormous, barrel-vaulted space, with dingy light filtered down through many semicircular windows. The atmosphere was stale with diesel fumes and the odours of the departed masses. A bulgy, gilded dummy of a pierrot was dangling from the beams overhead; Joyce supposed this was meant to be *public art*. She stopped and said to Isobel: ‘I’m not going anywhere, I told you that already. I’m staying here, in Zürich –’

'But, Mum –'

'I also told you, Isobel, that I'm fed up to the back-bloody-teeth with carrying you, girl.' From ancestral workshops came the bash and whine of her long-gone Black Country accent. 'If you're going to hang about on street-bloody-corners with this – this riff-raff, you can keep out of my road.'

'I'm worried about you, Mum.'

'Worry about yourself.'

'What about the house? What're you gonna do about that?'

Red and wet – was that how Isobel's cheeks were always going to be? Unreasonably – because she knew this was only the lost girl's compounded neurosis, *no home to go to at chucking-out time* – Joyce grew still angrier with her *grasping, ungrateful, sot* of a daughter.

'The house, the house – that's all you ever think about, Isobel. Worried you won't be getting your money any time soon, are you? Honestly, if your father could see you now! *If he could, he'd give her a hug, stroke her stupid dyed hair. Comfort her.*

Isobel was now sobbing; Swiss travellers hurried past, eyes averted, heading for the ticket machines. Joyce got a pen and notebook out of her handbag, and, distraught as she was, Isobel still noticed this new acquisition. Joyce scrawled Vreni Stauben's address and phone number on a page, tore it out and handed it to her daughter.

'This is where I'm staying, if you feel you have to reach me. I don't want to know where you are, Isobel, not until you straighten yourself out.'

'But, Mum, I've got no . . . You see, my credit card –'

Joyce forestalled this *bloody beggary*, so at odds with the nation, its cavernous Alps stuffed with *hard cash*. She got out her wallet and slapped five rust-coloured notes into her daughter's hand; then she tried to walk away, briskly, without a backward glance, *deliver them from the lion's mouth*, but Isobel was still quicker.

The drunk woman grappled at Joyce's arm, and it took fifty or a

hundred yards to shake her off. She fell back to the group by the statue, and the last her mother saw of her, when she did look, was Isobel being comforted by the Tamil man, who had put down his beer and clasped her in an embrace that – since he was a full head shorter – appeared *bloody ridiculous*.

Sanctus

Joyce used her own key to the apartment, and walked straight down the corridor and into the main room. Ueli Weiss and Marianne Kreutzer were on one of the sofa-slabs; Vreni Stauben sat quivering on a chair. The dusty curtains had been opened and the blinds rolled up; there was a figure at the window, and, when it pivoted to confront Joyce, it took a while for her to establish its sex.

Then he said, 'Mrs Beddoes – Joyce, if I may?' in flawless English, while advancing to take her hand. 'This is an intrusion – and an unexpected one for you – so, you must please forgive us?'

Is he wearing fancy dress? But no, it was a purple-trimmed soutane with wide, flaring skirts; a vivid purple sash cut across his tubular upper body; and a black biretta with a purple tuft was set on top of his head – the capital of this human column.

'I am Monsignor Reiter,' the priest announced – not without a trace of pride – 'but please, call me Jean.'

Joyce noticed the gold band on his wedding finger, and a white gold signet ring set with diamonds on his little one. He was young, this priest, and so white-skinned that he looked as if the pigment had been sucked out of him. He was also very tall, with a long El Greco face and black glossy hair so dense that even though he must have shaved that morning – evidenced by the fresh nick on his sharp Adam's apple – his hollow cheeks were already blue-shadowed by new stubble.

'How do you do,' Joyce conceded.

Vreni began flapping, asking Joyce if she wanted tea . . . coffee. Even Marianne, who was in an eau-de-Nil silk top *that must have cost a small fortune*, seemed a little awed by the prelate.

'Why,' Joyce asked him, 'are you here?'

'I am a papal chaplain,' Reiter explained, 'charged by the Curia with the task of assessing certain kinds of . . . well, perhaps the least prejudicial way of putting it would be to call them "unusual events".' He raised his eyebrows; it was a radical move that made of his face something comical and expressive; temporarily, he appeared dumbfounded by his own words, overawed by his own magnificence.

They were still standing. Joyce paced herself. She slowly unbuttoned her coat, retreated to the vestibule to hang it up – together with the woollen tam she had bought at Day's – then, returning to the living room, she sat down on the least comfortable of Vreni Stauben's chairs: an aluminium frame with a leather sling for a seat. She didn't feel particularly intimidated by the situation – priests, doctors, where was the difference? She had dealt with such professionals all her working life, and, as Derry had been a solicitor, she had also socialized with lawyers.

Joyce let her gaze track from one Swiss to the next. Vreni Stauben was cowed. 'Ueli – Herr Weiss,' she said, wheezing self-exculpation, 'he has been making calls all the days to say how is Frau Beddoes?'

'And you told him I was . . . fine?'

'You did not seem like the cancer patient to me, Joyce.' She allowed herself the upturned palms of a martyr.

Weiss held the tip of one finger up to his walrus moustache. 'When we first met, outside the chapel, I saw a very sick woman.' A second finger poked at the charged atmosphere. 'But when you came to St Anton's you were much better.' Weiss, Joyce thought, had the professional manner of someone who had no defined profession. 'I could tell, because I had already seen how sick you were . . . Und now, well, Frau Beddoes' – he withdrew the finger, laughed curtly – 'these big walks round the town, and – you must forgive her – but Frau Stauben, yes, she has been telling me with what – *der Appetit?*'

'With what relish,' said the Papal Chaplain, relishing the opportunity to correct his countryman's English.

'So, yes, exactly: with what relish you have been eating her *Röschti*. Und now, we see here a very sprightly, yes? Sprightly lady. Well, already when I was talking with Father Grappelli about you – and you saying what had happened with Hohl – I am thinking this is not usual, it is strange happening. So, well, we are being very careful – Grappelli, he is frightened, but I say we must –'

Leaning forward, Joyce cut Weiss off with a wave of her hand. 'Can I be right in what I'm hearing, Herr Weiss?' She was as matter-of-fact as if she had been querying bed allocation or late laundry delivery. 'Are you suggesting that what has happened to me is a' – she grimaced – 'miracle?'

Joyce wasn't at all surprised that Vreni Stauben crossed herself, but a little that Marianne Kreutzer did so as well.

'Aha!' Reiter interjected. 'This term – we don't use it so much nowadays; it is very value-laden, I think. The preferred expression – certainly during preliminary inquiries – is "perceived suspension of natural law".'

Joyce laughed at his bureaucratic jargon of the supernatural; laughed with Falstaffian vigour. 'Gentlemen – ladies,' she said once her merriment had subsided, 'I can't deny that I'm feeling extremely well indeed – and I'm happy to discuss the possible reasons for this, but, before we go any further, two things: I think I heard the kettle boil, Vreni. I'm thirsty and I would like some tea.' Frau Stauben got up and, after soliciting the others' orders for hot drinks, clucked off to the kitchen. 'Second,' Joyce resumed, 'if I have been the . . . subject? Of a suspension in natural law, could you tell me, please, who has been doing the suspending?'

It seemed that Weiss hadn't expected her to raise this point so soon. The moustache winced, and he nervously shot the pink cuffs of his striped shirt. Marianne busied herself in her handbag – only the Monsignor had the sang-froid to reply: 'Well, now, Mrs

Beddoes, these are very early days, and the procedure by which such extraordinary events are authenticated is a lengthy one. I'm only on secondment here, preparing initial reports for the diocesan bishop –'

Joyce silenced him with another imperious wave. 'That's quite enough of that, thank you, Monsignor Reiter. Let me put it another way: if you want me to cooperate at all, you'll have to answer that question right away; otherwise I'll pack my bag and leave.'

Silence. *Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth, Heaven and earth are full of . . . dust and cat hair.* The eyes of the delegation all slid to the kitchen doorway where Vreni Stauben was standing, a spoon in one squashy hand, a tea strainer in the other. Her usually mild expression was tempered by an intensity Joyce hadn't seen before: a fierce parental pride, not in some mundane swimming, jumping or instrumental achievement – but in a transcendent one.

After Derry died their friends had drifted away. Joyce had expected this – been prepared for it, too. Derry had been far more gregarious than her; it was he who organized get-togethers. She prized this in him, just as he valued her asperity, her reserve. It was not that Joyce was incapable of friendship; loyalty, she felt, was akin to insurance payments – something you *kept up*. There were her two friends from girlhood: Ruth, now retired to the Yorkshire Wolds, and Iris, who had gone down to London, where she maintained a long-lasting lesbian union. Then, when Iris's companion had died, she uprooted again and returned to Birmingham. She had stayed with Joyce for a month the previous year, while she hunted for a suitable cottage in the Forest of Arden. An indefatigable presence, round-faced, petite, *vigorous*.

Then there were Miriam and Sandra, both former colleagues; although her friendship with the former, who had once been her secretary, was always *a little strained*. On several occasions Miriam

had negotiated the tortuous arterial roads all the way from Snow Hill in order to take Joyce for her radiotherapy at Mid-East.

Sandra, who had been a long-serving and much revered consultant paediatrician, now reposed in the leafy splendour of Edgbaston. Every room of her Arts and Crafts villa was like a conservatory, while the entire house resounded with the song of grandchildren – or such was Joyce's impression on her infrequent visits. Sandra dispensed meals whenever required – came over, too – but she was hardly *proactive*. *I had to ask her to take me to the clinic – and that was hateful. Shameful.*

Self-pity was not in order, though: *I had a life*, and even, briefly, after Derry had died, *another lover*; a source – surely justifiable? – of considerable satisfaction. *Age would not wither me*. Despite all this, the way those couples had *dropped me* hurt. The self-satisfied solicitors and their WI wives, it was they who were withering as they dealt the pack of remaining individuals into bridge pairs.

Obscurely, Joyce blamed Derry for this, and related it to a failure in their intimacy: they had been *close, certainly*, yet the bulk of the unspoken communication between them had been that there was *nothing much worth saying*.

All this while the three seated Swiss looked at the one standing; all this while the Magi adored the Saviour's mother. It was preposterous, *most definitely*, the *dippy shrine* to the miraculous teenager; the beatification of Gertrud – first spotty, then holy. Oddly, Joyce now felt empowered by all those wordless decades she had spent with Derry. There was a shrewdness in them – a native cunning.

The Swiss had their coffee; Joyce took her tea. They talked, a devilish interplay between pragmatism and spirituality. It transpired that Ueli Weiss had a severely disabled son. 'A hard birth, there was not enough oxygen,' he explained, and Joyce thought *he's describing his marriage as well*. The baby had been – and this was stated like a menu choice – 'a vegetable': deaf, blind, dumb, para-

lysed. One day, Weiss, as had been his custom, took the persistently vegetative infant with him to visit Gertrud Stauben, who was in hospital, dying of leukaemia.

Joyce could envisage Vreni's daughter, her skin as translucent as dripping wax, stretching out her anaemic fingers to draw strength from the little boy's potato head . . . 'There are three classes of such happenings,' Monsignor Reiter said. '*Quoad substantiam* – this is the biblical act of the Saviour, and some of his saints.' The young prelate had sat and crossed his legs, the skirts of his soutane falling open to reveal tan cotton trousers. 'Then there is *quoad subiectum*, which, while not entailing the full resurrection of the dead, can nevertheless exhibit the full restitution – *restitutio in integrum* – of irreparably damaged organs; the growth, even, of new ones.'

