

Traveller's Tales

Volume 5

short pieces

A.D. Harvey

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Haiku

An angel might have a skin like yours
but would she have such alarmed eyes?

Twin shaved armpits
twin tweezered teats
twin depilated thighs
One fringed twat

Each day I left sonnets
by your pillow
but you preferred ten-pound notes.

Three Wishes

Oliver had been living in London for some months but was still wondering how to find himself a girl.

The best looking ones always seemed to be at the far end of the platform of the Underground when the train came into the station. The window of his living room faced approximately in the direction of the West End, and his street's location on one of London's forgotten, bricked over hills enabled him to gaze out over an immense geometrical wasteland of chimneys, television aerials and roofs, each one of the latter conceivably sheltering Miss Perfect Ecstasy 2003 if only he knew how to meet her. He tried answering small ads in Time Out, even got a couple of responses, and progressed as far as an embarrassing rendezvous in a pub in Camden Town, from which he would have escaped via the lavatory window if only he had been able to open it. He tried going on political demos in support of postmen and nurses and troop withdrawals. For a couple of weeks, inspired by a chance collision of supermarket trollies, one of them propelled by a schoolgirl with cherry coloured Dr Martens and a deliciously lopsided grin, he explored the possibilities of various branches of Safeways and Sainsburys. He even tried going to dances at the University of London Union.

And then, one morning, after wandering for two or three depressed hours through some of the least known back streets of Shoreditch, he found himself standing beside a canal. It was overlooked by the endlessly repeating windows of a group of tower blocks but he knew that if he threw himself in amongst the rusting prams in the canal, no stunningly pretty girls' club swimming champion would dive from a ninth floor balcony to his rescue. He contemplated throwing himself in anyway.

'Don't do it,' said a voice. 'You can help me instead.'

The obvious response would have been: How did you know what I was thinking? But Oliver did not ask, because the voice which had spoken to him came directly from a puddle on the towpath. He looked closer. It wasn't exactly a puddle: one of the flagstones of the pathway was missing and the resulting gap was brimful of water: water so dark and opaque and unreflecting that it was as if he was peering into the depths of the ocean, as if the towpath was nothing more than duck boarding over the middle of the Atlantic. And as he stood staring down at the square of water, its surface plopped suddenly and the voice said:

'You see that round slightly bluish pebble by your foot?'

‘Yes,’ said Oliver. (We’ll skip giving a description about his astonishment, as it was beyond words.)

‘Pick it up.’

Oliver picked it up. Something told him it would be colossally heavy, in terrifying disproportion to its small size, but it turned out to be as light as polystyrene.

‘Now drop it in me.’

‘Why?’ asked Oliver.

‘Because if you do I’ll grant you three wishes.’

‘Three wishes?’

The square of water at his feet plopped impatiently.

‘Three wishes. They’ll really work, too.’

Oliver held out the pebble and let it drop. It disappeared into the depthless water without even a ripple, though just as Oliver thought to himself, why, there wasn’t even a ripple, the surface of the water plopped again and the voice – a surprisingly dry voice – said:

‘So what’s your first wish?’

‘I wish I was incredibly good-looking.’

‘You are’. The voice made it sound so simple. ‘And your second wish?’

‘I wish I had an incredibly beautiful girl friend.’

‘You’ll meet her later today. And the third wish?’

Oliver decided he would like to see if his first two wishes came true before he asked for anything else.

‘Can I save it for later?’

‘If you like. I’m usually here,’ said the voice: but suddenly there was no longer any water in the space between the flagstones, only a shadowy muddy hole that smelt of someone else’s fart.

Oliver looked around but there was nobody in sight: only the tower blocks rearing against the sun like a close up of tombstones.

On the way home Oliver had an idea, from glimpses of his reflection half-caught in shop windows, that there was something odd about his appearance. He noticed people looking at him too, especially teenage girls. As soon as he got home he inspected himself in his bathroom mirror. His features were the same, they were still his nose and his lips, but they had been subtly, re-arranged and reordered and there was now no doubt about it, remarkably handsome. His hair seemed blonder and wavier too, like in a hair-conditioner advert, and his clothes sat on him with a new stylishness.

More than somewhat bemused he stepped into the next room. The most heart-rendingly beautiful girl he had seen in his whole life was standing by the table, leafing through a copy of *Socialist Worker*.

‘Richard?’ she said, with a radiant expression of hope.

‘My name’s Oliver.’

The girl looked away for a moment, her delicious larkspur-coloured eyes filling suddenly with tears, but when he put his arms around her she dropped the copy of *Socialist Worker* and stuck an eel-like tongue in his mouth.

She was called Samantha. During the next few weeks he found himself permanently amazed at how lovely she was: her breathtaking profile on the pillow beside him when he woke in the morning, the More-Than-Miss-World body in the bathroom before breakfast, the incredible unselfconscious elegance with which she stood in a doorway or nibbled a Yorkie bar or scratched her elbow. When he went outside the flat with her he felt like Prince Camaralzaman in the *Arabian Nights* or King Arthur promenading with Guinevere through the streets of Camelot: people would come out of the shops to stare, and when the traffic halted for them at zebra crossings it would only start up again when they had passed out of sight round the next corner. On the other hand, shop assistants were often rude to them, to show they weren’t impressed, and men in pubs were always trying to pick fights with him.

Sometimes girls came up to Oliver with various pretexts to speak to him. As soon as they realised Samantha was with him they would withdraw, looking as if they had drunk tea with salt in it.

