Wider Reading List Extracts

***A God in Ruins***

***30th March, 1944***

**The Last Flight**

**Naseby**

He walked as far as the hedge that signalled the end of the airfield.

The beating of the bounds. The men referred to it as his ‘daily constitutional’ and fretted when he didn’t take it. They were superstitious. Everyone was superstitious.

Beyond the hedge there were bare fields, ploughed over last autumn. He didn’t expect to see the alchemy of spring, to see the dull brown earth change to bright green and then pale gold.  A man could count his life in harvests reaped.  He had seen enough.

They were surrounded by flat farmland. The farmhouse itself stood square and immoveable over to the left.  At night a red light shone from its roof to stop them crashing into it.  If they flew over it when they were coming into land they knew they had overshot and were in trouble.

From here he could see the farmer’s daughter in the yard, feeding the geese.  Wasn’t there a nursery rhyme in there somewhere? No, he was thinking of the farmer’s wife, wasn’t he – cutting off tales with a carving knife. A horrid image. Poor mice, he had thought when he was a boy.  Still thought the same now that he was a man. Nursery rhymes were brutal affairs.

He had never met the farmer’s daughter nor did he know her name, but he was disproportionally fond of her.  She always waved them off. Sometimes she was joined by her father, once or twice by her mother, but the girl’s presence in the farmyard was a constant for every raid.

She caught sight of him now and waved. Rather than return the wave, he saluted her. He imagined she would like that. Of course, from this distance he was just a uniform. She had no idea who he was. Teddy was just one of the many.

He whistled for the dog.

***1925***

**Alouette**

‘See!’ he said, ‘there – a lark.  A skylark.’ He glanced up at her and saw that she was looking in the wrong place. ‘No, over there,’ he said, pointing.  She was completely hopeless.

‘Oh,’ she said at last.  ‘There, I see it!  How queer – what’s it doing?’

‘Hovering, and then it’ll go up again probably.’  The skylark soared on its transcendental thread of song.  The quivering flight of the bird and the beauty of its music triggered an unexpectedly deep emotion in him.  ‘Can you hear it?’

His aunt cupped a hand to an ear in a theatrical way.  She was as out of place as a peacock, wearing an odd hat, red like a pillar-box and stuck with two large pheasant tail-feathers that bobbed around with the slightest movement of her head.  He wouldn’t be surprised if someone took a shot at her.   ‘If only,’ he thought.  Teddy was allowed – allowed himself – barbaric thoughts as long as they remained unvoiced.  (‘Good manners,’ his mother, counselled, was ‘the armour that one must don anew every morning.’)

‘Hear what?’ his aunt said eventually.

‘The song,’ he said, mustering patience. ‘The skylark’s song. It’s stopped now,’ he added as she continued to make a show of listening.

‘It might begin again.’

‘No, it won’t, it can’t, it’s gone.  Flown away.’ He flapped his arms to demonstrate. Despite the feathers in her hat she clearly knew nothing about birds.  Or any animals for that matter. She didn’t even possess a cat. She was indifferent to Trixie, their Lurcher, currently nosing her way enthusiastically through the dried-up ditch at the side of the road. Trixie was his most stalwart companion and had been by his side since she was a puppy when she had been so small that she could squeeze through the front door of his sisters’ dollhouse.

Was he supposed to be educating his aunt, he wondered?  Was that why they were here? ‘The lark’s known for its song,’ he said instructively. ‘It’s beautiful.’ It was impossible to instruct on the subject of beauty, of course. It simply was. You were either moved by it or you weren’t.  His sisters, Pamela and Ursula, were, his elder brother, Maurice, wasn’t.  His brother, Jimmy, was too young for beauty, his father possibly too old. His father, Hugh, had a gramophone recording of The Lark Ascending which they sometimes listened to on wet Sunday afternoons.  It was lovely but not as lovely as the lark itself. ‘The purpose of art,’ his mother, Sylvie, said – instructed even – ‘is to convey the truth of a thing, not to be the truth itself.’ Her own father, Teddy’s grandfather, had been a famous artist, dead long ago, a relationship that gave his mother authority on the subject of art. And beauty too, Teddy supposed. All these things – Art, Truth, Beauty – had capital letters when his mother spoke about them.

‘When the skylark flies high,’ he continued, rather hopelessly to Izzie, ‘it means it’s fine weather.’

