

attentively serious, and because willing it to move, or being about to move it, was not the same as actually moving it. And when she did crook it finally, the action seemed to start in the finger itself, not in some part of her mind. When did it know to move, when did she know to move it? There was no catching herself out. It was either-or. There was no stitching, no seam, and yet she knew that behind the smooth continuous fabric was the real self - was it her soul? - which took the decision to cease pretending, and gave the final command.

These thoughts were as familiar to her, and as comforting, as the precise configuration of her knees, their matching but competing, symmetrical and reversible, look. A second thought always followed the first, one mystery bred another: was everyone else really as alive as she was? For example, did her sister really matter to herself, was she as valuable to herself as Briony was? Was being Cecilia just as vivid an affair as being Briony? Did her sister also have a real self concealed behind a breaking wave, and did she spend time thinking about it, with a finger held up to her face. Did everybody, including her father, Betty, Hardman? If the answer was yes, then the world, the social world, was unbearably complicated, with two billion voices, and everyone's claim on life as intense, and equal importance and everyone's claim on life as intense, and everyone thinking they were unique, when no one was. One could drown in irrelevance. But if the answer was no, then Briony was surrounded by machines, intelligent and pleasant enough on the outside, but lacking the bright and private *inside* feeling she had. This was sinister and lonely, as well as unlikely. For, though it offended her sense of order, she knew it was overwhelmingly probable that everyone else had thoughts like hers. She knew this, but only in a rather arid way; she didn't really feel it.

The rehearsals also offended her sense of order. The self-contained world she had drawn with clear and perfect lines had been defaced with the scribble of other minds, other needs; and time itself, so easily sectioned on paper into acts

and scenes, was even now dribbling uncontrollably surprises. haps she wouldn't get Jackson back until after lunch. Bing into his friend were arriving in the early evening, or even sooting and the performance was set for seven o'clock. And still there had been no proper rehearsal, and the twins could not act, or even speak, and Lola had stolen Briony's rightful role, and nothing could be managed, and it was hot, ludicrously hot. The girl squirmed in her oppression and stood. Dust from along the skirting board had dirtied her hands and the back of her dress. Away in her thoughts, she wiped her palms down her front as she went towards the window. The simplest way to have impressed Leon would have been to write him a story and put it in his hands herself, and watch as he read it. The title lettering, the illustrated cover, the pages bound - in that word alone she felt the attraction of the real, limited and controllable form she had left behind when she decided to write a play. A story was direct and simple, allowing nothing to come between herself and her reader - no intermediaries with their private ambitions or incompetence, no pressures of time, no limits on resources. In a story you only had to wish, you only had to write it down and you could have the world; in a play you had to make do with what was available: no horses, no village streets, no seaside. No curtain. It seemed so obvious now that it was too late: a story was a form of telepathy. By means of inking symbols onto a page, she was able to send thoughts and feelings from her mind to her reader's. It was a magical process, so commonplace that no one stopped to wonder at it. Reading a sentence and understanding it were the same thing; as with the crooking of a finger, nothing lay between them. There was no gap during which the symbols were unravelled. You saw the word *castle*, and it was there, seen from some distance, with woods in high summer spread before it, the air bluish and soft with smoke rising from the blacksmith's forge, and a cobbled road twisting away into the green shade...

She had arrived at one of the nursery's wide-open windows

lay before her some seconds before a scene that could easily have accompanied at least, a medieval castle. Some allises' land rose the Surrey Hills and paws of thick crested oaks, their greens y heat haze. Then, nearer, the estate's open today had a dry and savage look, roasting n, where isolated trees threw harsh stumpy the long grass was already stalked by the leonine yellow of high summer. Closer, within the boundaries of the balustrade, were the rose gardens and, nearer still, the Triton fountain and standing by the basin's retaining wall was her sister, and right before her was Robbie Turner. There was something rather formal about the way he stood, feet apart, head held back. A proposal of marriage. Briony would not have been surprised. She herself had written a tale in which a humble woodcutter saved a princess from drowning and ended by marrying her. What was presented here fitted well. Robbie Turner, only son of a humble cleaning lady and of no known father, Robbie who had been subsidised by Briony's father through school and university, had wanted to be a landscape gardener, and now wanted to take up medicine, had the boldness of ambition to ask for Cecilia's hand. It made perfect sense. Such leaps across boundaries were the stuff of daily romance.