So far as Joyce was concerned, it was this second kind of . . . not faith but collective suspension of disbelief that Reiter was investigating. The dying girl had laid on her hands more than fifteen years ago: 'My son, he was, as I say, a vegetable. Now, he is not the totally normal fellow – no one is saying this –'

'But he feeds himself, dressing too,' Marianne broke in. 'He can walk and is talking these few words, so.' She leant forward, her usually saturnine face animated. 'This was baby with no brain – *Siis Hirni isch Hackfleisch* –'

'The grinded meat,' Weiss put in.

'Now he is doing these things, but with what?' Her own struggle to be understood echoed this incomprehensible happening.

Joyce could picture the young man: wet-chinned, butting his big head at a door, his features grosser than his father's, and in place of Weiss's thick moustache the charcoal smudge of male puberty.

Reiter was pedantic: 'We don't expect the doctors to support what we're trying to prove for one second; nor do we look for doctors who are Catholics; the evidence is the evidence and we will abide by it. But even getting the doctors to give me interviews, the hospitals to release the records, and, naturally, arranging for Erich

to have the necessary scans and examinations – this is taking the longest time, you see.

‘Then there is the relationship between the diocese and Rome. We are,’ he said with a smirk, ‘like any other very large organization, so, there is much paperwork. Once already, the Bishop here in Zürich has referred this matter, but the report has come back: there must be more tests, further confirmation.’

It was easy to understand Vreni Stauben’s motivation: better than memory – or formaldehyde – faith would be the ultimate preservative; an acknowledgement from the highest level of the beatification that every parent bestows on her child. As for Reiter, he was a functionary, and this was his equivalent of a doctor’s cure; Joyce well understood how such statistics secured funding and advanced careers. But Ueli Weiss and Marianne Kreutzer? It was difficult to *peg them as zealots*. Was there a murkier guilt that needed assuaging, some sin of dereliction that must be shriven? Or was it only that this was a middle-aged man with a business card, who had never done much business worth speaking of? Vreni Stauben had mentioned a car dealership in Berne that Weiss had inherited; however, in her very glancing remarks there was the suggestion that this was a going concern, for which he had done very little of the running.

All this clicked through Joyce’s mind with tight precision as she listened to Reiter. She was making the kind of assessments that had been integral to her work as a high-level administrator; an analysis of ways and means and motives that, since retirement, had seized up to become mere crankiness. Sitting on her Modernist throne, Joyce was empowered to make statements *ex cathedra*.

‘So’ – she put a stop to the Papal Chaplain – ‘because I don’t look as if I’m dying, you want – you want to believe – that I may’ve been subject to’ – she savoured the phrase – ‘a suspension of natural law.’

‘*Quoad modum*,’ Reiter said succinctly. ‘This is the third class: a

recovery from a fatal, progressive malady that is spontaneous, and that, even if it could be managed by medicine, would take a long time and a lot of resources. Yes, Joyce, we do believe this may have happened to you.’

Fac eas, Domine, de morte transire ad vitam . . . Allow them, O Lord, to cross from death into the life . . . Joyce laughed heartily again – and although the lay Catholics grimaced, she was pleased to see Reiter joining in her secular merriment. ‘And how, may I ask, did Frau Stauben’s daughter perform this, ah . . .’ She fluttered her fingers in allusion to the politically incorrect miracle. *Mors slopebit et natora, Cum resurget creatura, Judicanti res-pon-sura . . .* The awesome phrases wormed their way into her inner ear.

‘Here are two things for you,’ Reiter said. ‘First thing. You may not be familiar with what Catholics believe here; these intercessions can occur years later, called forth – provoked, if you prefer – by the prayers of the faithful. Second thing. On the evening that you met with Herr Weiss, Marianne Kreutzer and Father Grappelli . . . well, this little chapel by the Lindenhof, it is – it has become – entirely unofficially, of course – a lot like a shrine for Frau Stauben’s daughter. Most days’ – he looked to Weiss for confirmation and the otter head dipped – ‘they go to pray there.’

Joyce had a vision of the power ‘provoked’ by their prayers: a neon thunderbolt that shot along the dull Zürich boulevards. It zapped into the flat at 84 Gertrudstrasse, where Joyce sat with Dr Hohl, and, by snapping open her jaw, helped to stay the assister-of-suicide’s hand, before playing up and down her abdomen – crackling purple veins on the glassy skin of a van de Graaff generator – irradiating her diseased liver with the entirely free, and on demand, X-rays of faith.

They were all staring at her. Reiter had stopped speaking; Vreni Stauben was cradling the framed photograph of the dead girl, which she had retrieved from her own domestic shrine. Thinking back to her foolish confidences at the Kronenhalle, Joyce said, ‘I’m

not a fool, you know –' Weiss sucked air sharply, but there were limits to *Treu und Glauben* and she pressed on: 'This strikes me as a very smart . . . very political move on the part of the deity, given what Herr Weiss told me about Dr Hohl's organization, the city's government, the Catholic majority here in Zürich – and so forth.'

Reiter sat forward, gathering his skirts over his knees, an action at once sexless and coquettish. He pressed his slim white hands together and brought them up in front of his long expressive face. Joyce thought of Phillimore, who, with his flaxen fringe thatching farmer's features, was a *peasant* compared with this princeling of the Vatican.

'You are entirely astute, Joyce,' Reiter said. 'And, although there is nothing to prevent the Lord involving himself in the minutiae of local government, I concede that from outside the Church this would appear very . . . well, worldly.'

Joyce decided she was going to enjoy doing business with Monsignor Reiter – and business it was most definitely going to be. His English, of course, was *far too good* – especially for an Englishman. It made everything he said pitilessly clear: 'Should you decide to cooperate with our investigation, the medical examinations, any treatment you require, accommodation – also a *per diem*: all of these we would help you with.'

'I don't really object to Dr Hohl's activities at all,' Joyce shot back at him. 'Otherwise I wouldn't have gone to him. On the contrary, I think he and his organization are doing good work – giving people a real choice.'

Weiss's eyes were popping, and Vreni Stauben caught a sob in her fat cheeks, but Reiter was unperturbed. 'It isn't really a question of conviction, Mrs Beddoes,' he said judiciously. 'It's more a matter of finding common cause. Besides, the primary objective here is not to campaign against assisted suicide' – this phrase he couldn't forbear from grimacing over: bitter pips – 'but to investigate events

of an overpoweringly spiritual nature: the evidence of God working through humanity.'

'I understand that,' Joyce remarked succinctly, although she didn't believe for a second that Ueli Weiss's prayers to Vreni Stauben's dead daughter had cured her of cancer. This odd feeling – not of health but of a kind of competent nullity – was simply a mundane plateau covered with a dusty rug, on all sides of which the abyss still fell away, deep and dark and deadly. Vreni Stauben's wombless Birman came padding into the room and over to where Joyce sat. It looked at her with its *stupid vain* eyes.

Ueli Weiss began talking with his tone of slightly egregious, boyish competence. The necessary tests, he said, could take weeks – perhaps months. Even if Joyce was in a position to demonstrate that she had considerable – and liquid – assets, obtaining a *Niederlassungsbewilligung*, or type C residence permit, from the federal government might still prove impossible, given her condition. But he, Weiss, in conjunction with the diocese, had access to the best immigration lawyers; and there seemed to them to be a *prima facie* case for Joyce claiming refugee status.

'Refugee status?' Joyce goggled at Weiss, who today was sporting a well-cut flannel suit in a highly neutral shade of blue. 'What exactly am I seeking refuge from, the NHS?' The Swiss looked blank, so she elaborated, 'The medical care in England, I mean.'

'No, no.' Weiss remained in earnest. 'We are thinking that you are asking for the *Asylberechtigung* from Hohl, his people – the pressure they made to kill yourself.'

I was subject to no pressure or duress by anyone . . . 'But they have safeguards for this, a tape recording, a contract –'

'So, so, we know this, *natürlich* . . .' He went on, reassuring Joyce that there would be no fuss – that wasn't the way things were done in Zürich. It would be a case of back-door representations, informal interviews, the subtle influencing of politicians and jurists. There was a case to be made – of that much they were certain; the shifting

demographic of religious affiliation in the canton chimed with a gathering nationalism . . . *You are seeing our new kind guests. Black guests, brown guests.* How ironic, she thought, me and Isobel's Tamil friend. *Two of a kind.*

Joyce was surprised that Monsignor Reiter ceded all this suasion to the unpersuasive Weiss. Despite this, she had resolved to go along with them before he eventually finished speaking. She couldn't have said what her motivation was; certainly, it had nothing to do with their aims, while her own were inchoate. This wasn't, it occurred to Joyce, as they all stood and tramped down the dim corridor to dead Gertrud's *Zimmer*, to do with ends at all; but, rather, means: the filling out of forms would fill in otherwise featureless days. There would also be appointments to attend – this would be *comforting*, a small sort of *part-time job*. And then there was the prospect of her own flat. *I've got to get away from this bloody cat!*

Vreni Stauben, Ueli Weiss and even Marianne Kreutzer – they all knelt down, seemingly unselfconscious, in front of the shrine; bowing their heads before the schoolgirl's bibelots, hair ribbons and dag-tails of macramé. Reiter darted a sharp look at Joyce: a schoolmasterly prohibition on giggling or fidgeting. Then he began chanting, low and clear, in Latin, while the trio made the appropriate responses, '*Credo in Deum Patrem . . . Et in Jesum Christum . . . Credo in Spiritum Sanctum . . .*'

A flat of her own would involve Joyce in her newly adoptive city, allow her to become part of it – then she pulled herself up short. This was *ridiculous! I'm terminally ill! Quid sum miser tunc dicturus, Quem patronum togaturus, Cum vix justus sit securus? What then shall I say, wretch that I am? What advocate entreats to speak for me?* The righteous Swiss had Monsignor Reiter, his purple sash glowing in the gloomy bedroom, with its nightlights wavering in their faithful exhalations. Reiter had said the Church could not sanction Saint Gertrud's growing cult – yet here he was, tending its shoots.

If it hadn't been for the curiosity, awakened in Joyce by the cynical Marianne Kreutzer's incongruous piety, she might have headed back to her own house – but then it could never again be a home, not now; the final washing up had been done, and her underwear itemized for alms. Might have, even so – but then there was that dreadful fear of flying, and the insufferable burden that was Isobel. Might have – but then there was Switzerland itself, its reassuring orderliness, its stolid vitality.

Easter came and then went. Joyce attended the children's passion play that Vreni Stauben put on at St Anton's. It seemed no different to such productions in Middle England: the same halting declamations and belted-out song, the same painted faces and haphazard gowns. The narrative – which linked environmental concerns to the Resurrection – had innocent new flowers sprouting on *Gründonnerstag*, only for them to be scythed down on *Karfreitag*, as the Saviour was nailed up. Joyce found the play's spirituality as flabby as anything Anglicans might have originated.

She told herself she went out of simple loyalty; that the week she had stayed at Universitatstrasse had created a bond between her and Vreni Stauben, shared domesticity being more adhesive than any *mumbo-jumbo*, no matter how ancient or hallowed. The truth was that Joyce was lonely – achingly so.

The heft of the diocese had secured her a flat in a small block on Saatlenstrasse, in the suburb of Oerlikon, which lay beyond the wooded hump of the Zürichberg. With her refugee status under consideration and a temporary residence permit granted, Joyce was freed from the exposure of repeated interviews with Frau Mannlé, the Fremdenpolizei officer who held her dossier.