‘Who’s Richard?’ he asked her, on their fourth day together.

‘Oh, he was a boy I once knew,’ said Samantha, giving him a Barbie Doll smile. ‘When I was ten, would you believe it. We were going to get married, only we had to wait till we were sixteen. Then he moved with his parents to another town and I’ve never seen him since.’

The curious thing was that he didn’t really want her. Hormones called to hormones, but only at the fifth form biology text book level. It was like having it off with Jane Fonda. Sometimes he felt like telling her, ‘Look, the girl I had in mind isn’t like you at all, she’s got different hair, isn’t so tall and –’ but that wouldn’t have been true, Samantha was so exquisitely right that no other curve of throat or thigh, no other way of standing, no other colouring, could have been righter. It was simply that He didn’t know what it was. He began to lie awake at night, thinking about his third wish.

One thing he couldn’t understand about Samantha was where she had come from. She had told him about this Richard kid when she was ten, but there was definitely something odd about her just turning up in his living room, without friends, without antecedents, and with only the clothes she stood up in. Finally he asked her how it was that she had stepped so suddenly into his life.

‘You won’t believe this,’ she said, ‘I was really depressed and lonely, I mean it was so bad I even tried placing a small ad in *Time Out* – you know Ugly Duckling seeks Hans Christian Andersen to help her become Beautiful Swan –’

‘I saw that one.’

‘Hoping that Richard, – did you write in?’

‘No, I thought it a bit sappy.’

‘So apparently did everybody else. I got no replies at all. Then one day I was coming home from a demo against the reintroduction of the Poll Tax, all on my tod as usual, and I stopped at a little old fashioned cabbagy-smelling corner shop, and bought one of those cardboard cartons of Ribena, you know, the ones that come with a green plastic straw with an articulated bend and have a little hole covered in silver foil. This time, when I poked the straw into the hole there was nothing inside the carton, though it felt full, and when I took the straw out

and tried to squint into the hole, you won't believe this, but a voice inside, definitely from inside but coming from a long way away as if from infinity, offered me three wishes if I would drop the carton in the litter bin at the point in Holloway Road where the buildings towards Archway have the appearance of a skull.'

'Three wishes?'

'Three wishes. So I thought, golly, and wished to be incredibly beautiful because I thought that might make a difference to my life, and I wished for a smashing boyfriend.'

And there we both were.'

'Yes.' She smiled at him, her wonderful larkspur-coloured eyes laughing and wistful at one and the same time, and it was impossible to believe she had ever not been unbelievably pretty. 'There we both were.'

'And you held on to your third wish for later?'

'No. My third wish was ...' she hesitated. 'My first two wishes I thought were too personal, so I wanted to wish for something bigger than my own life that would help other people. So I wished for a revolution.'

'A revolution?' Oliver laughed. 'But there hasn't been the least sign of one.'

'Perhaps we'll have to wait a bit.'

That night, as so often, he awoke after a couple of hours' uneasy sleep and lay pondering the question of what he was going to do with his third wish. It was a question that would not go away. He wanted to sleep, but it nagged at him like an exposed nerve in a broken tooth. His Third Wish.

For a few moments he seemed to doze, and then he woke again with a start. In the distance, on the other side of the city, but quite distinctly, there was the sound of artillery fire. Every thirty seconds or so orange flashes lit up the drawn curtains. There was a machine gun firing some streets away and, once, a shout from the pavement just below their window and the sound of running foot-steps. He waited for the police sirens, perhaps the braying of ambulances, but there were none of the customary noises of law and order coming to the rescue. Suddenly there was a detonation that shook the whole house. He had an idea it came from the police station on the other side of the park.

Samantha continued to breathe regularly but shifted her position in her sleep so that her rump was against the palm of his hand.

‘Richard,’ she whispered, still asleep.

Ex

We surfed six seconds side by side
Upon a sea of semen
Till sucked asunder by a tide
Of desperations deep and wide
Pulled taut by gender's demon.

Though all night snuggling thigh to thigh
A wider void stretched between our minds
Than between the Boeings in the sky
Vast pinball tables wired to fly
That twinkled through the pulled-down blinds

Twelve months on I simply stutter
If by happenstance we meet
Now separated by a gutter
Where discarded sports pages flutter
Between no longer footsyng feet,
Last year's orgasming miaow a mutter
Between loud buses in the street.

In the Wilderness

Having just completed a laborious volume on the World Wars and brought to a conclusion a decade-long phase of my life when my capacity for sentiment dwelt claustrophobically on scar- and medal-encrusted battlefield heroes, unceasing seepage of blood, statistics of fatality, and killing machines, it seems an appropriate time to reflect on my own solitary confrontation with imminent death.

I was born too late to be swept into the boredom of National Service. I have only once fired a gun, and that was a .410, puniest of farmyard weapons. If I have ever been shot at, my unknown assailant used a silencer, and missed. I have heard bombs explode in various cities. The first, in Oxford during my college-scarf-wearing years, loosened some mortar and cracked a brick on Magdalen Bridge. Another, a decade and a half later, wrecked a shoe shop in Salerno: an incident in a gang war which, at its climax, involved machine-gunnings on the highway outside Salerno at least twice a week. I was generally tucked up in bed when these deeds of derring-do were enacted, merely reading about them next day in *Il Mattino*. It was however not far from Salerno that my one real-life adventure took place.