What was less comprehensible, however, was how Robbie imperiously raised his hand now, as though issuing a command which Cecilia dared not disobey. It was extraordinary that she was unable to resist him. At his insistence she was removing her clothes, and at such speed. She was out of her blouse, now she had let her skirt drop to the ground and was stepping out of it, while he looked on impatiently, hands on hips. What strange power did he have over her. Blackmail? Threats? Briony raised two hands to her face and stepped back a little way from the window. She should shut her eyes, she thought, and spare herself the sight of her sister's shame.

But that was impossible, because there were further surprises. Cecilia, mercifully still in her underwear, was climbing into the pond, was standing waist deep in the water, was pinching her nose - and then she was gone. There was only Robbie, and the clothes on the gravel, and beyond, the silent park and the distant, blue hills.

The sequence was illogical - the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal. Such was Briony's last thought before she accepted that she did not understand, and that she must simply watch. Unseen, from two storeys up, with the benefit of unambiguous sunlight, she had privileged access across the years to adult behaviour, to rites and conventions she knew nothing about, as yet. Clearly, these were the kinds of things that happened. Even as her sister's head broke the surface - thank God! - Briony had her first, weak intimation that for her now it could no longer be fairy-tale castles and princesses, but the strangeness of the here and now, of what passed between people, the ordinary people that she knew, and what power one could have over the other, and how easy it was to get everything wrong, completely wrong. Cecilia had climbed out of the pond and was fixing her skirt, and with difficulty pulling her blouse on over her wet skin. She turned abruptly and picked up from the deep shade of the fountain's wall a vase of flowers Briony had not noticed before, and set off with it towards the house. No words were exchanged with Robbie, not a glance in his direction. He was now staring into the water, and then he too was striding away, no doubt satisfied, round the side of the house. Suddenly the scene was empty; the wet patch on the ground where Cecilia had got out of the pond was the only evidence that anything had happened at all.

Briony leaned back against a wall and stared unseemingly down the nursery's length. It was a temptation for her to be magical and dramatic, and to regard what she had witnessed as a tableau mounted for her alone, a special moral for her

wrapped in a mystery. But she knew very well that if she had not stood when she did, the scene would still have happened, for it was not about her at all. Only chance had brought her to the window. This was not a fairy tale, this was the real, the adult world in which frogs did not address princesses, and the only messages were the ones that people sent. It was also a temptation to run to Cecilia's room and demand an explanation. Briony resisted because she wanted to chase in solitude the faint thrill of possibility she had felt before, the elusive excitement at a prospect she was coming close to defining, at least emotionally. The definition would refine itself over the years. She was to concede that she may have attributed more deliberation than was feasible to her thirteen-year-old self. At the time there may have been no precise form of words; in fact, she may have experienced nothing more than impatience to begin writing again.

As she stood in the nursery waiting for her cousins' return she sensed she could write a scene like the one by the fountain and she could include a hidden observer like herself. She could imagine herself hurrying down now to her bedroom, to a clean block of lined paper and her marbled, Bakelite fountain pen. She could see the simple sentences, the accumulating telepathic symbols, unfurling at the nib's end. She could write the scene three times over, from three points of view; her excitement was in the prospect of freedom, of being delivered from the cumbrous struggle between good and bad, heroes and villains. None of these three was bad, nor were they particularly good. She need not judge. There did not have to be a moral. She need only show separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive. It wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you. And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value. That was the only moral a story need have.

Six decades later she would describe how at the age of thirteen she had written her way through a whole history of literature, beginning with stories derived from the European tradition of folk tales, through drama with simple moral intent, to arrive at an impartial psychological realism which she had discovered for herself, one special morning during a heat wave in 1935. She would be well aware of the extent of her self-mythologising, and she gave her account a self-mocking, or mock-heroic tone. Her fiction was known for its amorality, and like all authors pressed by a repeated question, she felt obliged to produce a story line, a plot of her development that contained the moment when she became recognisably herself. She knew that it was not correct to refer to her dramas in the plural, that her mockery distanced her from the earnest, reflective child, and that it was not the long-ago morning she was recalling so much as her subsequent accounts of it. It was possible that the contemplation of a crooked finger, the unbearable idea of other minds and the superiority of stories over plays were thoughts she had had on other days. She also knew that whatever actually happened drew its significance from her published work and would not have been remembered without it.