Her pension income continued to be deposited in her bank account; the running costs of the old family home were handled by direct debit. A small sum was also being discreetly paid into a Swiss bank account, so that for her Zürich rent and her nugatory expenses

Joyce could simply withdraw money from a cashpoint. Any questions of taxation might, an adviser at the lawyers' office told her, be postponed until her residency had been placed on a more permanent footing.

Joyce felt sorry for the solid, inter-war, Bournville semi, the tidy rooms growing mustier as spring quickened the world without: fluffing up the privet, greening the lawn, switching on the bulbs – white, then yellow, then red, violet and orange – in the brown beds. Yet this close dormancy seemed in equipoise with her new Oerlikon apartment.

She had welcomed the stripped-down state of the four small rooms. Light fittings, blinds, carpets, kitchen appliances – all had gone with the previous tenants; this was, Ueli Weiss had told her, the Swiss way. It meant that Joyce had to make several expeditions to the Sihl City shopping centre, where she had wandered the atriums and climbed the escalators, consulted catalogues and spoken with sales assistants. She didn't mind this, and such was the efficiency of the local service sector that the stuff was all delivered and installed within ten days.

By then, with characteristic competence, Joyce had completed her local orientation. She knew where to shop for groceries, where to buy the dockets that had to be attached to rubbish bags, and how to sort that rubbish so as to conform to the draconian recycling ordinances.

To begin with the neighbours in her three-storey block were, if not exactly friendly, pointedly welcoming. Herr Siemens, the stumpy, bearded man who lived in the flat on the other side of the landing, stopped to chat when they met on the stairs. Joyce guessed he was a computer programmer, and soon enough he confirmed this. He was middle aged, probably *obsessive*, yet altogether gentle and *decent*, she thought. In the evenings he played electronic music, and, although the beeps and oscillations were hardly raucous, Herr

Siemens came across punctiliously, every two or three days, to confirm that his neighbour still did not object.

It was the same with the Pfeiffers, who lived in the flat below. Their two children, Rolf and Astrid, were no noisier than any other under-fives Joyce had been exposed to – if anything, markedly less so – yet Frau Pfeiffer came up regularly to ask if they were disturbing Joyce. She was a jolly, sloppy, young woman, with uncorseted breasts hanging loose in her cardigan; but, however slatternly Frau Pfeiffer may have been, she was always perfectly correct: polite and distant. Her counterpart in Birmingham would, Joyce felt sure, have been tattooed, pierced and offhandedly abusive – for Oerlikon was a predominantly working-class area, convenient for the workers at the nearby industrial estate.

When Joyce had moved in, it was Frau Pfeiffer who told her about the local shops, and directed her to the Peter Tea Room, as a place where an Englishwoman might get a cup of her national beverage. The mannish hair-do that Joyce had had chemically induced was becoming unruly, and, once again, it was Frau Pfeiffer who recommended a salon. But that was as far as it went – no further intimacy was encouraged. She was not alone in this: Herr Siemens was the same, as was the landlord, Herr Frech, who collected the rent in person. All of them remained standing some way off, a people at once fleshily corporeal and nevertheless exiguous: *ein verschlossenes Volk* – a hidden-away people – as the Swiss said of themselves.

The language barrier didn't help, although Joyce felt little inclination to surmount it. Her old evening-class German carried her only so far into the impenetrable accent; it was almost impossible to feel out the syntax lying beneath the slushy Schweizerdeutsch. Besides, she feared that the lack of nuance she experienced conversing with these people in a collage of languages – a little English, *ein bisschen* German, sometimes a soupçon of French – would remain,

even if their meaning became as pellucid as the windows of their spick and span homes.

Joyce went for strolls along the railway line where allotment sheds comfortingly clustered, then followed the path that ran beside the River Glatt. Apart from the shallower pitch of the roofs on the boxy dwellings, and the precision of the spray-painted graffiti on the concrete bridges, these could have been dull promenades through the under-imagined outskirts of any small English city.

Or else Joyce turned the other way out of her block and went to the Peter, to sit in its cosy uglification of melamine tables and gingham curtains, watching the slow explosions of cigarette smoke from the ruined mouths of other elderly patrons. After this, telling herself – but for why? – that she ought to work off the *Apfelstrudel* and the squirry cream, Joyce would plunge uphill on the switchback trails that led to the top of the Zürichberg. Spring sunshine groped the evergloomy limbs of spruce and pine. The blackened trunks of their predecessors, done for by decay, lay tossed into gulleys. The toadstools were white warts on their flayed trunks, the atmosphere was rich with the odour of rotting bark.

Over the course of a month Joyce's walks grew longer and longer. It was difficult for her to deny to herself that this erect figure in a neat tweed suit and good walking shoes, who crunched over pebbles and skipped across puddles, was a very *sprightly* lady for her age. On the day she was due to go into town for the results of the medical examinations to which she had submitted, Joyce walked all the way to the top of the hill – feeling not the slightest shortness of breath – then over its thinning brow.

The spires of the Grossmünster and the Fraumünster stood down in the valley, stonily *lonesome pines*. The cloud lay down on top of the Uetliberg – a mauve-grey muff. She walked on along the ridge to the gates of a cemetery. It was only after noticing the words *Friedhof Fluntern* cut into the blocks of the wall that Joyce realized

the trim cinder path, disappearing down an avenue of silver birches, led to her own grave.

Judex ergo cum sedebit, Quidquid latet apparebit, Nil inultum remanebit. When therefore the Judge takes His seat, Whatever is hidden will reveal itself, Nothing will remain unavenged. Her mother had died before her father, clawed apart by the crab in those pinched years after the war. The tears were creamy on her father's synthetic face by the graveside. Joyce had been twelve, a bad age for a girl to lose her beloved mother – perhaps the worst. Later on she did not lack insight, understanding that this experience – being forced to mother her father and her younger brother – had helped to make of her a tyrant when it came to self-reliance and Best Emotional Practice.

Joyce had had high expectations of the interviews with the Papal Chaplain and Father Grappelli. She had hoped that even the lawyers engaged by the diocese to pursue her claim to *Asylberechtigung* – and the public relations consultant that they, in turn, had taken on to give currency to this politically sensitive case – would prove interesting interlocutors. The notion of a contemporary miracle was, she thought, so bizarre that anything connected with it would take on a diverting hue.

This was not so. Instead, shiny blue and black suits in the monotonous ambience of corporate offices. His subtle fencing upon their first meeting at Vreni Stauben's dusty apartment had, Joyce realized, been Monsignor Reiter's play for her – body and soul. Now he had her, she was subjected to a celibate's passionate indifference. In place of that delicious worldliness they had fleetingly enjoyed in each other, they sat either side of the Bishop's desk, surrounded by filing cabinets that could have belonged to any organization.

The long, thin prelate was coiled into a swivel-chair. His flared soutane and purple sash – which, in a domestic context, had struck Joyce as charged with exoticism – were here diminished: not-so-fancy

dress. The biretta sat on the blotter, the toy of God's executive. And so the Papal Chaplain examined her, his questions derived from a pre-printed sheet.

There were interviews alone with Reiter, and also ones with the Monsignor and Father Grappelli, who, it transpired, was to amend the first diocesan report on Gertrud Stauben so as to incorporate the evidence of Joyce's recovery – and recover she definitely had. The results of the exhaustive testing undertaken at the university's Kinderspital on Steinwiesstrasse had been conclusive: the tumour in Joyce's liver had radically contracted. Comparing her blood test results with the records obtained from Phillimore at the Mid-East, the medics – although not oncologists – could definitively establish that once more the body's chemical refinery was working at full capacity: tidying away glycogen, synthesizing vital plasma proteins and emulsifying lipids to produce crucial, digestion-aiding bile.

When he saw these data, Reiter allowed himself a rare quip: 'The liver is the body's saviour, no? After all, it is the one organ that can fully regenerate itself – be born again. Your liver, Joyce, well, it has risen from the dead.'

But Joyce was not wandering in the dewy garden of Gethsemane, clad all in white samite; she was trapped beside a filing cabinet as massive and grey as any boulder, looking at a calendar of the Dolomites.

Father Grappelli was preoccupied by one thing alone; had Joyce touched – or been touched by – either himself or Ueli Weiss on the evening they had all met for the first time? Joyce thought it *rather crass* that an omnipotent super-being should work through such clumsy agents and crude methods; touch, prayer – what were these? Surely, mere metaphysical sleight-of-hand combined with wishful thinking – no great marvel when compared to the blinding complexity of the largest organ in the human body, with its million-plus lobules, through which the life-blood percolated, via the very *fenestras*, into a thousand sinusoids.

The parish priest's English wasn't good enough for him to interrogate Joyce alone, so Reiter acted as interpreter. Again and again they anatomized the encounter outside the chapel beside the Lindenhof. Joyce remembered the open doors, the overgrown Christ child, Weiss's showy coat and edible hair – these were the things that had lodged in her memory. There had been verbal shuttlecocks flicked across the language barrier, but whether English stroke had followed through on to Swiss hand . . . well, the more they peered into the dim recency, the more opaque the run of play became: Joyce saw Weiss's suede gloves slapping on his open palm – had he also, perhaps, touched her arm?

Like a student confined to a library, Joyce found it impossible to concentrate, and it was visions of a sexual kind that came to her. She was surprised – although not immoderately. Whatever *people might assume*, she hadn't been wholly quiescent during her five years of widowhood; there had been one brief affair. Derry had been a carnal man, and even when ill-health had brought about the diminuendo of his own desire, he still desired hers. In life, the conversation of their bodies had been exclusive, yet open-ended; he did not seek to possess his wife from beyond the grave.

She hadn't been expecting it, but two years after Derry died she was ambushed by the leisurely urgency of reawakened lust. However, worse than an unfamiliar body, she thought, would be its revelation. Strange clothing discarded on a well-known chair, the alien tang and slack tone of a distorted musculature . . . Yet it wasn't these, but the very companionability of his caresses that had made her cease to want them. Why bother to get undressed when there was as much intimacy to be gained in front of the television? It was irrelevant whose the body had been – a widower's, of course, one of their old circle. She still saw him from time to time. There were no hard feelings; after all, there hadn't been any in the first place; and that, Joyce concluded, was the essence of desire – it was all hard feelings.

Now, here, with the two priests in the Bishop's office, the feelings were hard, hard as lust before the climacteric. Joyce sensed a hot flush rouging her face – *have they noticed?* Most disconcerting of all, it was Ueli Weiss who mounted this ambush; Weiss's body that she wanted to see, flayed of its bourgeois woollen skin; Weiss's unkempt moustache tickling . . . *my belly?* Healthy blush-blood jetted from Joyce's hepatic veins, through her inferior vena cava, into her heart, into her hot head, round and round. This – this had been one of the conversations the crab had scuttled her away from: the delirious gabble of arousal.

That afternoon Joyce left the diocesan office and, instead of taking the tram home, walked over the Zürichberg again. As she paid out her thread of orientation from the old town to Oerlikon, she thought on this: there had already been a small item in *Neue Züricher Zeitung* by a sympathetic journalist. Nothing showy – the Church was playing its hand close to its chest – still, enough to create some impetus. There was to be a meeting called by the Christian-Democratic Party in the canton. A follow-up editorial in the same newspaper had proposed another referendum on assisted suicide, singling out Dr Hohl's organization for especial censure – and, in particular, the move to offer clinical depressives their service.