The coastline of southern Italy is a thousand miles of petrol stations and polluted beaches but inland the countryside is the most cineramically picturesque in Europe: its neglect by the English and German school teachers who flock annually to Tuscany simply demonstrates how the main object of holiday-makers is to go to the same place as everyone else. Immediately behind the coastal strip the mountains rise sternly and jaggedly in a complex dog-tooth pattern that stretches right across the peninsula. The Rockies or the Himalayas are vastly higher and huger, but compared to the Italian mountains they are shapeless and poorly arranged, with vast ill-proportioned screes and monotonous skylines that hide the most photogenic peaks. In Italy every mountain seems as if hand-picked for good looks, angled so as to be seen with maximum advantage, and given sufficient individuality to avoid a cumulative effect of repetition or monotony. The two great weaknesses of Italian upland countryside are the birds and the trees. There aren't any: or at least, there are a lot fewer than there might have been. Every Easter Saturday ten million red-blooded Italians form hunting parties and shoot every bird that presents itself. The hills rattle and reverberate all day with the musketry. Consequently even a sparrow is a rare sight in rural Italy. The natural timber has been destroyed too. There are picture-postcard tracts of ancient gnarled chestnut trees in the mountain valleys, but otherwise there is hardly a tree to be seen that is more than a dozen years old. Once they are thick enough to be rigid they are all cut down to make supports for the lemon trees cultivated on the coast. There

is of course plenty of barely penetrable undergrowth: few birds, but many lizards, and processions of dung-beetles tumbling in files downhill with their precious pellets of turd, and, once in a blue moon, a glimpse of a poisonous snake, worm-coloured but as thick as a thigh. There are crickets, obviously, and butterflies, and a curious type of grasshopper which, when it leaps to safety spreads turquoise butterfly wings as if metamorphosized by the gods in its moment of panic.

The agriculture of this mountain zone was once much more prosperous. The retreat of our species can be traced in successive phases: here two or three courses of squared stones just below an exposed crest, the remains of a hilltop cottage abandoned perhaps three centuries ago, there on a hillside the roofless walls of a farm abandoned a hundred years ago, or lower down a still-roofed but rusty-padlocked dwelling in a valley. Occasionally one would meet peasants herding goats, gloomy men very unlike the village extroverts who figure in accounts of partisan warfare in 1944. A turn in the path might confront one with a view of the Mediterranean, shining like a vast diamond cupped between distant mountainsides: the Tyrrhenian Sea across which the Greeks came to this land in their oared galleys two and a half millennia ago, across which the British and the Americans came in their drab armada four years before my birth: a clean sea, when viewed in the perspective of history and mountain distances, not the septic broth resembling beer which I lived beside down on the coast.

On 4 June 1985 I hitchhiked to Acerno, which I had picked out some time earlier as a good starting point for a mountain walk. Acerno was not untypical of the small towns of the interior of Campania. It was approached by a single winding rising road enlivened by precipitous curves and panoramas reminiscent of Salvator Rosa. By the time one arrived there it felt as if one had completed the final stretch of the pilgrim path to Shangri-La, though in reality one was still near the edge of the coastal plain, and beyond the town the rugged landscape continued for at least another eighty kilometres. Entering Acerno one passed a couple of new but already neglected-looking villas, and small featureless apartment blocks with shops on the ground floor that suggested one of the less successful parts of Mexico. The older section of the town had a cathedral and other grand buildings, as if the place had once been more important; but in southern Italy buildings took on the appearance of decadence and economic decline as soon as they had been put up. The earthquake of five years previously had in any case laid half the town in ruins. Numbers of men, all apparently brothers and all aged either about thirty-five or about sixty-five, loafed around the bars. Amongst the collapsing buildings, hollow façades and makeshift wooden props buttressing tottering walls, they looked like troops occupying a front-line town, with greasy dark lounge suits by way of uniforms. Naked tawny mountain tops encircled the place.

I left the town along the road to Calabritto. This was an almost impassably pot-holed band of tarmac running along one side of a deep gorge and doubling back along the other side, coming out on a crag almost opposite the main square of Acerno but separated from the town by a steep ravine. Immediately below the roadway was some ragged grass where goats were feeding: above were naked rock faces and stunted awkwardly-angled trees. The whole gorge was so narrow that I have never once seen it with the sun shining into it, but only in the gloomiest shadow. Nevertheless on that day there was a pleasant warm breeze and the company of fleecy white clouds in slow motion across the blue strip of sky visible above the enclosing cliffs.

A couple of kilometres from Acerno, shortly after skirting a farm with the inevitable barking dog, the road passed a queer watershed where two largish mountain torrents started from the ground within yards of each other and flowed in opposite directions, creating a pass into the next valley.

I left the Calabritto road and followed a footpath through this pass, calculating that it would eventually lead me to the neighbourhood of Olevano, another hill town. Acerno was now on my right hand, but on the other side of the hill. After walking through a chestnut grove I found myself on the side of a long valley about two kilometres wide. It was difficult to be sure what was at the bottom of the valley because of the fall of the land: the opposite side was a succession of attractively wooded crests, quivering in the noon sunlight. One hill top seemed to have been cleared for cultivation, with only three or four pine trees left standing. It reminded me of English downland.