However, she could not betray herself completely; there could be no doubt that some kind of revelation occurred. When the young girl went back to the window and looked down, the damp patch on the gravel had evaporated. Now there was nothing left of the dumb show by the fountain beyond what survived in memory, in three separate and overlapping memories. The truth had become as ghostly as invention. She could begin now, setting it down as she had seen it, meeting the challenge by refusing to condemn her sister's shocking near-nakedness, in daylight, right by the house. Then the scene could be recast, through Cecilia's eyes, and then Robbie's. But now was not the time to begin. Briony's sense of obligation, as well as her instinct for order, were powerful; she must complete what she had initiated,

efficiency, as though preparing for some hazardous journey or military exploit, he accomplished the familiar little chores – located his keys, found a ten-shilling note inside his wallet, brushed his teeth, smelled his breath against a cupped hand, from the desk snatched up his letter and folded it into an envelope, loaded his cigarette case and checked his lighter. One last time, he braced himself in front of the mirror. He bared his gums, and turned to present his profile and looked across his shoulder at his image. Finally, he patted his pockets, then loped down the stairs, three at a time again, called a farewell to his mother, and stepped out onto the narrow brick path which led between the flower beds to a gate in the picket fence.

In the years to come he would often think back to this time, when he walked along the footpath that made a shortcut through a corner of the oak woods and joined the main drive where it curved towards the lake and the house. He was not late, and yet he found it difficult to slow his pace. Many immediate and other less proximal pleasures mingled in the richness of these minutes: the fading, reddish dusk, the warm, still air saturated with the scents of dried grasses and baked earth, his limbs loosened by the day's work in the gardens, his skin smooth from his bath, the feel of his shirt and of this, his only suit. The anticipation and dread he felt at seeing her was also a kind of sensual pleasure, and surrounding it, like an embrace, was a general elation – it might hurt, it was horribly inconvenient, no good might come of it, but he had found out for himself what it was to be in love, and it thrilled him. Other tributaries swelled his happiness; he still derived satisfaction from the thought of his first – the best in his year he was told. And now there was confirmation from Jack Tallis of his continuing support. A fresh adventure ahead, not an exile at all, he was suddenly certain. It was right and good that he should study medicine. He could not have explained his optimism – he was happy and therefore bound to succeed.

One word contained everything he felt, and explained why he was to dwell on this moment later. Freedom. In his life as in his limbs. Long ago, before he had even heard of grammar schools, he was entered for an exam that led him to one. Cambridge, much as he enjoyed it, was the choice of his ambitious headmaster. Even his subject was effectively chosen for him by a charismatic teacher. Now, finally, with the exercise of will, his adult life had begun. There was a story he was plotting with himself as the hero, and already its opening had caused a little shock among his friends. Landscape gardening was no more than a bohemian fantasy, as well as a lame ambition – so he had analysed it with the help of Freud – to replace or surpass his absent father. Schoolmastering – in fifteen years' time, Head of English, Mr R. Turner, MA Cantab – was not in the story either, nor was teaching at a university. Despite his first, the study of English literature seemed in retrospect an absorbing parlour game, and reading books and having opinions about them, the desirable adjunct to a civilised existence. But it was not the core, whatever Dr Leavis said in his lectures. It was not the necessary priesthood, nor the most vital pursuit of an enquiring mind, nor the first and last defence against a barbarian horde, any more than the study of painting or music, history or science. At various talks in his final year Robbie had heard a psychoanalyst, a Communist trade union official and a physicist each declare for his own field as passionately, as convincingly, as Leavis had for his own. Such claims were probably made for medicine, but for Robbie the matter was simpler and more personal: his practical nature and his frustrated scientific aspirations would find an outlet, he would have skills far more elaborate than the ones he had acquired in practical criticism, and above all he would have made his own decision. He would take lodgings in a strange town – and begin.

He had emerged from the trees and reached the point where the path joined the drive. The falling light magnified

the dusky expanse of the park, and the soft yellow glow at the windows on the far side of the lake made the house seem almost grand and beautiful. She was in there, perhaps in her bedroom, preparing for dinner – out of view, at the back of the building on the second floor. Facing over the fountain. He pushed away these vivid, daylight thoughts of her, not wanting to arrive feeling deranged. The hard soles of his shoes rapped loudly on the metal road like a giant clock, and he made himself think about time, about his great hoard, the luxury of an unspent fortune. He had never before felt so self-consciously young, nor experienced such appetite, such impatience for the story to begin. There were men at Cambridge who were mentally agile as teachers, and still played a decent game of tennis, still rowed, who were twenty years older than him. Twenty years at least in which to unfold his story at roughly this level of physical well-being – almost as long as he had already lived. Twenty years would sweep him forward to the futuristic date of 1955. What of importance would he know then that was obscure now? Might there be for him another thirty years beyond that time, to be lived out at some more thoughtful pace?