And when Joyce reached the end of the reel, at Saatlenstrasse, there was the Minotaur: Isobel, bullish with booze, crashing up and down outside the apartment block.

Of course, it hadn't been the media references to 'the English woman who has cheated Doctor Death' that had sent Isobel bellowing and snorting towards Oerlikon, but Vreni Stauben, who, having had Joyce explain to her, perfectly matter-of-factly, that her daughter was an alcoholic, still insisted that it would not be *mütterlich* to so reject her only child.

Isobel kicked at the wheelie-bins in the front yard. She shouted,

'Mummy, what're you doin', Mum? Are you a fuckin' ghost, or what?'

At least the Tamil man – whose mouthful, Joyce had gathered, was Chandrashekra – wasn't with her this time. He had come on other occasions, and the way he loitered had seemed far more menacing than Isobel's acting up.

Since he wasn't in evidence – and her daughter was making still more noise than usual – Joyce let her come up to the flat for her handout. *The beast*, with greasy horns of hair on her spotty forehead, trampled from bedroom to living room. 'Very ni-ce, very ni-ce,' she snorted, laying hoofs on curtains and upholstery, her nasal vowels a bad impression of a Birmingham hausfrau.

Stupidly, Joyce offered her tea. Isobel laughed like a dirty drain: 'Tea? I don't want your fucking tea, Mummy.' She was staying with Chandra at some kind of refugee hostel; the wardens were 'cunts', but, so long as he smuggled her in late at night and she left early in the morning, she could get away with it.

'But what're you getting away with?' Joyce made herself some peppermint tea anyway, hating herself for her neurotic little sponge-dabs on the worktop; *old womanish*, fending off dirty disorder and dusty death with nothing but *habit*.

She sat on the sofa nursing the hot vessel. 'Why're you still here, Izzy? Look, if you go and get your things and meet me at the airport, I'll buy you a ticket home right away –'

'I'm not bloody going!' Isobel bellowed. 'I've told you that before, an' I'm specially not going now I know you really are the fucking saint you've always behaved like.'

'Sit down before you fall over, Isobel – and what do you mean by that?'

'I may not be able to read bloody German – but Chandra can; we saw the thing in the paper. Oh, Mum.' She fell to her knees and came snuffling across the carpet. 'What've you got yourself involved in – are you getting treatment from some quack?'

Sympathy, Joyce thought, didn't suit her daughter. To be on the receiving end of it was to feel *damp and mauled*. 'No,' she said firmly. 'I'm not getting treatment any more, Isobel, there isn't any. You know that – I'm terminally ill –'

'Terminally ill?' Isobel laughed bitterly. 'Have you looked in a mirror recently, Mummy, you look bloody better than I do!'

There was a deep pathos in this: the bland room, barely furnished – a show home for a second life; the bigger, younger woman, her face rubbed with alcohol and then scraped raw by distress, kneeling at the sharp knees of the older, trimmer woman, who would apply no salve.

However, this awareness came later, after Isobel had got her 200 francs, crashed off down the stairs, bashed through the front doors, then disappeared down the road in the direction of the tram stop, still bellowing. It came later, after Joyce had gone across the landing, then downstairs, to apologize haltingly to Herr Siemens and Frau Pfeiffer, both of whom had stared at her blankly, while denying that they had heard anything untoward.

This came later, when Joyce sat in the darkness, staring out at the spider webs that veiled the orange head of the street lamp below her window. *Quantus tremor est futurus, Quando judex est venturus, Cuncta stricte discussurus . . .* She couldn't pinpoint exactly when it had happened, but the abundantly rich and complex orchestration had drained away, while the polyphony had dwindled to a single, deep, dry voice that spoke to her alone, of a *dread*, when the *Judge* shall come, to *judge* all things *strictly*.

On Sunday mornings Joyce went into town by tram for the noon mass at St Anton's. She alighted at the Bahnhof Stadelhofen and walked the last kilometre, summoning herself for the ordeal. Many eyes surreptitiously tracked her each time she entered the church. She knew what they sought: the submissive self-quartering of a genuflection. It was not enough that she be seen to be saved by

their god; it was necessary that, like a sulky child, Joyce say 'thank you'.

The service was always well attended, and Father Grappelli, together with his deacon, made up for what they may have lacked in soulfulness with well-choreographed aplomb, moving from altar to pulpit and back again: slow-revolving dancers in white surplices. The congregation were dutiful under dull stained-glass windows; they sang louder than English Anglicans, but no more tunefully. The children fidgeted, although not much. Modern Jesus leant against his big cross above the altar, a bad Giacometti with a face like a pious turd. Joyce followed the order of service, telling herself that mouthing the responses and hymns was improving her Schweizerdeutsch accent by the Suzuki Method.

When Ueli Weiss and Marianne Kreutzer were alone, they sat near the front on the right, but when Weiss's son was with them they took the last pew, and sat by the aisle so that Erich could come and go as he pleased. Joyce assumed the young man had cerebral palsy – he certainly moved in the crabbed, spasmodic fashion of some CP victims she had seen.

When Joyce first encountered Weiss with Erich, a fortnight before, he had been pushing him on a swing in the playground next to the church. It was an incongruous sight: the child big enough to be the father to the man. Weiss hadn't bothered with an introduction, speaking of the forthcoming festival of *Sechseläuten*, when the old winter – in the form of a straw dummy stuffed with fireworks – would be dismissed by flames.

As they had chatted stiffly, the young man's white face plunged between them, again and again, ferociously concentrated on his controlled abandonment. Erich was better looking than his father. He had a beautiful mouth, such as it was impossible to credit Weiss's moustache with concealing; and the chocolate eyes were deeper, more profound. Was it fanciful to see in them an anguished

intelligence, which had been released by the dead girl's touch but remained trapped inside brain tissue petrified by anoxia?

While Father Grappelli intoned the eucharist, the manly boy ranged up and down the nave, in and out of the side chapels. When reverent men came up to assist with the communion, Erich exited into the churchyard; Joyce could hear him out there, groaning. Was it because of his status as a miraculous being that Erich was allowed such licence? Or was it only another aspect of the Swiss's peculiarly repressive liberalism, whereby the community permitted anything, if the individual could overcome his or her own massive internalized constraint?

Were it not for those accusatory looks, Joyce might have taken communion. The Lord's Prayer – this was the muzak of spirituality; and the sign of peace was a brusque handshake, a murmured '*Frieden ist mit dir*', then Grappelli and his deacon got the picnic ready on the already laid cloth. It was, she thought, no worse flummery than the Anglican rite, nevertheless she balked; bloodwine, fleshwafer, *Scottie's Liver Treats*.

This went on throughout Easter, all in a month of Sundays. There were no more convivial lunches at the Kronenhalle; after the service Joyce chatted with the priest for a short while, then made her way back to the tram stop. Not even Vreni Stauben seemed inclined to invite her to the Universitätstrasse apartment for coffee and cakes. As for Reiter – on whose companionship Joyce had pinned such high hopes – by the end of the month he was gone.

'It was only in the – *was ist beratend?*'

'Advisory.' Unusually, it was Marianne who made good Weiss's deficiency.

'Yes, so, it was only in the advisory capacity Monsignor Reiter was acting. The diocesan staff, they will now be making this second report. The Monsignor is a papal chaplain you know –'

'I know.'

'Good, so, he has returned to Rome.'

They were standing on the church steps, and Weiss spoke as if he regarded Reiter as a rival of some specialized kind, *Celibacy being* – this was Derry's fruity, lawyerly disdain – *only an extreme sexual perversion*.

It was a drear day, the cloud covering the top of the Uetliberg, the spires and cupolas of the old town brownish smudges on the near-distance. Marianne Kreutzer held Erich's hand cursorily, as if he were human rubbish and she were looking for a bin to drop him in. The young man moan-whistled; he was handsome, but the steady hand of consciousness was needed to draw finer features.

Weiss went over to talk to a man in a navy trench coat. 'That is one of Ueli's guild,' Marianne explained. 'They are preparing for the *Umzug* now.' When Joyce looked perplexed, she continued: 'It is part off the *Sechseläuten*, the men, you know, they are having the big gets-together, the big lunch, the big dinner. They tell these special jokes and things.' Marianne seemed *awfully bored*, and, observing the grey foreclosure of her handsome features, Joyce wondered, not for the first time, *why does she bother?*

'He will, I think' (Eyezink) 'ask you to go with him to the Opernhaus; there is a special concert.' This she said offhandedly, yet *this is what she wants. But why?* Stylized poses, Marianne and she as Sabine women, Ueli Weiss naked except for a crested helmet, his penis adamant below a moustache of pubic hair . . . *Ridiculous*. 'Und so, you will come to Baden with me, for the spa day? It is a good thing for us girls (Uzgurls) 'to be . . . *verhättscheln?*'

'Pampered.' Weiss had rejoined them. Was it Joyce's imagination, or were his chocolate eyes melting with a vision of this *verhättscheln?*

Marianne Kreutzer pulled up outside the Saatlenstrasse block the following morning in the compact Mercedes that looked like a travel iron. Joyce was surprised to see Marianne driving – she had

thought her one of life's more accomplished passengers. When they were pressing north along the neat crease of a dual carriageway, Joyce continued her reappraisal. From the way she managed the car alone, Joyce judged Marianne Kreutzer to be no mere ageing geisha, schooled in Catholic ritual and cultural pursuits, but a competent woman of this particular world: the trim farms, neat business parks and geometric plantations of conifers through which the spring sunlight strobed.

Marianne piloted the car with tight precision – and at speed. Light music mingled with car air freshener. She spoke little, yet when she caught Joyce's eye in the rear-view mirror, she smiled; not her usual constipated smirk but a grin that displayed tightly packed and beautifully maintained teeth, the white pipes of a cherished organ.

'So, yes, we are going for one night – you have the night things? Good, so, we are staying at Hotel Blume in the Kurgebiet – the healthy district. It is having its own hot spas like all these hotels, also very high space inside . . .' She lifted a leather-gloved hand from the steering wheel.

'An atrium?'

'That is it, an atrium. There we will be pampering our tummies after the treatments.' Again the smile. 'That is my treat to you.'

'No, no, really Marianne, I couldn't possibly –'

'Please. You will be making me cross if you refuse. Also, when I was running my *Gesell* – my company, I have done public relations for the hotel, so I have discounts.'

'You were in public relations?' To her own ears Joyce's remark sounded tinnily silly: tenth-rate conference-morning-coffee-break chit-chat.

'Yes, I was businesswoman for many years, working all the times, but I enjoy it.' The grin. 'Und, so, I never marry at that time. It did not bother me. I have the company workers – the employees, yes?'

'Yes, employees.'

'They are being children for me; and I have my faith, *natürlich*.'

The way Marianne referred to this 'faith' was as a spiritual utility: supernatural gas, to mingle with her own sophisticated musk, a perfume that battled with the car air freshener for olfactory supremacy.

The Mercedes had been ironing along in the slow lane; now, seeing a gap in the faster traffic to the left, Marianne pressed her expensively shod foot down on the accelerator, and the car shot into it, stopping up the conversation.

As they left the main road and drove through the outskirts of Baden, Joyce sat, barely registering the picturesque jumble of buildings in the narrow upper valley of the Limmat, or the ruined Stein Castle high on its crag. She was fixated on *I never married at that time*. Was this merely the imprecision of Marianne's English, or had she meant to imply that she and Weiss were now married? Their being lovers had always seemed to Joyce to be incompatible with their status as pillars of ugly St Anton's; yet at that first meeting – and this inconsequence Joyce could vividly recall – Weiss had definitely introduced Marianne as his 'partner'.