On my side of the valley it was open terrain: grass and a few bushes. There was a footpath worn on the turf just below the skyline on the side facing across the valley, with a sheer drop a little lower down, and I walked along this path, supposing it must lead somewhere. Over the previous few months I had developed the habit of striking out in whatever direction seemed most picturesque: sooner or later one would always come to a townlet or a road leading somewhere or other. On this particular day the track continued very distinctly for some hundreds of metres and then disappeared. This was not unusual. The footpaths in the mountains were in many cases centuries old, but with the contraction of the rural population they might not be visited for years. Torrential rains and, at this altitude, prolonged frosts from December to February, caused frequent minor landslips. In the warm weather plants grew unchecked. It was quite standard for footpaths to disappear into the middle of a bush, and to resume two or three boulders away to left or right. I thought this was what was happening here, I had forgotten that goats, whose only urgent business is to eat, often double back on their own tracks.

I was casting around for the continuation of the footpath, stumbling amongst boulders and rocky outcrops with a loose top-soil thinly covered with herbage, when I slipped and fell, slithering some distance downhill on my bottom towards the sheer drop down into the valley. I was only brought to a halt by a thin tree appearing providentially between my legs, just as used to happen in those cowboy serials they used to show at Saturday Morning Pictures. The tree, a juniper, grew horizontally from the point where the slope down into the valley became a precipice. I was at the very lip of an overhanging drop of something like fifteen metres. Behind me a loose shale-y surface sloped up at forty-five degrees towards a flatter area about four metres beyond my reach. There were no handholds, only a few tufts of leafy weed, which came away in my hands as I tugged at them.

Digging in my fingers I managed to scramble almost back up to the footpath, slid again, and was saved by another providentially placed tree. I tried again, reached even higher, slipped again, and was stopped from shooting over the precipice by the first tree. The pullover which I had been carrying knotted by its sleeves round my neck fell away out of sight below.

It was a warm sunny day. Glossy white clouds drifted overhead with ostentatious indifference to my plight, as if flaunting their denial of the Pathetic Fallacy of the French Romantics, who liked to think nature was disposed to echo human moods. Perhaps, I thought, it was just that I lacked Victor Hugo's world significance. I was very hot and very thirsty. The few birds that had survived the Easter massacre were rejoicing in the thickets below. I could hear a stream murmuring between concealing trees on the valley floor. It sounded like the music of Paradise, taunting me as I became thirstier and thirstier. The grassy meadow which had reminded me of English downland two kilometres away on the other side of the valley now seemed like a vision of the Elysian Fields, concrete and almost within reach, yet separated from me by an uncrossable gulf. I imagined myself drinking from the fresh musical stream I could hear, stretching out luxuriously on the cool grassy slopes I could see, but all the while clinging to the dry dusty incline above the precipice with the sun beating down on my head. A dark glue-like scum began to form on my lips.

Be organized. I tried to think through every move as rationally as I could. Be calm. After my second attempt I gave up the idea of trying to regain the disappearing footpath above me. I had been saved by trees that were thin and insecurely rooted; I was heavy and my back-slidings towards the precipice had attained uncomfortable velocity. Statistical probability suggested that next time, even if I managed to grab a branch as I slipped I would nevertheless scoot out into the void with an uprooted tree in my hands. This time the cinematic model was *Tom and Jerry*, Tom the cat frantically treading the air

with a charred post or sawn-through pipe in his arms, hovering in space for a long moment only a yard from a third-floor ledge, before plummeting down like a runaway lift towards the open can of paint or vat of boiling pitch below. In my case, though, I lacked Tom's two-dimensional resilience. If I broke a leg in this wilderness, or otherwise injured myself in falling so that I could not move, I could count myself lucky if my bones were discovered while there was anything left about me sufficient for identification.

The alternative to scrambling upwards was to scramble downwards. To my left as I faced the Elysian Fields across the valley the cliff face had crumbled and sprouted shrubs and there seemed a possibility of sufficient toe and finger holds for a descent. I had been more than averagely cowardly about climbing trees as a boy, and I had no knowledge of mountaineering or rock-climbing techniques: but I did not have much choice. I managed to edge over towards the crumbled-away descent and found three or four easy holds. I succeeded finally in clambering down to within seven or eight metres of level ground. Then I ran out of finger-holds.

No doubt anyone with experience of mountaineering would have found further progress as easy as boarding a bus. For what seemed ages I considered my predicament. The sound of the stream hidden amongst the trees was nearer and louder and cooler and wetter. The sun continued to beat down on my head. I tried to decide whether to throw myself into a small spindly tree whose top was just below me, and count on it bending under my weight and lowering me gracefully to the ground, or whether to try and find more finger-holds in order to come down lower before jumping. Finally I made up my mind that it would be ridiculous to launch myself deliberately into space and then break a limb. I kept remembering my lack of daring when trying to climb trees as a child. I managed to descend a bit lower and was within two or three putative handgrips of a spot where I could stand when my feet slipped, and my hands were torn out of their holds. I fell: I remember only a sense of confusion as in any fall, a bang on my chest, surprise that I was still falling and that I bounced so easily.

I ended up in a huddle perhaps five or six metres below my last foothold, having rolled some way down the comparatively gentle slope at the foot of the cliff. My right foot looked as if it was somehow wearing my left shoe. It barely hurt but I supposed it was broken. For a moment I felt faint, as after even a much smaller fall, and lay waiting for the pain, but then I realized I was more or less all right. A circle of skin had been ripped off the tip of the big finger of my right hand as it had been torn away from the cliff face. I had great scratches on my hands and arms, on my left shoulder and over the area of my left kidney. My left knee and shin were bruised, and the front of my chest was beginning to swell: but nowhere was I bleeding. One of the scratches on my left arm has

resulted in a permanent scar three inches long but it was never an open wound. There was a single round splash of bright blood on the rock beside me but I have no idea where it came from.