He thought of himself in 1962, at fifty, when he would be old, but not quite old enough to be useless, and of the weathered, knowing doctor he would be by then, with the secret stories, the tragedies and successes stacked behind him. Also stacked would be books by the thousand, for there would be a study, vast and gloomy, richly crammed with the trophies of a lifetime's travel and thought – rare rain-forest herbs, poisoned arrows, failed electrical inventions, soapstone figurines, shrunken skulls, aboriginal art. On the shelves, medical reference and meditations, certainly, but also the books that now filled the cubby hole in the bungalow attic – the eighteenth-century poetry that had almost persuaded him he should be a landscape gardener, his third-edition Jane Austen, his Eliot and Lawrence and Wilfred Owen, the complete set of Conrad, the priceless 1783 edition of Crabbe's

The Village, his Housman, the autographed copy of Auden's *The Dance of Death*. For this was the point, surely: he would be a better doctor for having read literature. What deep readings, of his modified sensibility might make of human suffering, of the self-destructive folly or sheer bad luck that drive men towards ill-health! Birth, death, and frailty in between. Rise and fall – this was the doctor's business, and it was literature's too. He was thinking of the nineteenth-century novel. Broad tolerance and the long view, an inconspicuously warm heart and cool judgment; his kind of doctor would be alive to the monstrous patterns of fate, and to the vain and comic denial of the inevitable; he would press the enfeebled pulse, hear the expiring breath, feel the fevered hand begin to cool and reflect, in the manner that only literature and religion teach, on the purity and nobility of mankind . . .

His footsteps quickened in the still summer evening to the rhythm of his exultant thoughts. Ahead of him, about a hundred yards away, was the bridge, and on it, he thought, picked out against the darkness of the road, was a white shape which seemed at first to be part of the pale stone of the parapet. Staring at it dissolved its outlines, but within a few paces it had taken on a vaguely human form. At this distance he was not able to tell whether it faced away or towards him. It was motionless and he assumed he was being watched. He tried for a second or two to entertain himself with the idea of a ghost, but he had no belief in the supernatural, not even in the supremely undemanding being that presided over the Norman church in the village. It was a child, he saw now, and therefore it must be Briony, in the white dress he had seen her wearing earlier in the day. He could see her clearly now and he raised his hand and called out to her, and said, 'It's me, Robbie,' but still she did not move.

As he approached it occurred to him that it might be preferable for his letter to precede him into the house. Otherwise he might have to pass it to Cecilia in company, watched perhaps by her mother who had been rather cool towards him since

he came down. Or he might be unable to give the letter to Cecilia at all because she would be keeping her distance. If Briony gave it to her, she would have time to read it and reflect in private. The few extra minutes might soften her.

'I was wondering if you'd do me a favour,' he said as he came up to her.

She nodded and waited.

'Will you run ahead and give this note to Cee?'

He put the envelope into her hand as he spoke, and she took it without a word.

'I'll be there in a few minutes,' he started to say, but she had already turned and was running across the bridge. He leaned back against the parapet and took out a cigarette as he watched her bobbing and receding form fade into the dusk. It was an awkward age in a girl, he thought contentedly. Twelve, or was it thirteen? He lost sight of her for a second or two, then saw her as she crossed the island, highlighted against the darker mass of trees. Then he lost her again, and it was only when she reappeared, on the far side of the second bridge, and was leaving the drive to take a shortcut across the grass that he stood suddenly, seized by horror and absolute certainty. An involuntary, wordless shout left him as he took a few hurried steps along the drive, faltered, ran on, then stopped again, knowing that pursuit was pointless. He could no longer see her as he cupped his hands around his mouth and bellowed Briony's name. That was pointless too. He stood there, straining his eyes to see her – as if that would help – and straining his memory too, desperate to believe that he was mistaken. But there was no mistake. The handwritten letter he had rested on the open copy of *Gray's Anatomy*, Splachnology section, page 1546, the vagina. The typed page, left by him near the typewriter, was the one he had taken and folded into the envelope. No need for Freudian smart-aleckry – the explanation was simple and mechanical – the innocuous letter was lying across figure 1236, with its bold spread and rakish crown of pubic hair, while his obscene draft was on the table,

within easy reach. He bellowed Briony's name again, though he knew she must be by the front entrance by now. Sure enough, within seconds, a distant rhombus of ochre light containing her outline widened, paused, then narrowed to nothing as she entered the house and the door was closed behind her.