‘Well, one doesn’t need a bird to tell one if it’s good weather or not, one simply looks about,’ Izzie said.  ‘And this afternoon is glorious. I adore the sun,’ she added, closing her eyes and raising her painted face to the skies.

Who didn’t, Teddy thought? Not his grandmother perhaps, who led a gloomy drawing-room life in Hampstead, with heavy cotton nets drawn to prevent the light entering the house. Or perhaps to stop the dark escaping.

‘The Knights’ Code’, which he had learned by heart from Scouting for Boys, a book he frequently turned to in times of uncertainty, even now in his self-exile from the movement, demanded that ‘Chivalry requireth that youth should be trained to perform the most laborious and humble offices with cheerfulness and grace.’ He supposed entertaining Izzie was one of those occasions.  It was certainly laborious.

He shaded his eyes against the sun and scanned the skies for the skylark. It failed to make a reappearance and he had to make do with the aerial manoeuvres of the swallows. He thought of Icarus and wondered what he would have looked like from the ground. Quite big, he supposed.  But Icarus was a myth, wasn’t he? He was going to boarding school after the summer holidays and he really must start getting his facts in order. ‘You will need to be a stoic, old chap,’ his father advised.  ‘It will be a trial, that’s the point of it really, I suppose. Best to keep your head below the parapet,’ he added. ‘Neither sink nor float, just sort of paddle about in the middle.’

 ‘All the men in the family’ went to the school, his Hampstead grandmother said (his only grandmother, Sylvie’s mother having died long ago), as if it were a law, written down in ancient times. Teddy supposed his own son would have to go there too, although this boy existed in a future that Teddy couldn’t even begin to imagine.  He didn’t need to, of course, for in that future he had no sons, only a daughter, Viola, something which would be a sadness for him although he never spoke of it, certainly not to Viola who would have been volubly affronted.

Teddy was taken aback when Izzie unexpectedly started to sing and – more startling – do a little dance. ‘Alouette, Alouette, gentille Alouette.’  He knew no French to speak of yet and thought she was singing not ‘gentille’ but ‘jaunty’, a word he rather liked. ‘Do you know that song?’ she asked him.

‘No.’

‘It’s from the war. The French soldiers sang it.’ The fleeting shadow of something – sorrow, perhaps – passed across her features, but then just as suddenly she said gleefully, ‘The lyrics are quite horrible. All about plucking the poor swallow. Its eyes and feathers and legs and so on.’

In that inconceivable yet inevitable war still to come – Teddy’s war – Alouette was the name of 425 Squadron, the French Canadians.  In the February of ’44, not long before his last flight, Teddy made a an emergency landing at their base at Tholthorpe, two engines on fire, shot up as they crossed the Channel. The French boys gave his crew brandy, rough stuff that they were nonetheless grateful for. Their squadron badges, something Teddy hadn’t known before he met them, showed a swallow above the motto Je te plumerai and he had thought about this day with Izzie. It was a memory that seemed to belong to someone else.

Izzie did a pirouette. ‘What larks!’ she said, laughing. Is this, he wondered, what his father meant when he said Izzie was ‘ludicrously unstable’?

‘Pardon me?’

‘What larks,’ Izzie repeated. ‘Great Expectations. Haven’t you read it?’ For a surprising moment she sounded like his mother.  ‘But, of course, I was making a joke. Because there isn’t one any longer. The lark, I mean. Flown orf. Gorn,’ she said in a silly Cockney accent. ‘I’ve eaten lark,’ she added in an offhand way. ‘In Italy. They’re considered a delicacy over there. There’s not much eating on a lark, of course. No more than a mouthful really.’

Teddy shuddered. The idea of the sublime little bird being plucked from the sky, of its exquisite song being interrupted in full flight, was horrible to him.