My first priority was to drink. I tried to stand and was startled at how promptly my right leg gave way under me. I was only able to move by dragging myself forward with my hands and slithering downhill through the undergrowth on my bottom. Beside the stream I found a barbed-wire fence. After drinking I had to decide which way to go: back along the fence in the general direction I had come from, or further into the unknown. In the direction of the Acerno-Calabritto road the fence ran uphill. For all I knew it might take on an impossibly steep gradient a little beyond the nearest curtain of trees. In that direction, moreover, I knew that the first human settlement I reached would be the farm I had skirted just before I had come to the watershed and the pass between the valleys. That would have been an hour's trek for someone with the use of both legs. For me it would be four or five hours. But what really decided me was the recollection of the barking dog: either an Alsatian or one of those gigantic, cream-coloured, completely fearless Abruzzi shepherds. It was likely that the farm people were off somewhere in the hills or in some remote corner of their scattered property. The dog was bound to go for me, and on my hands and knees I would be unable either to defend myself or run away. At that stage I was not thinking of life or death. My foot barely hurt and I was not sure it was even broken, but I was certain of being bitten if I managed to crawl up to the farm. In the other direction the barbed-wire fence sloped downhill. There was probably another farm there where the ground became flatter and perhaps the farmer would see me before his dog did. In any case it would probably be much closer. I headed downhill.

At first I hopped from fence-post to fence-post. Then I found a stick large enough to support me and hopped with that, but it soon broke. I used several sticks during my one-legged anabasis: most of them snapped under my weight after three or four strides, often causing me to fall quite heavily. It was like a variation of Russian roulette, trying to guess which step forward would drop me flat on my face. Though I was in the middle of a wood – mainly I think beech, lime, sycamore, ash and elder – there was no *mature* timber. There were plenty of saplings long and thick enough to support me but because they were still green and springy they were too tough to break with my bare hands. There were also quantities of dead branches lying amongst the undergrowth but I never saw one much thicker than my thumb, and at that thickness the dried-out wood quickly gave way under my weight. If I had been carrying a pen-knife I could have made a serviceable crutch out of a sapling in ten minutes: but I wasn't carrying a knife.

Part of the time I hopped, with or without a stick, falling frequently. At first I also tried crawling on my hands and knees but this was too painful. I don't know how small children manage but my knees could hardly bear it, especially on a hard stony surface. My foot could give me minimal support when standing but not enough to enable me to take a step. It seemed mainly the exterior swelling that ached, but even if the damage was only a sprain the foot was clearly useless for the time being. The most comfortable means of progress left to me was to slide forward on my bottom, facing backwards, pulling with my hands and pushing with my left foot.

Once in every ten minutes I could hear the neck bells of goats in the distance and after trying to guess how close they were I filled my lungs and yelled for help. *Ai-u-t-o!* I supposed that was what Italians shouted. I had never actually heard one calling for help. It was strange how feeble my shouting sounded in the open. The breeze which gently turned up the pale undersides of the leaves on the surrounding trees seemed to swallow up my voice completely. I felt I would have been inaudible a hundred metres away. The eventual clink from a neck bell came back too late to be any kind of response.

The track beside the fence became a surface wide enough for a tractor and began to rise, leaving the barbed-wire fence behind. As I hopped and slithered up the incline, the place where I had fallen began to come into view. While clinging above the cliff face I had thought that the impassable area was no more than a few metres wide. I now saw that I had been at the edge of a vast overhanging bluff which extended down one side of the valley for a couple of kilometres, a human-dwarfing cliff that seemed to belong to a virgin primeval continent, gloomy and menacing even in the bright sunlight.

Little streams crossed the path every hundred yards or so and I could drink as much and as often as I wanted. Soon I was using the streams to punctuate my awkward progress: twenty yards of hopping and falling, eighty of slithering, then lap, slurp, splash. One might expect, if one had nothing else to sustain one but mountain streams, that at least they would taste like Perrier, but it was in fact the most undistinguished water I have ever drunk, certainly far below the standard of the landscape. It was cool and clean but I think deficient in lime and too rich in something like alum: at any rate remarkably flat and insipid. To supplement the water there were occasional small patches of wild strawberries, some as large as a fingernail, but all virtually without flavour. Sometimes I would find as many as twenty in one patch. I suppose they contained fructose but obviously not very much. They were all I was to have to eat for three days.

By the time night fell I was beginning to think I might have made a mistake in my choice of direction. The path continued uphill. I tried to sleep, since it

seemed inadvisable to move on a path which was too dark to see, but it was too cold for sleep. I would lie for twenty minutes, the flinty surface grinding into my hips and elbows, trying conscientiously to doze and then would have to continue my forward progress merely in order to stop shivering. I was at least a thousand feet above sea level and as it was still relatively early in the summer the drop in temperature at nightfall was considerable. It had not occurred to me, right after my fall, to scramble around looking for the pullover which had preceded me down the cliff.

About midnight – but really I had no idea what time precisely, for my pocket watch had stopped – I reached a point in the path where it rounded the side of a bluff and then began to descend. From this vantage point I expected to see lights from houses in the distance but there were none. I was now at least twelve hours away from the farm with the barking dog. I had no choice but to continue dragging myself forward along the lightless path.