A, 'The sister told me to come and have a little chat a.' Not knowing the word, she translated 'sister' as 'sister is very kind.' Then he cocked his head and added, 'But she always was. And is all going well for her? What does she do these days?'

There was such friendliness and charm in his eyes, such boyish eagerness to engage her, that she could only go along. 'She's a nurse too.'

'Of course. You told me before. Is she still happy? Did she get married to that man she loved so well? Do you know, I can't remember his name. I hope you'll forgive me. Since my injury my memory has been poor. But they tell me it will soon come back. What was his name?'

'Robbie. But ...'

'And they're married now and happy?'

'Er, I hope they will be soon.'

'I'm so happy for her.'

'You haven't told me your name.'

'Luc. Luc Comet. And yours?'

She hesitated. 'Tallis.'

'Tallis. That's very pretty.' The way he pronounced it, it was.

He looked away from her face and gazed at the ward, turning his head slowly, quietly amazed. Then he closed his eyes and began to ramble, speaking softly under his breath. Her vocabulary was not good enough to follow him easily. She caught, 'You count them slowly, in your hand, on your fingers ... my mother's scarf ... you choose the colour and you have to live with it.'

He fell silent for some minutes. His hand tightened its grip on hers. When he spoke again, his eyes were still closed.

'Do you want to know something odd? This is my first time in Paris.'

'Luc, you're in London. Soon we'll be sending you home.'

'They said that the people would be cold and unfriendly,

but the opposite is true. They're very kind. And you're very kind, coming to see me again.'

For a while she thought he might have fallen asleep. Sitting for the first time in hours, she felt her own fatigue gathering behind her eyes.

Then he was looking about him with that same slow turn of the head, and then he looked at her and said, 'Of course, you're the girl with the English accent.'

She said, 'Tell me what you did before the war? Where did you live? Can you remember?'

'Do you remember that Easter, when you came to Millau.' Feebly, he swung her hand from side to side as he spoke, as though to stir her memory, and his dark green eyes scanned her face in anticipation.

She thought it wasn't right to lead him on. 'I've never been to Millau ...'

'Do you remember the first time you came in our shop?'

She pulled her chair nearer the bed. His pale, oily face gleamed and bobbed in front of her eyes. 'Luc, I want you to listen to me.'

'I think it was my mother who served you. Or perhaps it was one of my sisters. I was working with my father on the ovens at the back. I heard your accent and came to take a look at you ...'

'I want to tell you where you are. You're not in Paris ...'

'Then you were back the next day, and this time I was there and you said ...'

'Soon you can sleep. I'll come and see you tomorrow, I promise.'

Luc raised his hand to his head and frowned. He said in a lower voice, 'I want to ask you a little favour, Tallis.'

'Of course.'

'These bandages are so tight. Will you loosen them for me a little?'

She stood and peered down at his head. The gauze bows were tied for easy release. As she gently pulled the ends

Anyway, that's what Anne says. It keeps running through my mind. Perhaps you know it.'

He hummed a few random notes. She was uncoiling the layer of gauze.

'No one knows where she got her gift from. The rest of our family is completely hopeless. When she plays her back is so straight. She never smiles till she reaches the end. That's beginning to feel better. I think it was Anne who served you that first time you came into the shop.'

She was not intending to remove the gauze, but as she loosened it, the heavy sterile towel beneath it slid away, taking a part of the bloodied dressing with it. The side of Luc's head was missing. The hair was shaved well back from the missing portion of skull. Below the jagged line of bone was a spongy crimson mess of brain, several inches across, reaching from the crown almost to the tip of his ear. She caught the towel before it slipped to the floor, and she held it while she waited for her nausea to pass. Only now did it occur to her what a foolish and unprofessional thing she had done. Luc sat quietly, waiting for her. She glanced down the ward. No one was paying attention. She replaced the sterile towel, fixed the gauze and retied the bows. When she sat down again, she found his hand, and tried to steady herself in its cold moist grip.

Luc was rambling again. 'I don't smoke. I promised my ration to Jeannot . . . Look, it's all over the table . . . under the flowers now . . . the rabbit can't hear you, stupid . . .' Then words came in a torrent, and she lost him. Later she caught a reference to a schoolmaster who was too strict, or perhaps it was an army officer. Finally he was quiet. She wiped his sweating face with a damp towel and waited.