Many, many years later, in the early Seventies, Viola, discovered Emily Dickinson on an American Studies course that was part of her degree. In her scrawly, untamed hand she copied down the first verse of a poem she thought her father would like (too lazy to transcribe the whole of the short poem). ‘Split the lark – and you’ll find the Music, bulb after bulb in silver rolled’.  He was surprised she had thought of him, she rarely did.  He supposed  literature was one of the few things they held in common even though they rarely, if ever, discussed it.  He considered sending her something in return, a poem, even a few choice lines – a means of communicating with her – ‘Hail to thee, blythe spirit!  Bird though never wert’ or ‘Hark how the cheerfull birds do chaunt their lays and carol of love’s praise’ or ‘Ethereal Minstrel! Pilgrim of the sky! Dost thou despise the earth where cares abound?’ (Was there a poet who hadn’t written about skylarks?) He supposed his daughter would think he was patronizing her in some way.  She had an aversion to learning anything from him, possibly from everyone, and so in the end he simply wrote back, ‘Thank you, very thoughtful of you.’

Before he could stop himself – the armour of good manners falling away – he said, ‘It’s disgusting to eat a lark, Aunt Izzie.’

‘Why is it disgusting?  You eat chicken and so on, don’t you? What’s the difference, after all?’  Izzie had driven an ambulance in the Great War, dead poultry could do little to ruffle her emotions.

A world of difference, Teddy thought, although he couldn’t help but wonder what a lark would taste like. Thankfully, he was distracted from this thought by Trixie barking extravagantly at something. He bent down to investigate. ‘A slow worm,’ he said appreciatively to himself, the lark temporarily forgotten. He picked it up gently in both hands and displayed it to Izzie.

‘A snake?’ she said, grimacing, snakes apparently having no charms for her.

‘No, a slow worm,’ Teddy said. ‘Not a snake. Not a worm either. It’s a lizard actually.’ Its bronze-gold lustred scales gleamed in the sun.  This was beauty too.  Was there anything in nature that wasn’t?  Even a slug demanded a certain salutation, although not from his mother.

 ‘What a funny little boy you are,’ Izzie said.

***Time’s Arrow***

I, Odilo Unverdorben, arrived in Auschwitz Central somewhat precipitately and by motorbike, with a wide twirl or frill of slush and mud, shortly after the Bolsheviks had entrained their ignoble withdrawal. Now. Was there a secret passenger on the back seat of the bike, or in some imaginary sidecar? No. I was one. I was also in full uniform. Beyond the southern boundary of the Lager, in a roofless barn, I slipped out of our coarse travelling clothes and emotionally donned the black boots, the white coat, the fleece-lined jacket, the peaked cap, the pistol. The motorbike I found earlier, wedged into a ditch. Oh how I soared out of there, with what vaulting eagerness, what daring… Now I straddled this heavy machine and revved with jerked gauntlet. Auschwitz lay around me, miles and miles of it, like a somersaulted Vatican. Human life was all ripped and torn. But I was one now, fused for a preternatural purpose.

Your shoulder blades still jolted to the artillery of the Russians as they scurried eastward. What had they done here? Done something as an animal does: just finds it’s gone ahead and done it. I reacted on impulse. To tell the truth, I was in less than perfect control of myself. I started shouting (they sounded like shouts of pain and rage). And at whom? At these coat hangers and violin bows, at these aitches and queries and crawling double-U’s, ranked like tabloid expletives? I marched; I marched, shouting, over the bridge and across all the railway tracks and into the birch wood – into the place I would come to know as Birkenau. After a short and furious rest in the potato store I entered the women’s hospital, inflexibly determined on an inspection. It was not appropriate. I see that now (it was a swoon of where-to-begin?). My arrival only deepened the stupefaction of the few orderlies, never mind the patients, sprawled two or three to a straw sack and still well short of the size of a woman. And rats as big as cats! I was astonished by the power with which my German crashed out of me, as if in millennial anger at having been silenced for so long. In the washroom another deracinating spectacle: marks and pfennigs – good tender – stuck to the wall with human ordure. A mistake: a mistake. What is the meaning of this? Ordure, ordure everywhere. Even on my return through the ward, past ulcer and edema, past sleepwalker and sleeptalker, I could feel the hungry suck of it on the soles of my black boots. Outside: everywhere. This stuff, this human stuff, at normal times (and in civilized locales) tastefully confined to the tubes and runnels, subterranean, unseen – this stuff had burst its banks, surging outward and upward on to the floor, the walls, the very ceiling of life. Naturally, I didn’t immediately see the logic and justice of it. I didn’t immediately see this: that now human shit is out in the open, we’ll get a chance to find out what this stuff can really do.

***Birdsong***

‘Quiet, isn’t it?’ said Stephen.