It was a long night, and when dawn finally came it was still some hours before the sun rose high enough to provide warmth. I was supposed to be conducting an examination at the university from 9 a.m. onwards: it looked as if I was going to be late. I continued pulling myself along backwards with my hands, pushing with my one good foot, occasionally scrambling upright and hopping. When it became warmer I tried occasionally to doze, with my foot arranged where the sunlight was filtered through leaves, since the direct heat of the sun made it ache, but even with the wind in the trees as a lullaby I never quite managed to doze off. I tried once or twice to put my damaged foot on the ground, to test if the sprain was adjusting itself, but it would give way under me with a cautionary stab of pain. I was still not sure that it was broken, but the simple fact was I could not walk and I began to realize that if help was not fairly close I would not reach it before starvation brought me to a halt. The prospect of being killed, more or less, by a mere sprain was so demeaning as to seem all the more probable.

I was not especially worried by the idea of dying. I was thirty-eight. All the things I had wanted to do as a young man I had done, though none of them in the classic, consummate, triumphant way I had envisaged. Approximate achievement of ambition had brought me no sense of fulfilment but had made it clear that I would have felt little more content if I had achieved my programme in a more unambiguously perfect manner. I had a steady relationship with a girl I did not love enough. She would be sorrier to lose me than I would be to lose her, but I had long since given up hope of being really touched by anyone who wanted me, and did not think that death would cheat me of anything in the consuming passion line. I had a book, my fourth, nearing completion but knew that nobody would care enough about my ideas to add the finishing touches it

needed and see to its publication: but my previous books had been failures professionally and commercially and this last one, because the best and most original so far, would probably founder in even greater apathy. Once I was dead none of this would matter. It was no such bad idea to leave the game while still one and a half points ahead. Death now meant that I would not die agonizingly and protractedly of cancer, or achieve brief public fame and be assassinated in front of the television cameras, or have a lonely and physically degraded old age.

I had only two worries. People in my predicament traditionally found God in their worst moments of danger and isolation and I did not want this to happen to me. I had been to a school where the chaplain was a former mining engineer who had discovered God when lost and alone down a mineshaft. Just as he was giving up hope he had stumbled on the track of the underground railway used to move coal from the pit face to the bottom of the mineshaft. He had followed the rails to safety. This experience, he once claimed, had led to his taking Holy Orders. I had decided he was a charlatan some time before leaving this school. Now I found myself thinking not of the existence of God but of the humiliation of having to explain a conversion of this kind to my friends. As it turned out, God failed to manifest himself in my extremity. I was alone, totally alone, with the trees and the streams and the silent mountains but I never once felt the presence of God. However beautiful, however hostile and threatening to my mere existence, the woods and the mountains remained simply woods and mountains.

The second worry was my strength. Not that I was not strong enough, but that I was too strong. A diet of watery-tasting wild strawberries, cropped at the rate of two from this clump, five from that, three from the next one twenty minutes further on, was not going to sustain me indefinitely. The occasional ant or spider that crossed my path looked neither appetizing nor nourishing. Dragging myself along by my hands was heavy work, much more so than walking for all that it was so much slower. I knew that eventually I would be unable to drag myself any further: but I also calculated that from that point it would take a further six or seven days for me to die, and that I would be conscious almost till the end. I have never liked waiting and there was all the waiting I remembered in the prospect of that long, light-headed wait for death.

In other respects I was remarkably comfortable. My foot hurt only when the direct heat of the sun beat on the swelling. I also had a broken breast bone which did not subsequently show up in X-rays but which grated audibly when one pushed the midpoint of my chest. It continued to make a grating noise whenever I looked over my shoulder all through the ensuing summer but neither caused pain nor, now, interfered with the strenuous employment of my chest

muscles involved in hauling myself backwards along the path. There was no risk of thirst, and I felt no hunger. Confronted by this challenge to its survival, my body was beginning to close down every function, every operation, that was not absolutely indispensable. My stomach did not rumble emptily or signal hunger pains. The digestion of the last meal I had before my accident slowed down so that it was to be more than a week before I had another bowel movement. My penis dwindled and retreated and lost the power of erection, which only came back slowly after six weeks, and my scrotum shrivelled up. My mind contracted. Mentally I felt perfectly alert, and while resting between bouts of dragging myself forward I would poke twigs inquisitively at passing creepy-crawlies, but though I kept telling myself that I could be using all this enforced quiet and solitude to do some hard, coherent thinking about whatever political, philosophical, historical, critical or aesthetic problem I ought to be working out, it was as if the tap supplying the energy for abstract thought had been turned off. I was not in pain, I was not preoccupied, I was able to focus my external senses, but my body was economizing on my powers of abstract ratiocination. Once the sun had risen I was warm, cheerful, neither anxious nor bored. It was like a picnic that had gone on too long, not disagreeable in itself but with the question of how one is going to get home always at the back of one's mind.

Shortly before nightfall the path joined a serviceable dirt roadway, wide enough for two vehicles to edge past each other. It was the sort of dirt track that one expects to join up with a main road a couple of corners further on. Near the junction was a capsized corrugated iron barn and a field of lush coarse grass. The latter seemed to offer a more comfortable bed than the flinty track of the previous night but I found it difficult to arrange myself.