When he opened his eyes, he resumed their conversation as though there had been no interlude.

'Yes.'

He paused to consider this. Then he said cautiously, raising a delicate matter, 'And our croissants?'

'The best in Millau.'

He smiled. When he spoke, there was a grating sound at the back of his throat which they both ignored.

'It's my father's special recipe. It all depends on the quality of butter.'

He was gazing at her in rapture. He brought his free hand to cover hers.

He said, 'You know that my mother is very fond of you.'

'Is she?'

'She talks about you all the time. She thinks we should be married in the summer.'

She held his gaze. She knew now why she had been sent. He was having difficulty swallowing, and drops of sweat were forming on his brow, along the edge of the dressing and along his upper lip. She wiped them away, and was about to reach the water for him, but he said,

'Do you love me?'

She hesitated. 'Yes.' No other reply was possible. Besides, for that moment, she did. He was a lovely boy who was a long way from his family and he was about to die.

She gave him some water. While she was wiping his face again he said, 'Have you ever been on the Catisse de Larzac?'

'No. I've never been there.'

But he did not offer to take her. Instead he turned his head away into the pillow, and soon he was murmuring his unintelligible scraps. His grip on her hand remained tight as though he were aware of her presence.

When he became lucid again, he turned his head towards her.

'You won't leave just yet.'

'Of course not. I'll stay with you.'
'Tallis ...'

Still smiling, he half closed his eyes. Suddenly, he jerked upright as if an electric current had been applied to his limbs. He was gazing at her in surprise, with his lips parted. Then he tipped forwards, and seemed to lunge at her. She jumped up from her chair to prevent him toppling to the floor. His hand still held hers, and his free arm was around her neck. His forehead was pressed into her shoulder, his cheek was against hers. She was afraid the sterile towel would slip from his head. She thought she could not support his weight or bear to see his wound again. The grating sound from deep in his throat resounded in her ear. Staggering, she eased him onto the bed and settled him back on the pillows.

'It's Briony,' she said, so only he would hear.

His eyes had a wide-open look of astonishment and his waxy skin gleamed in the electric light. She moved closer and put her lips to his ear. Behind her was a presence, and then a hand resting on her shoulder.

'It's not Tallis. You should call me Briony,' she whispered, as the hand reached over to touch hers, and loosened her fingers from the boy's.

'Stand up now, Nurse Tallis.'

Sister Drummond took her elbow and helped her to her feet. The sister's cheek patches were bright, and across the cheekbones the pink skin met the white in a precise straight line.

On the other side of the bed, a nurse drew the sheet over Luc Cornet's face.

Pursing her lips, the sister straightened Briony's collar. 'There's a good girl. Now go and wash the blood from your face. We don't want the other patients upset.'

She did as she was told and went to the lavatories and washed her face in cold water, and minutes later returned to her duties in the ward.

At four thirty in the morning the probationers were sent to their lodgings to sleep, and told to report back at eleven.

Briony walked with Fiona. Neither girl spoke, and when they linked arms it seemed they were resuming, after a lifetime of experience, their walk across Westminster Bridge. They could not have begun to describe their time in the wards, or how it had changed them. It was enough to be able to keep walking down the empty corridors behind the other girls.

When she had said her goodnights and entered her tiny room, Briony found a letter on the floor. The handwriting on the envelope was unfamiliar. One of the girls must have picked it up at the porter's lodge and pushed it under her door. Rather than open it straight away, she undressed and prepared herself for sleep. She sat on her bed in her nightdress with the letter in her lap and thought about the boy. The corner of sky in her window was already white. She could still hear his voice, the way he said Tallis, turning it into a girl's name. She imagined the unavailable future – the boulangerie in a narrow shady street swarming with skinny cats, piano music from an upstairs window, her giggling sisters-in-law teasing her about her accent, and Luc Cornet loving her in his eager way. She would have liked to cry for him, and for his family in Millau who would be waiting to hear news from him. But she couldn't feel a thing. She was empty. She sat for almost half an hour, in a daze, and then at last, exhausted but still not sleepy, she tied her hair back with the ribbon she always used, got into bed and opened the letter.