‘Tolerable,’ said Ellis. ‘I’ve got a problem. I’m trying to get a working party to go out and bring back some bodies. It’s pretty quiet, as you say, and we may not have a better chance.’

‘So what’s the problem?’

‘My men wouldn’t do it unless I went too. So I said I would. Then they insisted on having at least one miner with them, but the miners’ CO says it’s nothing to do with them and in any case they’re fed up with doing our fatigues.’

Ellis’s white, freckled face was agitated. He pushed the cap back from his forehead to show a puckered hairline from which the gingerish hair had started to recede.

Stephen smiled vaguely and shook his head. ‘We should all go. It doesn’t matter. It’s only death.’

‘Well, will you tell Captain Weir to get one of his sappers out with us?’

‘I can ask him. Perhaps he’d like to come too, now that his arm’s better.’

‘Are you serious?’ said Ellis crossly.

‘I don’t know, Ellis. There’s something about you that makes me quite unsure. Get your working party ready for twelve o’clock. I’ll see you in the next firebay.’

Weir laughed drily when Stephen made the suggestion.

‘There’ll be rum,’ said Stephen.

Weir’s eyes opened in interest.

Then when the moment came it brought a sudden fear and unreality. They could never be prepared to look at death in the crude form that awaited them. Stephen felt, as he had done before at moments of extreme tension, a dislocation in his sense of time. It seemed to stutter, then freeze.

At noon on the firestep in gas masks. Taste of death, smell of it, thought Stephen. Coker slashed sandbags into gloves. ‘Wear these.’ Firebrace and Fielding of the miners, Ellis, white like milk, Barlow, Bates, Goddard, Allen of the infantry; Weir taking rum on top of whisky, unsteady on the step of the ladder.

‘What are you doing, Brennan?’

‘I’m coming too.’

They tracked out towards a shellhole, the sun bright, a lark above them. Blue sky, unseen by eyes trained on turned mud. They moved low towards a mine crater where bodies had lain for weeks uncollected. ‘Try to lift him.’ No sound of machine guns or snipers, though their ears were braced for noise. ‘Take his arms.’ The incomprehensible order through the gas mouthpiece. The arms came away softly. ‘Not like that, not take his arms away’. On Weir’s collar a large rat, trailing something red down his back. A crow disturbed, lifting its black body up suddenly, battering the air with its big wings. Coker, Barlow shaking their heads under the assault of risen flies coming up, transforming black skin of corpses into green by their absence. The roaring of Goddard’s vomit made them laugh, snoring private mirth inside their masks. Goddard, releasing his mask, breathed in worse air than he had expelled. Weir’s hands in double sandbags stretched out tentatively to a sapper’s uniform, undressing the chest in search of a disc which he removed, bringing skin with it into his tunic pocket. Jack’s recoil; even through coarse material, to the sponge of flesh. Bright and sleek on liver, a rat emerged from the abdomen; it levered and flopped fatly over the ribs, glutted with pleasure. Bit by bit on to stretchers, what flesh fell left in mud. Not men, but flies and flesh, thought Stephen. Brennan anxiously stripping a torso with no head. He clasped it with both hands, dragged legless up from the crater, his fingers vanishing into buttered green flesh. It was his brother.

When they got back to the safety of the trench Jack was angry that he and Fielding had been made to go, but Weir pointed out that there were three men from their company unburied. Goddard could not stop vomiting, though his stomach was long since empty. When he was not retching, he sat on the firestep, weeping uncontrollably. He was nineteen.

Michael Weir had a rigid smile. He told Fielding and Jack they were excused fatigues for a week, then went to Stephen’s dugout in the hope of whisky.

‘I wonder what my father would say, he said reflectively. ‘Of course they’re all “doing their bit”, as he put it.’ Weir swallowed and licked his lips. ‘It’s just that his “bit” and mine seem so different.’

Stephen watched him and shook his head fondly. ‘You know what I really dreaded?’ he said. ‘What frightened me was the thought that one of those men was going to be alive.’

Weir laughed. ‘After all that time?’

Stephen said, ‘It’s been known.’ He had a thought. ‘Where’s Brennan? Did you see him when we got back?’

‘No.’

Stephen went along the trench looking for him. He found him sitting quietly on the firestep near the dugout where he and half a dozen others slept.