A couple of elder bushes covered with sprays of white blossom gave the place the atmosphere of a long-abandoned garden. The wooded slopes where I had descended sprawled into a rolling woodland extending in the direction taken by the dirt roadway. The field where I lay was at the edge of a valley. On the far margin were mountains rising to bare peaks one after the other, like the backs of oxen. These became the merest crouching shadows in the dark. It was soon bitterly cold again. This time I lacked the energy to continue crawling and hopping through the night and lay on my fragrant but knotty couch, dozing fitfully, all through the hours of darkness. Once or twice I saw the headlights of cars about four kilometres away, on the other side of the valley and at a slightly higher level, but with the intervening ridges it would probably have taken a two hour walk to reach the road: and the whole point was I couldn't walk. After some hours I noticed a curious white light in a clump of trees about three hundred metres away. It was curious because it had a much whiter radiance than ordinary house lights and somehow suggested some sort of pre-war industrial

lighting. I had not noticed any normal domestic lights in that direction earlier in the night. I would have to wait till daybreak before investigating in any case, as it would involve making a bee-line across broken terrain, away from the comparatively easy going of the dirt track. After a while however I realized that it was only the moon rising. This, incidentally, gives an idea of the contrast between my predicament at that moment and my customary style of life. I had gazed at the moon yearningly or speculatively hundreds of times in the past but only during the hours directly following the setting of the sun. I knew in theory that the moon sometimes rose later in the night but I had never seen this happen. I don't know why I hadn't observed it the previous night.

Dawn came eventually, and after another couple of hours a civilized degree of warmth returned. I still felt well, and there was still a plentiful supply of water, though now the insipid streams that trickled down between the trees were conducted under the roadway; but I felt much less capable of exertion, and made much slower progress. The road was descending, and in places I could slither through the undergrowth from one level down to where the road doubled back further down the hillside. Or perhaps that was what I had been doing the previous day: as my mental energy ran down, my perceptions made increasingly less impression on my memory, and the truth is that there were only a couple of occurrences which I am completely sure of pinning down to this, my third day in the wilderness.

The first occurrence was that, dragging myself round a bend, I saw a Fiat van parked further along the dirt track. On the far side of the track was a wooded descent, with a wooded ascent resuming right alongside the van: just a wooded hillside with a track running along its flank, and a van tidily parked on the track. I thought perhaps the driver was collecting mushrooms or looking for strayed goats. I shouted, but my voice seemed even more inadequate in the immense landscape than it had two days earlier. I dragged myself up to the van and found that it was rusting, the interior stripped. It had probably stood there for two or three years. I felt too lethargic to be disappointed: it proved at least that people *occasionally* came here.

The second occurrence was towards evening, when the road passed near a fair-sized mountain torrent just where it issued from a kind of miniature gorge. I crawled down to the water, on the principle that the larger the quantity of running water, the greater the likelihood of human settlement. Dragging myself along the bed of a stream was of course no more uncomfortable than dragging myself along a track, merely wetter. The gorge was small but spectacularly picturesque, with crags and tufts of vegetation arranged with almost Chinese elegance. I christened it the Caverns Measureless to Man, which indicates that as yet my mental activity had not completely

ceased, though perhaps already moving in unwonted directions: of course the gorge was not really a cavern, and not so very big, but it had an authentically Kublai Khan-like atmosphere. And as I was slithering across the wet rocks of the torrent I heard voices.

I called out. There were three men a little further down the stream but when I shouted they promptly moved away and I had only the merest glimpse of them through the undergrowth. A minute later I saw a car moving off amongst the trees. I struggled on, and reached the junction of two quite broad though still unmetalled dirt roads. The tracks were scored out of a grey, almost cement-like sandstone, with short tough grass growing in streaks down the middle. A fair amount of rubbish was strewn along the verges: the Italian conception of a rural beauty spot is as a place where one goes to tip one's domestic trash. I was lying beside the road, feeling by now very much like the unfortunate traveller in the story of the Good Samaritan, when the men I had seen came by in their car. There were actually four of them, dressed in expensive casual gear, evidently from the city of Naples or Salerno, They had probably been fishing, though their appearance in the middle of nowhere at 6 p.m. on a working day may have betokened something more nefarious than merely poaching trout. The car passed me quite slowly and when I called for help the passenger next to the driver shouted back through the open window *Aspett* – wait. I waited, not being able to do much else, but they did not reappear.

I passed the third night on an uncomfortable bed of uprooted weeds, wrapped in dirty polythene sheeting. It was not much warmer than the previous nights. Before composing myself for sleep I wrote a good-bye note to my girl. Apart from the obvious reflection that I would have preferred to have been curled up in bed with her, I had not given her a lot of thought, but the last thing I could do for her now was to tell her that at least I had been thinking about her at the end.

In the morning, as I was hopping forward with the last of my rotten sticks, a peasant in a battered pale-blue Fiat passed me going in the direction of the Caverns Measureless to Man. I waved, and just after he passed me he slowed down and looked back, as if wondering whether I wanted a lift. He evidently decided I was heading in the opposite direction – of course he could not see that I was injured – because a moment later he accelerated and disappeared round a bend. It occurred to me that one of the dirt roads that joined up just after the Caverns probably led to a short-cut across the mountains.