Dear Miss Tallis,

Thank you for sending us *Two Figures by a Fountain*, and please accept our apologies for this dilatory response. As you must know, it would be unusual for us to publish a complete novella by an unknown writer, or for that matter a well-established one. However, we did read with an eye to an extract we might take. Unfortunately we are not able to take any of it. I am returning the typescript under separate cover.

That said, we found ourselves (initially against our better

judgment, for there is much to do in this office) reading the whole with great interest. Though we cannot offer to publish any part of it, we thought you should know that in this quarter there are others as well as myself who would take an interest in what you might write in the future. We are not complacent about the average age of our contributors and are keen to publish promising young writers. We would like to see whatever you do, especially if you were to write a short story or two.

We found *Two Figures by a Fountain* arresting enough to read with dedicated attention. I do not say this lightly. We cast aside a great deal of material, some of it by writers of reputation. There are some good images – I liked 'the long grass stalked by the leonine yellow of high summer' – and you both capture a flow of thought, and represent it with subtle differences in order to make attempts at characterisation. Something unique and unexplained is caught. However, we wondered whether it owed a little too much to the techniques of Mrs Woolf. The crystalline present moment is of course a worthy subject in itself, especially for poetry; it allows a writer to show his gifts, delve into mysteries of perception, present a stylised version of thought processes, permit the vagaries and unpredictability of the private self to be explored and so on. Who can doubt the value of this experimentation? However, such writing can become precious when there is no sense of forward movement. Put the other way round, our attention would have been held even more effectively had there been an underlying pull of simple narrative. Development is required.

So, for example, the child at the window whose account we read first – her fundamental lack of grasp of the situation is nicely caught. So too is the resolve in her that follows, and the sense of initiation into grown-up mysteries. We catch this young girl at the dawn of her selfhood. One is intrigued by her resolve to abandon the fairy stories and home-made

folk tales and plays she has been writing (how much nicer if we had the flavour of one) but she may have thrown the baby of fictional technique out with the folk-tale water. For all the fine rhythms and nice observations, nothing much happens after a beginning that has such promise. A young man and woman by a fountain, who clearly have a great deal of unresolved feeling between them, tussle over a Ming vase and break it. (More than one of us here thought Ming rather too priceless to take outdoors? Wouldn't Sévres or Nymphenburg suit your purpose?) The woman goes fully dressed into the fountain to retrieve the pieces. Wouldn't it help you if the watching girl did not actually realise that the vase had broken? It would be all the more of a mystery to her that the woman submerges herself. So much might unfold from what you have – but you dedicate scores of pages to the quality of light and shade, and to random impressions. Then we have matters from the man's view, then the woman's – though we don't really learn much that is fresh. Just more about the look and feel of things, and some irrelevant memories. The man and woman part, leaving a damp patch on the ground which rapidly evaporates – and there we have reached the end. This static quality does not serve your evident talent well.

If this girl has so fully misunderstood or been so wholly baffled by the strange little scene that has unfolded before her, how might it affect the lives of the two adults? Might she come between them in some disastrous fashion? Or bring them closer, either by design or accident? Might she innocently expose them somehow, to the young woman's parents perhaps? They surely would not approve of a liaison between their eldest daughter and their charlady's son. Might the young couple come to use her as a messenger?

In other words, rather than dwell for quite so long on the perceptions of each of the three figures, would it not be possible to set them before us with greater economy, still keeping some of the vivid writing about light and stone and

Because his brother
made a
at

the years, my forensic memoir could
my fellow criminals were alive. You
and the dead. The Marshalls have been
since the late forties, defending their
most expensive ferocity. They could ruin
th ease from their current accounts. One
they had something to hide. Think, yes,
obvious suggestions have been made -
e, dissemble. Bring down the fogs of the
imagination! What are novelists for? Go just so far as is
necessary, set up camp inches beyond the reach, the fingertips
of the law. But no one knows these precise distances until a
judgment is handed down. To be safe, one would have to
be bland and obscure. I know I cannot publish until they
are dead. And as of this morning, I accept that will not be
until I am. No good, just one of them going. Even with Lord
Marshall's bone-shrunk mug on the obituary pages at last,
my cousin from the north would not tolerate an accusation
of criminal conspiracy.