As Marianne Kreutzer expertly manoeuvred the Mercedes into a parking place, Joyce slid about in these ambiguities of word and flesh.

Joyce had a *Holy, holy, wholly* bad feeling in the hotel room; everything that should have been soft and inviting coldly rejected her. There were too many pillows on the bed: bleached teeth gnawing the taupe silk of the headboard. The mattress, when she drew back the coverlet, shone like a white-tiled floor. The unsettling reversal continued in the bathroom, where, as she arranged her toiletries, the real tiles sickeningly yielded beneath her heels.

Joyce felt her forehead – a useless examination when practitioner and patient were *the same one*. *Is it my teeth?* She had looked after them – almost all were her own; nevertheless, there was the

inevitable softening of the gums, the exposure of bony roots in the old mud of her mouth. *Not pretty.*

But no, a cursory probe with tongue and eye was enough to reassure *on that score*. Then she reeled back into the bedroom and bit down on the bed. Whatever had happened to her – whatever might happen – Joyce's teeth would, she knew, survive her flesh, dentine kernels popping against the perforated cylinder that revolved to grind her bones.

She and Isobel had scattered Derry's ashes into the Severn near Tewkesbury, where, for a couple of years, he had moored a stubby cabin cruiser – another thing father and daughter had shared, to Joyce's mild derision. His teeth had been intact. She saw them, perfectly clearly, as they fell gnashing into the grey puffs of his dust. Then they sank, and the dust had lain on the coffee-coloured bulge of the river's shallows, between yellow doilies of algae. Isobel had cried, but then *she always did*.

No, it wasn't her teeth; it was this room, with its heavy double shutters and oppressive atmosphere. They had checked in so early – and now they had the whole day ahead of them in this stuffed womb. A speedy reverse gestation: the rubbing away of hardened skin, the removal of adult hair, the tightening of slack flesh, until she and Marianne were thrust from the delivery room of the spa, twins identical in terry towelling, fresh and ready to have their little tummies *verhättscheln*.

It all reminded Joyce of the Widder, and those four strange days when she was – what? Reborn – resurrected? She didn't believe any of it, *not for a second*; all she knew was that she had come to hate hotels more than she feared the grave. She rose, checked herself in the mirror, picked up the key with its heavy-testicle fob from the liverish top of an armoire and left the room.

It was the revelation of Marianne Kreutzer's body that made Joyce anxious, more than the exposure of her own. She found it difficult

– no, *impossible* – to conceive of this elegant Swiss woman, childless and of a brittle age, being comfortable in her own skin – even if it was only under the eyes of an older, less beautiful woman.

This anxiety was misplaced; the spa at the Blume was a clinical unit rather than a leisure centre. There was to be no girlish disrobing beside troughs of carefully graded rocks, or preliminary chatting over peach tea and fashion magazines. Instead, they were interviewed by a nurse-alike in a starched white tunic, who sat behind a metal desk upon which lay blood-pressure equipment and a stethoscope.

She was a tough-looking blonde with no English, so Marianne translated, and Joyce declined *die Dickdarmberieselung, das Enthaarungsmittel, die Druckstrahlmassage* and especially *die Abblätterung*. In German these treatments sounded scarily invasive: a scouring out of her body, then the decortication of what little remained. Joyce settled instead for the basic package: a dunk in the hotel's own sulphur baths, followed by a brief laying on of trained hands.

'She is asking to me,' Marianne relayed, 'if you are having the heart conditions of any kinds?'

Joyce checked herself from saying 'only heartlessness'; it was a problematic sentiment to translate; besides which, it had meaning for herself alone.

She and Marianne separated. Joyce changed in a cubicle, and was then led down sloping white-tiled tunnels into the hot bowels of the hotel. Here she was submerged in the shit-tangy waters that bubbled and farted in a giant stone basin. The orderlies, in their plastic aprons, were unsmiling butchers and hustled her along: another body part to be hosed down and then wrapped. The masseuse – whose developed sense of her clients' modesty caused her to work on one portion of their bodies at a time – gripped Joyce's calves as if she were squeezing giant toothpaste tubes and exclaimed, '*Ach! So dick! Sie Händ vil Musklä!*' Joyce, startled from

her drowse, reared up, and the woman scattered confused English: 'Madam, so sorry, I am only that you have very physical, ja?'

At last the peach tea, the recliner, the terry towelling. Lying in soft moist splendour, 'very physical' was, Joyce considered, a perfectly apt description of how she felt. The *Kursaal* was spartan – white walls hung with black and white photographs of highly toned naked bodies, strip lighting rebounding from the chequer board of white and black floor tiles – yet to Joyce it all seemed suffused with a roseate glow. *Pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria tua. Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory.* Joyce hadn't thought she would ever again experience such a complete mingling of calm mind and easeful body.

When Marianne Kreutzer came in, her hair in a towel turban, a second wrapped beneath her arms, Joyce amazed herself. 'Oh, Marianne,' she gushed, 'this is heavenly! Thank you.' By way of acknowledgement, she unwound her hair, dropped her other towel and stood bare before Joyce's recliner.

What did I expect? The cruel scar left by the barbed bracelet of a Catholic sect? Or else fierce preservation – a body plumped, filled, implanted, and so engineered into artificial youth? Clothed, Marianne Kreutzer was so poised; yet, here it was; the sagging breasts and scrawny arms, the blue veins straggling through cheesy thighs and the pucker of cellulite on drooping buttocks.

'Come,' Marianne said, extending her left hand. *Had they always been there – the diamond solitaire engagement ring, and the dull circlet of a platinum wedding ring? Or had Marianne slipped them on as she slipped her towel off? 'Come, please, Joyce, show yourself to me also, please.'*

There was a full-length mirror by the door that was wide enough for the most brassy cream pot of a Zürichers, and Marianne led Joyce to this. Joyce didn't understand what this ritual was – yet grasped that full revelation was essential. Was it gratitude or pride

that made it so easy to abandon a lifetime's reserve and divest herself? She could not have said.

They stood there looking at themselves, until Marianne Kreutzer said, 'Ach, Joyce, you are too beautiful. Really, too beautiful. This, I am thinking, is the miracle.'

Benedictus

As Marianne had predicted, Ueli Weiss telephoned the following week to ask Joyce if she would accompany him to the special *Sechseläuten* concert at the Opernhaus. Joyce was inclined to turn him down; he had, she felt, so neglected her. However, he smoothed his dereliction over with pat English phrases: 'I've been rushed off my feet,' he said, but it was 'time we caught up'.

Employing equally formulaic language – 'It would be a pleasure', 'At what time?', 'I'll look forward to it' – Joyce imposed a week-to-view grid on the shapelessness of her current life. *For if not there, on that green coverlet, beneath that Alpine landscape, then when? My father's death at Ypres had surely, given the odds, been inevitable. Yet he survived. And my own, also – now there's nothing ahead of me to look away from . . . I've been shifted into some other . . . Everything is possible – but nothing . . . heard.*

Joyce replaced the handset and twitched the curtain to stare across Saatlenstrasse. There was a noticeboard on the pavement opposite; the Zürich Nord branch of Die Heilsarmee had placed details of their services and their youth club behind glass, together with pious homilies printed on cards cut exactly so and edged with cotton wool to make little clouds of godliness. The biggest cloud – which Joyce, having time to kill, had already read several times – proclaimed, *'Hilf mir zu erkennen, oh Gott, dass die Dunkelheit in Wirklichkeit der Schatten deiner liebevoll ausgestreckten Hand ist.'*

She wondered if Sandra – who stood beside the noticeboard, and whose sea-green, incorruptible eyes were levelled at Joyce's window – knew enough German to understand this; to grasp how, according to the North Zürich branch of the Salvation Army, God played

with insect humanity: they scuttled about in the spring sunlight, then He plunged them into abject terror by blocking out the sun with His august right hand.

Sandra still wore her ivory-white hair defiantly shoulder-length; while her black slacks and tan suede jacket suggested, to her former colleague and friend, that her retirement was being spent in coffee bars discussing airy abstractions. Sandra, whose lifetime of ministering to childflesh – in between *pushing out some of her own* – had bequeathed to her more practical support than she could *possibly make use of*. Sandra, who had none the less eschewed the assistance of her grown children – all competent medics themselves – and booked her own ticket, then driven herself to the airport and enjoyed the short flight despite the gravity of her mission. Sandra, who, with equal efficiency, had now taken a cab here, to Oerlikon.

To forestall the agitation of the buzzer, Joyce got her own jacket, snatched up her shopping bag and skipped down the rubber treads of the communal stairs. She tossed a pan-European 'Hi' to Astrid Pfeiffer, who was playing out on the landing with a lubriciously pink and naked doll. Joyce shopped daily – for freshness, and to give herself something to do; this encounter with Sandra would be like the others – with Miriam, with Iris, with Ruth – screened off by nylon mesh.

She isn't my friend. Sandra came across the patch of grass, smiling, her arms open for a hug. *She's only the ghost of an old acquaintance.* 'Joyce, what's the matter – Joyce!' she cried out, *far too loudly* for this quiet suburb, especially in the still mid-morning of a weekday.

'Joyce.' Sandra fell into step behind Joyce, as she hurried towards Beckmann's, the convenience store. 'I've come all this way to see you – to talk with you. Miriam told me –'

Joyce said nothing, silencing her with an angry glare. *Told you what? What? That she'd been given her marching orders, too?* Those other three had been bad daydreams, mercifully brief, easy to forget, for, although these women had sought her out here, where

Joyce lived, the reality was that *they're dead to me. We've said our goodbyes.* They might just as well have gone to Fluntern, strolled along the cinder path between the box hedges and paid their respects to the waiting niche. These corpses-in-waiting, stinking of the eau de toilette they applied for special journeys, were no more welcome than Isobel, stinking of booze. *They all want bloody handouts.*

Joyce's exorcisms of these domestic demons had been short and sharp: 'I have nothing to say to you'; 'I don't care what you've heard'; 'Leave me alone'. No pleases or entreaties; and, while a dispassionate observer – if one such can be imagined – might have expected her visitors to be more persistent, Joyce was so very vehement that, having once recoiled, none of them returned.

Sandra hung on a little longer. She shadowed Joyce to Beckmann's, then up and down the short aisles, examining swatches of kitchen cloths and jars of sauerkraut. Was Sandra, Joyce wondered, making the sort of three-way exchange comparisons – from Sterling to Euros to Swiss Francs – that were meat and bread to the bankers downtown? Or were these only *nervy displacements*?

Once Joyce had paid – exchanging pidgin weather chat with Frau Beckmann – Sandra came at her again, saying, 'Joyce, I'm your friend – Isobel called me as well. I – she – we're both so very worried about you.' Then she made the mistake of taking Joyce by the arm.

What did the passers-by see? And the lingerers across the road, outside the pensioners' drop-in centre? An old Englishwoman – crazy, with lank hair – shouting, while grabbing at that nice lady who lives on Saatlenstrasse, the one who moved in a few weeks ago and who, altogether understandably, *keeps herself to herself.*

The cotton wool cloud of Swiss opprobrium descended on Sandra as Joyce shrugged her off. 'I'm a doctor, Joyce,' she protested; 'I can help you.' But this was utterly counterproductive; a futile assertion that was her last. She dogged Joyce back to the apartment

block, and as they reached the door to the flats Joyce at last spoke: 'There's a taxi rank at Schwamendingenplatz, five minutes' walk that way. But if I were you I'd go the other way, along Tramstrasse to the depot. You can get a tram direct to the airport from there; it's far cheaper – and quicker.'