‘I’m sorry, Brennan,’ he said. ‘That was a terrible thing for you. You needn’t have come.’

‘I know. I wanted to come. I feel better now.’

‘You feel better?’ Brennan nodded. He had a narrow head, with thick, black greasy hair on which Stephen was looking down. When he turned his face up, its features were calm.

Stephen said, ‘At least wash your hands, Brennan. Get some chloride of lime on them. Take some time off if you want to. I’ll tell your sergeant you’re excused fatigues.’

It’s all right. I feel lucky in a way. You know last July when I fell off the firestep when the mine went up and I broke my leg? Then watching you lot go over the top. I was lucky.’

‘Yes, but I’m sorry about your brother.’

‘It’s all right, I found him, that’s the thing. I didn’t let him lie there. I got him back and now he’ll have a proper burial. There’ll be a grave that people can see: I can come and put flowers on it when the war’s over.’

Stephen was surprised by how confident Brennan was that he himself would survive. As he turned to go, Brennan began to sing softly to himself, an Irish song that he had sung on the morning when they waited to attack. His voice was a grating, persistent tenor and he knew many songs.

All night he sang for his brother, whom he had brought, home in his hands.

***Then We Came to the End***

Layoffs were upon us. They had been rumored for months, but now it was official. If you were lucky, you could sue. If you were black, aged, female, Catholic, Jewish, gay, obese, or physically handicapped, at least you had grounds. At one point or another we have all been deposed. We plan on being deposed for Tom's suit — we have no doubt there will be one. Though he has no grounds unless asshole has been added to the list. And that's not just us talking. His ex-wife hates the guy. Restraining order. He can't see his two young kids without supervision. She moved to Phoenix just to get away from him. We wouldn't call him an asshole without having reached a very high consensus. Amber Ludwig objects to the specific designation because she has objected to profanity since becoming pregnant, but really there is no other word, and her objection is really just an abstention.

When Tom found out he was being let go, he wanted to throw his computer against his office window. Benny Shassburger was in there with him. Benny wasn't like a great friend of Tom's or anything but he was the guy who on occasion would have lunch with Tom and then report back to the rest of us. Word spread fast that Tom had been laid off and naturally Benny was the guy to go down there. He said Tom was pacing in his office like a man recently jailed. He said he could picture what Tom had looked like the night he went to the Naperville house with the aluminum bat and the authorities were called to restrain him. We had never heard that story before. Right there and then we had to stop Benny from telling us the story of Tom's final hour so he could first tell us the story of the aluminum bat. Benny was shocked we had never heard that story; he was sure we had. No, we never had. "Get out of here," he said. "You've heard that story." No, we hadn't. This was always how these conversations went. So Benny told us the story of Tom and the bat and then he told us the story of Tom's final hour. Both were good stories and together they killed a good hour. Some of us loved killing an hour of the company's time and others felt guilty for it afterward. But whatever your personal feelings on the matter, you still had to account for the hour, so you billed it to a client. By the end of the fiscal year, our clients had paid us a substantial amount of money to sit around and bullshit, expenses they then passed on to you, the consumer. It was the cost of doing business, but some of us feared it was an indication that the end was near, like the profligacy that preceded the downfall of the Roman Empire. There was so much money involved, and some of it even trickled down to us, a small amount that allowed us to live among the top one-percent of the wealthiest in the world. It was lasting fun, until layoffs came.

Tom wanted to throw his computer against the window, but only if he could guarantee it would break the glass and land on the street below. He was under his desk removing cords. "That's sixty-two stories, Tom," Benny said. And Tom agreed it was a bad idea if he couldn't break the glass. If glass didn't break they would say Tom Mota couldn't even fuck up right — he didn't want to give them the satisfaction of *that*, the bastards. We were the bastards he was referring to, in part. "But I don't think it'll break the glass," said Benny. Tom stopped tooling around with his computer. "But I gotta do *some*thing," he said, sitting back on his heels.