There was a crime. But there were also the lovers. Lovers and
their happy ends have been on my mind all night long. As into
the sunset we sail. An unhappy inversion. It occurs to me that
I have not travelled so very far after all, since I wrote my little
play. Or rather, I've made a huge digression and doubled back
to my starting place. It is only in this last version that my lovers
end well, standing side by side on a South London pavement
as I walk away. All the preceding drafts were pitiless. But
now I can no longer think what purpose would be served
if, say, I tried to persuade my reader, by direct or indirect
means, that Robbie Turner died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes
on 1 June 1940, or that Cecilia was killed in September of the
same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground
station. That I never saw them in that year. That my walk
across London ended at the church on Clapham Common,
and that a cowardly Briony limped back to the hospital,

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(S)

THE END OF

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NOVEL.

unable to confront her recently bereaved sister. That the letters
the lovers wrote are in the archives of the War Museum.
How could that constitute an ending? What sense or hope
or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account?
Who would want to believe that they never met again, never
fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in
the service of the bleakest realism? I couldn't do it to them. I'm
too old, too frightened, too much in love with the shred of life I
have remaining. I face an incoming tide of forgetting, and then
oblivion. I no longer possess the courage of my pessimism.
When I am dead, and the Marshalls are dead, and the novel is
finally published, we will only exist as my inventions. Briony
will be as much of a fantasy as the lovers who shared a bed
in Balham and enraged their landlady. No one will care what
events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a
novel. I know there's always a certain kind of reader who will
be compelled to ask, But what really happened? The answer
is simple: the lovers survive and flourish. As long as there is
a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft, then my
spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive
to love.

The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can
a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power
of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no
entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled
with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her.
In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No
atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It
was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the
point. The attempt was all.

I've been standing at the window, feeling waves of tiredness
beat the remaining strength from my body. The floor seems to
be undulating beneath my feet. I've been watching the first
grey light bring into view the park and the bridges over the
vanished lake. And the long narrow driveway down which
they drove Robbie away, into the whiteness. I like to think

carried in from the village cricket pitch – again, the youthful Leon and his terrible friends from school. The legs had been kicked away and used to break the windows, and were lying outside, softly crumbling into the earth among the nettles and the incorruptible shards of glass.

Just as the swimming pool pavilion behind the stable block imitated features of the temple, so the temple was supposed to embody references to the original Adam house, though nobody in the Tallis family knew what they were. Perhaps it was the style of column, or the pediment, or the proportions of the windows. At different times, but most often at Christmas, when moods were expansive, family members strolling over the bridges promised to research the matter, but no one cared to set aside the time when the busy new year began. More than the dilapidation, it was this connection, this lost memory of the temple's grander relation, which gave the useless little building its sorry air. The temple was the orphan of a grand society lady, and now, with no one to care for it, no one to look up to, the child had grown old before its time, and let itself go. There was a tapering soot stain as high as a man on an outside wall where two tramps had once, outrageously, lit a bonfire to roast a carp that was not theirs. For a long time there had been a shrivelled boot lying exposed on grass kept trim by rabbits. But when Briony looked today, the boot had vanished, as everything would in the end. The idea that the temple, wearing its own black band, grieved for the burned-down mansion, that it yearned for a grand and invisible presence, bestowed a faintly religious ambience. Tragedy had rescued the temple from being entirely a fake.

It is hard to slash at nettles for long without a story imposing itself, and Briony was soon absorbed and grimly content, even though she appeared to the world like a girl in the grip of a terrible mood. She had found a slender hazel branch and stripped it clean. There was work to do, and she set about it. A tall nettle with a preening look, its head coyly drooping

Seven

⑥ THE TEMPLE

The island temple, built in the style of Nicholas Revett in the late 1780s, was intended as a point of interest, an eye-catching feature to enhance the pastoral ideal, and had of course no religious purpose at all. It was near enough to the water's edge, raised upon a projecting bank, to cast an interesting reflection in the lake, and from most perspectives the row of pillars and the pediment above them were charmingly half obscured by the elms and oaks that had grown up around. Closer to, the temple had a sorrier look: moisture rising through a damaged damp-course had caused chunks of stucco to fall away. Sometime in the late nineteenth century clumsy repairs were made with unpainted cement which had turned brown and gave the building a mottled, diseased appearance. Elsewhere, the exposed laths, themselves rotting away, showed through like the ribs of a starving animal. The double doors that opened onto a circular chamber with a domed roof, had long ago been removed, and the stone floor was thickly covered in leaves and leaf mould and the droppings of various birds and animals that wandered in and out. All the panes were gone from the pretty, Georgian windows, smashed by Leon and his friends in the late twenties. The tall niches that had once contained statuary were empty but for the filthy ruins of spider webs. The only furniture was a bench