On that day I made only about five hundred metres' progress. I had to rest much more frequently, and for longer periods. I passed an abandoned farm, and shortly afterwards encountered half a dozen cows grazing in the roadway. Again

I had a moment of enervated hope: there would be a cow-herd. But there wasn't. The presence of the cows merely indicated that this was the kind of place people did *not* usually come to: otherwise it would have been unsafe to leave the cows unattended.

It crossed my mind that I could refresh myself by drinking directly from the largest cow's udders, but I knew nothing about milking cows, and thought that, even if I managed to manoeuvre myself under the beast, I would only manage to get shat on, and trodden on, and perhaps break a few more bones.

The dirt road ran parallel to, and about four metres from, a quite considerable river, about as broad as the Thames at Oxford but much faster, and with dense thickets growing down to the banks on either side. I think it must have been the Tusciano, and the streams I had drunk from previously must have flowed into it, for it had the same insipid taste. There was a constant swish and rumble from the river that made me think there was traffic passing only a little way ahead, but however much I strained my ears I could hear no sound of car horns or voices and I knew that if there was a road ahead it would be another two or three kilometres further on: and I was now simply too weak to drag myself that far.

I still felt well: simply incapable of effort. All the heroic narratives I had read of wounded soldiers dragging themselves along for days, in spite of gaping wounds and inconceivable pain, failed to inspire me with their example. Clearly I lacked the resilience and sheer animal will of the more memorable wounded heroes. Perhaps I didn't care enough about staying alive. Not life, not death, but the several days, probably disagreeable, that must elapse in my passage from one to the other, were the only subject of my foreboding. Having seen two cars already I thought I was as likely to be found where I was as two hundred metres further up the track, and I resolved to make myself comfortable, and at least be warm at night while I waited for rescue or release. A particularly lush roadside crop of cardboard and polythene bags suggested a good place to stop. I found an empty lemonade bottle. The river was close to the road but about a metre lower down and in my weakness I found this few feet of boulders and tree roots awkward to negotiate. One last effort would enable me at least to fill the bottle to supply me for some hours longer. I was rinsing this bottle, my feet up at road level, my face almost in the river, when a red pick-up truck passed me, heading in the direction of the Caverns Measureless to Man. The driver of course could not see me.

I noticed that the pick-up truck was loaded with bricks and rubble. It was probably the local builder on a fly-tipping expedition. I crawled back up to the road to wait for his return.

At about mid-day on 7 June the red pick-up came back down the dirt track.

And stopped.

And here I am.

One Night

At the publishers' party

she was a smiley blonde who knew his name
from an article in *The New Nerd*

On the bus back to his abode

she was a tiddly giggler
amused by elbow-jabs and alliteration

In his living room

she was a silhouette with taut tum
tilted in tight treads tut-tutting to his bookshelf

In his bed room

she was a pump-up rubber doll with shoulders smelling of bath gel
and a gerbil smelling of wee

In the shower next morning

she was two pink points pouting at his solar plexus
pronouncing and announcing: –
I've just (splash) finished with my boyfriend
and don't want to you know start (splash) straightaway
organizing my you know life around (splash) another
man

At the front door

she was a blonde back of a head with bangs
running away from saliva on a coffee cup
and sweat on the outside of three concertina'd condoms
beside the sheet-strewn altar where they had unmade love.

Numb Night in N16

Stoke Newington. Just after midnight, probably. Date: about a year before the date on the reverse side of the title page.

Nick was on his way home after a late-night session at Martin Walsh's. Adrian had been there, insisting that the man who had sold Martin that white powder should be charged under the Trade Descriptions Act. Novocain and cheap speed – two per cent of coke if you were lucky to give it flavour. They had done the knives too, first time in years. Martin even had the traditional fox-hunter's bugle for snorting up the acrid smoke from the match-head-sized piece of dope squeezed between red-hot kitchen knives. Straight through the back of your throat into the brain cells ordinary lagers couldn't reach.

Still seriously mind-warped he took a short-cut between the allotments and the backs of the neighbours' houses, along a narrow lane between back-yard gates and iron railings. He was just level with the Turkish Working Men's Caff's back windows – they were his next door neighbours – when a man stepped out in front of him, not as tall as he was, wiry-looking, dressed in denims and a red woolly ski hat, holding a knife in an awkward way that might denote esoteric expertise.

'Gimme your money, your wallet.' Nick went for his knife hand, tripped him with his left toe, knelt on his kidneys. It took half a second but it was one of those seconds that lasted twenty minutes. An soon as the man hit the ground he shot sideways like an eel but Nick had already shifted the aim of his descending knee and scored a groin's eye. Next the head-lock – after that it would be a question of whether simply to go through the mugger's pockets or do a Charles Bronson on him. Her. Nick held in his hand irrefutable evidence that his assailant was a woman.

'Just a friendly fight, officer,' Nick said, throwing the mugger from him with an expansive flourish and smiling perkily up at the two policemen with chequer boarded caps who had suddenly appeared three places forward from where the ring side seats should have been. He stood up, dusting his trousers. 'Just coming home from a stroll with the lady. A small spat became a pushing game. One of those, you know, wrestling matches.'

The girl was supposed to look as if she had an intense dislike of being interrupted by the police while, you know, wrestling. Instead she looked as if she had an intense dislike of men who thought it funny to discover that what

they were squeezing was, you know, her left tit. Fortunately the two looks were very similar.

‘Well, that’s warmed me up,’ she murmured in a choked voice, pulling off her woolly hat, releasing hair to her shoulders. ‘It’s cold isn’t it? Can we?’

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