Then, having fulfilled her duty of care, Joyce went inside and closed the door firmly in the former paediatrician's wrinkled and wounded face.

At Sechseläutenplatz there were fat green buds on the upscratching limbs of the lindens along the quayside. The sun was a dull silver disc, while haze lay on the lake. The crowd, being Swiss, struggled to achieve festive incoherence, one bright, primary-coloured jacket slicking against its neighbour. They watched, muttering their appreciation, as the Reitergruppe – the mounted guard of the twenty-six guilds – undertook its ceremonial canter around the bonfire of the *Böögg.*

Joyce had set out from Oerlikon at lunch-time, intending only to take her usual walk, up along the snaking paths of the Zürichberg to the Fluntern Cemetery. But, on reaching the far side of the woods, she could see ant-people milling across the Quaibrücke, and the flash of the *Umzug's* penants, as the guildsmen, together with their floats, processed through the streets of the old town.

Gravity dragged her down the hill. With all this exercise Joyce's knees no longer creaked or groaned; she had bought some ski pants at Globus, and the foot straps transformed her legs into exo-tendons, giving extra snap to every stride, as Joyce marched down the Rämistrasse into town, barely breaking sweat.

She ate an apple fritter – hot and sugar-dusted – that she bought from a stall, then wandered among the guildsmen in their cod-medieval costumes. It was somehow predictable that Ueli Weiss would be in quartered hose, half of each leg yellow, half green. His yellow-green belly could be glimpsed between the sides of his

leather jerkin, from the slashed sleeves of which escaped puffs of yellow cotton.

Weiss stood, together with a handful of others similarly attired, at the base of the bonfire. These paperbag manufacturers and loss adjusters were fooling nobody with their embroidered banners and velveteen cowpat hats; burst blood vessels, liver-spotted hands, bifocals pinching pitted noses – *in the fifteenth century this lot would be long gone*. All apart from Weiss, who, as ever, managed to carry it off. His aquatic head bobbed in the surly-burly of civic gaiety, his manicured hands gripped the varnished haft of a fake halberd, and the moustache bristled with martial pride.

Spotting Joyce in the crowd, he saluted her with his ceremonial weapon. They would, she thought, *have sex*; there would be no breathy tenderness, only *fat slug push* and *stubble rasp*, but *so what?* The axe head of the halberd chopped at spring air, Weiss grinned, and then his brown eyes rounded: he had spotted someone in the crowd behind Joyce. She turned, expecting to see Marianne Kreutzer leading the miraculous Erich; instead, there was Isobel, being dragged away by the police. Their white-gloved hands were under her armpits, yanking up her short leather jacket. The pale slab of her back was exposed, and the near-legible notelet of her underwear label.

Joyce was disconcerted – she hadn't thought that Weiss knew what Isobel looked like. But then he resumed his historical mummery – posing legs apart, the halberd sloped – and Joyce realized that he'd made no connection between her and the drunken beggar; it was only the disruption that had drawn his attention.

One of the policemen was now pushing Isobel down by her head into the back seat of a Volvo estate, his white glove grabbing her scrappy dyed hair. Joyce searched the crowd for the Tamil boyfriend, but he was nowhere to be seen. However, here and there, idling among the children rabbiting on toffee apples and their *gassing* parents, were the town drunks; it was they who were the festival's

cosmopolitan element – some with brown or black faces reddened by wine – leavening the heavy Swiss-German homogeneity.

When Joyce looked back the police car had gone, and Marianne Kreutzer was standing in front of her, with Erich Weiss tethered by her arm. Marianne bestowed her cheek on Joyce – this had been the way of it since their spa break. To Joyce, giving her a peck felt less like further intimacy than being fended off by a shield of foundation.

'It is your date with Ueli this night,' Marianne said, while Erich spluttered, '*Sch-sch-schwess!*' A leakage of breath and spit that was *surely* parodic of the tongue he couldn't twist his own around. He was so smart, Erich, and so handsome. At St Anton's, Joyce had been taken by this mad fancy: that Erich was no more handicapped than anyone else, that his tics, spasms, barks and yelps had been carefully rehearsed and his spasms blocked out. The English apparel – toff's canary-tan corduroys, the waxed jacket, the brogues – these, she felt sure, were Ueli's doing, although could anyone be stylish and subnormal?

'He will take you for supper at Casa Ferlin after the concert,' Marianne said. By this alone Joyce understood that she was not the first other woman to be so entertained, and nor would she be the last. 'Be making sure to have baby cow meat – the veal?'

'The veal,' Joyce concurred.

'It was the dinners for the *Umzug* last night – Ueli was with his *Schneider Zunft* until late times. He was ve-ery drunk.' She laughed.

'*Schneider?*'

'The men who do the' – she mimed sewing – 'making of clothes.'

'Tailors? I had no idea Ueli was a tailor, I understood he owned a Mercedes dealership.'

Erich cavorted over to his father, who was chatting with his fellow *Schneiders*; from a hundred feet away their hungover hilarity was still salient: shoulders shook, banners quivered. Erich fitted in, Joyce thought; his country squire's costume was more mummery.

St Vitus was Erich's patron – he zigged and zagged and boogied beside his dad, who, together with his friends, seemed oblivious.

Marianne laughed again, sourly. 'Aha, no, you see this is only the guild for the ceremony – they are not real tailors.'

Any more than this was the medieval era, with an abbess installed in the abbey church, although, as the big bells of the Fraumünster began to two-tone toll 'Bing-bong, bing-bong, bing-bong', a local government official in fancy dress stepped forward and fiddled with a lighter, until the brand he held licked into life. The tots in baseball caps cried out, as worshipful of fire as anyone, ever. The brand sent flames hopping and skipping up the flanks of the pyre. It was, Joyce judged, a cleverly constructed and very Swiss pyre: a giant inverted fir cone of precisely stacked logs. The *Böögg* himself, far from being a grotesque Guy, was an elegant wooden bodyform that would have sat well in the Kunsthau. One of the vanquished Winter Spirit's arms was raised, and as the two women watched this was slit by fire and puffed yellow smoke.

'I hear nothing now from Father Grappelli,' Joyce said. 'Now Monsignor Reiter has returned to Rome, it's as if I . . . well, don't exist.' She fell silent, appalled by her own self-piteous tone. The *Böögg* was swaying in a fiery soutane, then the first of the fireworks packed into the effigy's shapely chest shot up through the linden boughs and arced over the river. 'I mean,' she resumed, 'what's happening with the political side of things – this business of a referendum? Father Grappelli seemed to think it would be easy to get the necessary signatures – fifty thousand, is it?'

Again the tightened face and the acerbic laugh; whatever creaminess Marianne Kreutzer had exuded in Baden had now gone off. 'You – you, well you are not understanding, Joyce. The referendums – no one is giving their votes. No one cares, you see. No one cares.'

More rockets launched from the burning manikin, as the crowd sighed with pleasure; a flight of pigeons lifted off from the *Badeanstalt* – the open-air swimming pool out in the river. The *Böögg* half

crumpled, embers bleeding from his cracked ribs. It was a creepily human motion – as if the figure were a suicidal monk, who had doused himself in petrol, then sparked a match.

Marianne Kreutzer urbanely lit a mentholated cigarette. 'I was, you know, twenty-one when the Federal Constitution was changed to make the women do the voting – to give *me* the vote. By then . . . well, I was making my money already three years. There are some cantons – Appenzell Innerrhoden – where there was no women voting until 1990.' She took a pull on the cigarette and exhaled; her expression said it had lost its minty savour. She dropped it and ground it out with a patent leather toe; then she picked up the butt and clicked to a steel bin, where she discarded it. By the time she returned to Joyce's side, the *Böögg* was no longer humanoid – was no longer anything, and the *Sechseläuten* was only another bonfire.

'The churches, the state, the banks also – in Switzerland, Joyce, to have any of these – these *Grossfirmen* . . .' She cast about, almost wildly, having reached the limits of her English.

'Do you mean institutions?'

'Exactly so. To have any of these big institutions pay any attention to a woman – an older woman – well, this is, I think, also the miracle.'

In the interval Joyce followed Ueli Weiss to the circle bar, where, on a shelf supported by two gold-painted plaster cherubs, two gin and tonics were waiting for them. He used the paper napkin with his surname written on it to blow his nose and wipe his moustache, then he began an explanation. This was not the usual venue for this festival concert: it was normally held in the Grosser Saal of the Tonhalle; but then nor was it the custom to have a visiting orchestra playing – in this case, the San Francisco Symphony.

Joyce only half-listened to his lecture on Zürich's musical politics; she sensed that Weiss was giving it not because he thought it of

interest to either of them but simply to fill time: a verbal intermezzo.

Other couples, the vast majority in late middle or old age, stood having their drinks. The wealthy and cultured Zürichers were dressed in their habitual navy blues and shades of black – with, here and there, a youngster in her fifties who dared brown. Jewels sparkled at plump wrists and plumper throats; these women's bodies were *display cushions*, scattered in this gilded cabinet.

The programme, thus far, had not entranced Joyce. Her thoughts had not been about music – or music itself resounding in her mind, note-for-thought, tone-for-feeling, the organic development of mood – but preoccupied with how very un-musiced she felt. The musicians had clodhopped on to the steeply raked stage, frumpy cellists and tubby percussionists, their evening dress worn as lovelessly as traffic wardens' uniforms. Had they been this apathetic when they left the City of Industry, or had the pall fallen on them only as their flight descended into Zürich?

And there, in the shape of the local conductor, had been the cliché Joyce dreaded: he was a Francophone Swiss from the hinterland of Geneva, who was yet more Bavarian than a puppet in wooden lederhosen strutting from underneath a clockface. Tick-tock, tick-tock – he gestured from the waist, and hearkening to his Taylorization of sound, the assembled lines of players sawed and hammered and blew. The opening chords of the Overture Egmont, which should have been a Romantic storm surge, were instead a mechanical pumping out of sound.

As the San Franciscans laboured to the Swiss beat, Joyce despaired. There was no dizzying ascent into the orbit of the crystalline chandelier that dripped from the ceiling of the auditorium; instead, she was sent truffling between ankles, where she smelt the shit of toy poodles smeared on expensive shoes.

Back in Birmingham, back in time, on those rare occasions when she had thrust Derry before her to a concert – it wasn't that he was crass, or that he couldn't swing to a slower beat, only that he

preferred his Laphroaig to hand, and to be able to turn up the volume when Dexter blew hot and mean – Joyce, not liking herself for it, would involuntarily cast her eyes to one side, again and again, gauging his response to what they heard and then, sickeningly, adjusting her own.

After the piano had been brought on for the soloist – with some huffing and puffing – the second piece in the first half of the concert began. The San Franciscans obediently transported him through the choppy waters of the Allegro, if not *con brio*, then at least with dispatch; then the young man – who, Joyce didn't need the programme to tell her, was French from the tip of his ascetic nose to the ends of his lily-white fingers – geared himself down for the Largo of Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto.

His forearms and thighs appeared to stretch out from his forward-canted trunk. Still, no fiery embers fell from this *Böögg*: he might have been *typing* so far as Joyce was concerned. To her left, Ueli Weiss's thumb supported his smooth-shaven chin, while his manicured index finger probed the soft barbs on his upper lip. Frozen and tantalized, she watched the white half-moon of his nail trace the wing of his nostril.

At the interval Joyce had been desperate to pee; she rose but Ueli remained solidly seated, until, the applause pounding her ears, she was compelled to clamber over his knees.

In the second half the San Franciscans abandoned their factory and went wandering in the Alpenglow of Strauss's tone poem. Joyce was too tired to accompany them, as they humped their harps and drums into deceptively pillowy couloirs and across polished blue glaciers. Besides, there was a fat lady, not singing but shouting *Domini, Domini*, as a *Brummie slapper* might bawl at an unwanted child, her every ragged warble bracketed by the still louder cries of the bass baritone, Derry, who stood outside the Top Rank Bingo Hall at Five Ways, intoning mournfully, *Dom-i-ni, Osanna in excelsis*. She ran away from him and found herself beneath

the purple sky of Monsignor Reiter's soutane, with his pale face – *where it shouldn't be!* – the sun.

Either Ueli Weiss didn't deign to wake her, or he cared not that Joyce slept. She was roused by the deadening *réclamé* of the Zürichers, only to witness the spectacle of the mousy first violinist scuttling into a bouquet. As the clapping scattered, Ueli said invitingly, 'Und now, supper at Casa Ferlin.'

Joyce hadn't gone so far as to obtain a full fur, but the saleswoman at Weinberg's had persuaded her to buy a black leather coat with genuine mink at cuffs and collar. Her old-new coat was abandoned. Beneath the leather was a real dress, plum silk, cut on the bias; and beneath the dress there was an armature of more silk and wire, that, amazingly, provided her with a *not unbecoming décolletage*. The lank grey crop that the hairdresser in Oerlikon had treated with not much more than professional neglect – shampoo, set, trim, the hedging of old growth – was, at Marianne's instigation, borne across town to Schwartzkopf's on Urianastrasse, where it was artfully dyed, before having completely new topiary.

Joyce waited on the steps of the Opernhaus while the *Schneider* went to get his little clothes iron of a Mercedes. When he returned, and hustled round to open the door for her, Ueli Weiss gaped at Joyce – but was this because of the makeover, or the veil of night and the rouge of street lamps? He kept darting looks at her as he pressed the tarmac around the town to Stampfenbachstrasse. In the restaurant's vestibule Ueli uttered a small, animalistic grunt of appreciation when she disrobed; or perhaps, since there was a strong smell of pasta and *baby cow meat*, this was only coincidental.

Beside a slim golden pillar, with a tapestry-covered banquette scratching between her shoulder blades, Joyce scanned first the menu and then the room. The latter was nothing special, with its off-white walls, undistinguished oil paintings and fireplace stripped of paint in emulation of a rusticism that had never existed. Joyce might have wondered why Ueli Weiss's chosen women found such

an ambience seductive, were it not that she already knew that seduction – in her case as much as in theirs – was not an issue.

The discussion of menu selections, and then, when the entrées arrived, of the music they had just heard, was as much a formality as these events themselves. The ear-worm of Scoresby's semi-professional Requiem bored into Joyce as she bent to scallops caught in a chicory basket. *Benedictus qui venit in nomine Dom-i-ni*. The quiff-flicking in the Arts Centre canteen – did it all lead, ineluctably, to this? And had the others – who, she was sure, whether young or old, had been lacking in self-esteem, seeking the stiffest, and shortest-lived, acceptance – been as numb as she? Drained of melody, what remained of anyone's life? A narrative trajectory as straight and dull, as discordant and crowded, as the Mr. *Benedictus qui venit*.

Bread and wine were needed for a benediction. Joyce ordered tagliatelle, with an amatriciana sauce, and drank deep of the Gamarret, a *bloody red* that Weiss regally called for – first one bottle, then a second.

He talked, if at all, of his first wife and their damaged child. Her virtues, it seemed, were many – although they were lost in the retelling: a loyal wife, a doting mother, a superb homemaker – the very ideal of a hausfrau; lovely to gaze upon as well . . . The trauma of Erich's birth, the severity of his disability, these had been, well, there was no need for him to say this – the implication was as weightily present as he himself – but were it not for their faith . . .

Weiss had dealt with his own dish – some meatiness swimming in a *jus* – in double-quick time, and now his hands were free to flop in the orangey light flung down by the fake oil lamp on their table. They were hands, Joyce mused, that always seemed gloved – sheathed in their own tanned hide. She steeled herself, imagining what they would feel like flayed, then dug down between her buttocks and a mattress.

Joyce saw herself reflected in Ueli Weiss's brown eyes: the two tiny miracles of her birth and her resurrection. He said, 'She died of pancreatic cancer, you know.'

She hadn't. The waiter arrived, his hips epicene below his short white jacket, and asked if they would like cream with their coffee. Weiss declined, then said, 'Here in Switzerland we have the highest levels of pancreatic cancer – you are not knowing this, also?' His tone verged on the hectoring. 'It is the creams, the milk and the butter – the fats, you say, we are eating them all the times. We think, maybe, we are still up on the Alps, looking after the goats and the cows – like Heidi, you know?'

And this, she did know.

There could be no question of them going to the apartment that Ueli shared with Marianne in Seefeld – this was how Joyce thought of it, not, despite the evidence of the rings, as a marital home. She knew it was close to St Anton's, and, while they were at Baden together, Marianne had explained in some detail how she had renovated the top-floor flat where Ueli's parents had lived, bought a second flat in the adjoining building, then knocked through the walls to create a defiantly contemporary space.

Joyce placed Marianne in this chic penthouse as Ueli Weiss skimmed the rainy streets with the Mercedes. Marianne in black silk pyjamas on a black leather divan. Lobby music welled from concealed speakers while she turned the pages of a fashion magazine. Her abstraction – it was more integral to her than her faith.

As for Erich, it wasn't possible to place him in this rational environment; he must be in the basement, beside the roaring boiler, crouching in an outsized plastic sack, waiting to be put out with the rest of the rubbish.

Benedictus qui venit in nomine. Ueli had booked a room at the Widder, *Dom-i-ni, natürlich*. Either because they didn't care, or else because they were accustomed to his liaisons, the staff showed no

particular interest in them; *and yet, and yet . . .* surely this was the point at which somebody should've balked and made a pointed remark?

Blood. Or even, *DOOLB*, estate cars idling in the Mid-East car park, *URGENT BLOOD* on their flanks, their snouts yboold noses. Up in the treatment rooms, the operating theatres and the intensive-care wards there were plenty of bodies pulled back from the edge of the abyss; jolted with electricity and then pumped with factors 1 through 8. Were these rollings away of the stone any less mysterious than her own? She had witnessed them all her working life – and were the arisen any more grateful, any more content? Did they not subside, soon enough, into the dull mulch of ordinary existence, cursing their miraculously humdrum lives?

It was Karl – *her* bellboy – who showed them up and up, to a room in the converted attics of the old townhouse, although he made no indication of having recognized her, except for saying 'Good evening, madam' in English, as he ushered her in through the door.

Joyce had an impression of queered familiarity. Her previous room at the Widder, with its blond-wood mirrored cabinets, mirror-topped desk and coffee table, its riot of cut glass and urns of fresh-dying blooms, had been crushed to fit under the sloping roof. But she had no real time to take this in: Ueli switched off the lights and pushed her against the wall; one of his hands clutched her right breast, the other she felt coming up under the hem of her dress.

She did not mind the moustache that grew immediately on her top lip, nor the strange tongue that flexed in her mouth. A kiss – always a thrilling taste of the essence of another, from adolescence on: their sweetness, their sourness – the loneliness of the nery cave, lined with tombstones, where the hermit I lived. .

She did not mind the rush and fumble. She felt no sexual arousal, yet was excited by her own suppleness, as she backed and wove

between the furniture, absorbing his onslaught until they toppled on to the bed.

When, in the mêlée of snort and paw, Joyce cried 'Stop it, Ueli!', he did at once. She rose and bade him unzip her dress, which she saw no cause to damage.

While in the dark and delusive room she searched for a hanger, he, ruffled by his urges, pulled the black wave of his jacket over his amphibious head, then kicked out with his trousers.

She did not mind the way he yanked her underwear, nor the push-down of limbs, then the drag-up of covers. They thrashed about, and Joyce wondered, where are the aches and pains, the cramping of ageing muscles, and the tightening of tendons that, over the decades, had hobbled their love-making? This wanton coupling belonged to a time when she and Derry were newly married and had overcome their shyness, when they fitted together: parts of a single organism engaged in complex self-pleasuring. She remembered the dry greasiness of the condom as she had rolled it on to him, and the live-wiriness of his penis. *Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini!*

She did not mind when Ueli turned her over, nor when she felt him digging at and then into her. She did not mind the astringency of his cologne and the shellacking of his sweat, nor yet intermittent suffocation in the crisp Widder pillows; but she did mind, very much, when he stopped and, rearing up over her, began to describe upon her skin the botched geometry of his caresses.

She had gained her shaming night sight; flung from cabinet, to desk, to window, Joyce saw their mirror-images: the portly pink Swiss, his sleek hair mussed, babbling *love twaddle* to the cadaver coiled beneath him. She saw this, and she saw also that Marianne Kreutzer, who sat quietly on an upright chair by the door, had seen it, too. Then Joyce snapped: 'Don't fondle my bum, I'm seventy years old!'

After that he finished off brutally – three or four rams into her

and all of Ueli went blubbery. He slid away, then collapsed beside her, panting. *Osanna in excelsis!*

Later, when Joyce was sure Marianne had gone, she got up and, feeling Weiss's semen trickling out of her, went carefully into the bathroom, where she encountered the pathos of the hand towels.

Agnus Dei

At dawn on 14 July, Joyce Beddoes awoke in the small bedroom of her flat at 34 Saatlenstrasse, in the Zürich suburb of Oerlikon. She did not lie there tangled in dream shreds, or stare woozily at the pictures on the white walls. For her there was no confusion between sleep and wakefulness, and nor were there any pictures in the bedroom. The only representations in the flat at all were two postcards: one propped on the thermostat unit in the kitchenette, the other leaning against a jar that Joyce had intended for rice but never filled. The first was a banal Alpine scene of picturesque peaks reflected in a limpid lake; the second a reproduction of a painting by Trouget, the great contemporary master of figuration, whose acquaintance Joyce's daughter had laid claim to, despite the very glancing, bar-room nature of their association.

Getting up, going to the toilet, then dressing – these Joyce did automatically. In the kitchenette she made coffee and prepared a bowl of muesli with soya milk. If she noticed the Trouget postcard at all it was not because of what it depicted – the artist's usual subject matter and conceit, a bourgeois in a suit, distressingly upended – but only to recall buying it; and the other card, from a visit to the Kunsthaus weeks before, *because that's what you did, didn't you?*

She sat by the window eating her muesli and drinking her coffee. She looked down into the dull street, along which came a figure with the draught-animal plod of a woman bearing heavy shopping. *But bought from where at this time on a Sunday?*

The day smeared ahead, hot, murky and ill-defined. *Dona eis requiem. Grant them rest.* There was no one for Joyce to meet, no

place she had to go, or task she needed to complete. It was Sunday, *but what should I rest from?* She had stopped attending mass at St Anton's three months before – shortly after *Sechseläuten*. Since then Joyce had employed this, the most void of days, to fit in her household chores; but there were so few of these anyway that she soon found herself weeks in advance of her routine, with the Sundays to come purged of any structure at all. She discovered herself slavishly dusting individual Venetian blind slats, morning and evening.

This morning, once cup, bowl and spoon had been washed up, there was only Monday's rubbish to be put in its Züri sacks, ready for when the refuse truck came truffling along Saatlenstrasse the following morning. Joyce squatted down before the swing-bin in the kitchen and sorted through her meagre detritus, reducing it still further. Tin cans, clear, brown and plastic bottles she put to one side. These she would bag separately and take out with her on her walk, stopping at a recycling centre to post them into colour-coded dump bins.

All this order – what an oppression it had become. The necessary formalities; the correct paperwork; the importance of social responsibility rather than personal impulse. While during her first few weeks in Zürich, Joyce had been relieved – finally, she was among others who understood the virtues of careful administration as well as she – now this was no longer the case. Instead, the go-round of each identical week, with its shopping for solo meals, its washing of a handful of clothes, its payment of the odd bill, seemed like the reprise of a terminal exercise: the winding up, and winding up once more, of a pitifully small estate.

The mounting warmth, the silence in the flat – punctuated only by the Pfeiffer children's stifled play – the odour of the place that, no matter how much she sprayed and aired, still smelt so much of her, and her alone – it was more than enough to make Joyce swoon; and she would have done, were it not for the stupid, blind vigour

of her body rising up from the kitchenette floor, forcing her into walking shoes, gathering the bag with the bottles and a second with her swimming costume and towel in it, then driving her out the door and shooing her down the stairs.

On her body went, frogmarching Joyce up the trails of the Zürichberg, while behind her the sleepy suburb slumbered. The previous Tuesday she had had a letter from Father Grappelli on headed diocesan paper. With tongue twice-tied – by formality, by estrangement – he had informed her that Monsignor Reiter would be returning from Rome in the next few days. The initial response of the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints had been encouraging, and in view of this the Bishop would like to assemble a second report. Would it be possible for Frau Beddoes to –?

But no, she had thought, *why should I?* Not only assist in the beatification of the goofy Stauben girl – *a ridiculous notion* – but also be compelled to speak English again, with all the messy intimacy that this would entail. Confined, for day after day, to the certitudes of *Grüezi, Guten Abend, Bitte, Danke*, and the naming of small needs, Joyce had become *ein verschlossenes Volk* of one; she almost believed that this was the limit of any possible communication, while beyond lay only this hillside: the dense curtains of yellow and grey-green needles, the stink of their sap stronger than creosote; the undergrowth parched and crackling, with midges swirling over the boggy hollows; and the grasshoppers pulsing like blood.

Her body wouldn't let Joyce stop for long at the gates of the Fluntern Cemetery, but shoved her on down the Zürichbergstrasse into town. It was still before nine, and under their wide eaves the deeply recessed windows of the houses were blank eyes on the world. What could they have seen anyway on this overcast morning? Only the flapping black silhouette, a ghost of the civic dead.

At the Bellevue Bridge, Joyce had to wait; the *Frauenbad* – the women's bathing area – wasn't open yet. A few other, younger women were lingering on the quayside by the *Stadverwaltung*,

and when the custodian came to open the turnstile they roused themselves and headed for the changing cubicles at a neat clip. The enclosed pool, which was fed with water from the lake, was clearly visible from the surrounding buildings, yet a few of the women bathed here in the nude. Joyce had never considered doing such a thing, but this morning her *stupid blind body* made the decision for her, by folding its clothing neatly, placing this mound on top of its shoes in the locker, then chucking on top of this both towel and swimming costume.

Joyce's body threw her into the water – an aggressive dive; then its arms dragged her, while its feet kicked her, up and down the length of the pool. Up and down, up and down – two lengths, four, then fourteen. It was untiring, this body of hers, and the gaggle of girls who had entered the water with her gave up long before Joyce, disengaging themselves from its chilly embrace to pace the concrete surround. Their breasts and buttocks and thighs were, Joyce judged, babyishly soft, and wobbled as they rubbed themselves ruddy. When Joyce's body hauled her out – no need for the ladder – she couldn't fail to notice the contrast between her own trim, adult form and these graceless maidens.

Perhaps drawn by this elderly lady's vitality, they seemed to want to talk to her; one mountainous Valkyrie came over and offered her some mineral water. However, Joyce's body had other ideas: it hustled her away, towelled her down, dressed her and then escorted her off the premises.

Once she had regained the top of the hill, Joyce was fully intending to take the trail that led off behind the Zürichberg Hotel, through a series of grassy clearings, and so, eventually, home. A hot dry wind had begun to stir the trees, and she knew what this was – the *Föhn*. The oppressive feeling she had had all morning, that the very sky was smothering her, was this down-draught of hot air from the mountains.

Far from being enervated by the *Föhn*, her wild body hearkened to its souging and pulled her the opposite way, on through the woods towards Rigiblick. Then, at the second waymarker, it forced her in the direction of Forch. From previous excursions Joyce knew that this was the beginning of a five-hour hike, and, with the temperature rising and no water with her, this would be at best uncomfortably debilitating; at worst it could prove *fatal*.

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona eis requiem. Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona eis requiem sempiternam. Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, grant them everlasting rest.

Joyce cavilled as sure feet took her along the trail. Combed by the *Föhn*, the myriad needles of spruce, fir and pine formed ominous figures in the undulating green carpet. She tried to ignore them and busy herself with memories of a convivial past, not lamb of God but leg of lamb, mint sauce, red wine. *A family Sunday lunch, Isobel – at her best age, ten or eleven, not rebellious yet: Derry vigorously carving the joint . . . the scent of rosemary, as if a Provençal hillside had been raised up out of the Birmingham suburbs.*

Her wayward body was having none of it; it got at Joyce's hurting head from behind, prodding her on through the forest: *Et-er-nal rest, et-er-nal rest*, the 4/4 beat of its footfalls a forced military march. On Joyce went, through the shuttered-up town of Forch, then back into the woods, and finally she arrived at the monument, the Forchdenkmal.

Joyce had visited this before and thought nothing of it, but on this fetid and dismal outing the iron blob on its wide plinth struck her as unspeakably disgusting, cream or excrement dolloped from the heavens. The legend *Die ewige Flamme* – 'The Eternal Flame' – had been inscribed in runic script on the stepped pyramid of the monument. There was also a desiccated wreath, and buried in its crispy core Joyce saw the white-out-of-red Swiss cross. But what war dead could this wreath possibly be honouring after five hundred years of democracy, peace and brotherly love?

Communio

Towards dusk Joyce returned to Saatlenstrasse. Her body showered itself, fed and watered itself, because that's what bodies did – but it wasn't remotely tired. The *Föhn*, a feverish zephyr, rubbed its sweaty flank against the apartment block, while inside the flats the static crackled.

When she moved in, Joyce bought a television and a radio at Sihl City. She'd never turned them on, preferring to listen to the orderly burr of the lives surrounding her. But this evening, with the temperature still rising, the Pfeiffer children were *running riot* up and down the communal stairs, and Joyce longed to shout them down. Eventually, young Frau Pfeiffer lost her temper and began screaming '*Bis ruhig! Bis ruhig!*' over and over again, until she sobbed up the scale, her hysteria in maddening counterpoint to the bleeps and peeps of Herr Siemens's electronic music.

As the dusk gathered, and a semblance of calm returned to the building, Joyce sorted through her papers and put them in order. It was necessary to write a long, lucid and fairly complex letter to the authorities, and another, shorter one to Isobel, who was being held on remand at Hindelbank, the women's prison outside Berne.

Joyce wished she had a computer – or at least a typewriter – with which to set down all these words: her fingers ached from the unfamiliar tension of holding a pen. Darkness seeped into the small living room as she scratched away at the thin sheets of paper; outside, a sparrow buffeted by the hot wind perched wonkily on the street lamp, then dropped to the ground.

If I stay here, then what? Joyce had experienced old age, and then

her final illness, as the creeping normalcy of a bad habit. You took your pills and turned up for your treatments, because that's what people did. And, although you might have toyed with the idea of *ending it all when things got too bad*, what you discovered was the day didn't seem to come when it was *bad enough*; because, after all, they hadn't been *that good* the day before.

Joyce had never thought of herself as a rebel, but when she realized that soon she would have no fortitude left with which to resist death's conventions, well, this was a more nauseating abbreviation than chemo or radio, and so she did rebel – she made the call. Now Switzerland itself, with all its orderliness, had become the very creeping normalcy she had feared. With each sifting of the green, the brown and the plastic bottles, with each purchase of the state-approved plastic bags, she felt increasingly that it was this *rubbish* that was participating in a real life-cycle, whereas she was only a human residuum.

As she wrote the letter to her daughter, Joyce tried to imagine what a Swiss women's prison might be like – maximally orderly, she assumed. Isobel's letters – she had sent three – were hardly informative, consisting as they did almost entirely of protracted rants against her mother's heartlessness, her selfishness – and so *bloody, fucking on*.

Joyce finished writing, sealed the letters and addressed them. She arranged the envelopes together with the cardboard folders containing her papers on the serviceable table. All this was done as night completely fell, which was just as well, because Joyce didn't want to switch on the lights – she couldn't switch on the lights.

Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis . . . Grant the dead eternal rest, O Lord, and may perpetual light shine on them . . . The naked walls and barely used furniture suggested a show flat, not a place of genuine habitation. *Isobel could make an installation out of this*, like Mr Vogel's abandoned office. *My heart as contrite as the dust that gathers on Vreni Stauben's ledges. Dust,*

Joyce thought, *foolish of me to not understand that it has a kind of peace*.

Joyce's panther-body lunged at her: it had never been still. It mauled her into the toilet, where the flashing tail-lights of a jet coming into land at the airport sparkled in the water of the commode. Then the panther worried her back into the living room. These, Joyce realized, were the perpetual lights: the television, always on stand-by, the limelight switch of the electric jug.

The Zwingli Singers were back, jostling Joyce with their hideous 1970s frocks – *chiffon sacks, really*. It had been stupid of her to believe that anything not truly believed in could – Well, it was best left unsaid, *the sheer silliness of it*, a magic trick, a sleight-of-mind deployed against the gaunt inexorability of Death. *Babbababbada-babba-daaa! What then shall I say, wretch that I am?* Isobel was thrashing about in her cell, the *graceless, clumsy, awkward, ungainly girl. She's a fat puppy, who gorged on Scottie's Liver Treats, just as I stuffed myself with hotel truffles and suicidal bonbons, then drank too deep of liqueur choccies*. The only palatable meal was a symbolic one: the *Leberknödel* of the Lord.

Joyce's body kept her up all night, a rambunctious teenager partying in the worn-out mind of an elderly woman. Towards dawn Trevor Howard came marching along Saatlenstrasse swinging his arms. A versatile leading man, he was playing Joyce's father, and Derry as well. He stood in the living room in his belted leather coat, waiting for morning to harden into day, while Joyce's body paced her up and down. Then, once office hours had arrived, he said to her: 'I tried to tell you, Beddoes, back at the Widder: leave death to the professionals.' There was no 'Joyce', no 'Jo', and certainly not the frank intimacy of 'Jo-Jo'; only the clipped 'Beddoes'.

Then, *A trumpet spreading a wondrous sound. He is offering now to the people with clinical depression his poison – nothing wrong in their body, only the head*. Joyce lifted the handset and dialled Dr Hohl's

number. He answered on the second ring, and their conversation was brief and to the point. Yes, he was aware, of course, of the activities of the diocese, and *natürlich* he understood the possible repercussions; however, so far as he was concerned a contract was – and remained – a contract, *Treu und Glauben*.

Ite missa est. Go, it is the dismissal.

Prometheus