We lacked that kind of urgency. Our building was on the Magnificent Mile, in downtown Chicago, on a corner a few blocks from Lake Michigan. It had tones of art deco and two gilded revolving doors. We shuffled up the stairs toward the revolving doors slowly, afraid of what awaited us inside. In the beginning, we were let go in large numbers. Then, as the practice was refined, one by one, as they saw fit. We feared ending up on Lower Wacker Drive. Unemployed, we would be unpaid; unpaid, we'd be evicted from our homes; evicted, we would end up on Lower Wacker, sharing space with shopping carts and developing our own winterized and blackened feet. Instead of scrabbling for the addition of "Senior" to our current titles, we would search the alleyways for smokable butts. It was fun, imagining our eventual despair. It was also despairing. We didn't really believe we would be honked at from the Lexuses of our former colleagues as they drove down Lower Wacker on their way home to the suburbs. We didn't think we would be forced to wave at them from our lit oil drums. But that we might have to fill out an unemployment form over the Internet was not out of the question. That we might struggle to make rent or a mortgage payment was a real and frightening prospect.

Yet we were still alive, we had to remember that. The sun still shone in as we sat at our desks. Certain days it was enough just to look out at the clouds and at the tops of buildings. We were buoyed by it, momentarily. It made us "happy." We could even turn uncommonly kind. Take, for instance, the time we smuggled Old Golds into Frank Brizzolera's hospital room. Or when we attended the funeral of Janine Gorjanc's little girl, found strangled in an empty lot. It was hard for us to believe something like that could happen to someone we knew. You have never seen someone weep until you have witnessed a mother at the funeral of her murdered child. The girl was nine years old. She was removed at night from an open window. It was all over the papers. First she was missing. Then her body was found. To watch Janine at the funeral, surrounded by pictures of Jessica, her family trying to hold her up — even Tom Mota's heart broke. We were outside the funeral home afterward, in the parking lot speaking somberly to one another, when Tom began to beat on his '94 Miata. It didn't take long before everyone noticed him. He hit the windows with his fists and let out terrible cries of "Fuck!" He kicked the doors and the tires. Finally he collapsed near the trunk, wracked with sobs. It was not unreasonable behavior given the circumstances, but we were a little surprised that Tom appeared the most affected. He was sprawled out on the funeral home parking lot in his suit and tie, sobbing like a child. A few people went over to comfort him. We assumed in part his behavior had something to do with his ex-wife taking his kids to Phoenix. One thing we knew for certain — despite all our certainties, it was very difficult to guess what one individual was thinking at any given moment.

We believed that downturns had been rendered obsolete by the ingenious technology of the new economy. We thought ourselves immune from things like plant closings in Iowa and Nebraska, where remote Americans struggled against falling-in roofs and credit card debt. We watched these blue-collar workers being interviewed on TV. For the length of the segment, it was impossible not to feel the sadness and anxiety they must have felt for themselves and their families. But soon we moved on to weather and sports and by the time we thought about them again, it was a different plant in a different city, and the state was offering dislocated worker programs, readjustment and retraining services, and skills workshops. They'd be fine. Thank god we didn't have to worry about a misfortune like that. We were corporate citizens, buttressed by advanced degrees and padded by corporate fat. We were above the fickle market forces of overproduction and mismanaged inventory.

What we didn't consider was that in a downturn, we were the mismanaged inventory, and we were about to be dumped like a glut of imported circuit boards. On the drive home we puzzled over who was next. Scott McMichaels was next. His wife had just had a baby. Sharon Turner was next. She and her husband had just purchased a house. Names — just names to anyone else, but to us they were the individuals who generated our greatest sympathy. The ones who put their things in a box, shook a few hands, and left without complaint. They had no choice in the matter, and they possessed a quiet resignation to their ill-timed fates. As they departed, it almost felt to us like self-sacrifice. They left, so that we might stay. And stay we did, though our hearts went out to them. Then there was Tom Mota, who wanted to throw his computer against the window.

He wore a goatee and was built like a bulldog, stocky, with foreshortened limbs and a rippling succession of necks. He didn't belong where we were. That's not condescension so much as an attempt at a charitable truth. He would have been happier elsewhere — felling trees in a forest, or throwing nets for an Alaskan fishery. Instead, he was dressed in khakis, drinking a latte on a sectional sofa, discussing the best way to make our diaper client's brand synonymous with "more absorbent." That is, when we still had our diaper client. After deciding not to throw his computer against the window, Tom fixated on his magazines. He said to Benny, "Benny, man, you gotta get my magazines from Jim. That fuck's had them two months. I'm not leaving here without them — but I can't go out there. I don't want to have to see anybody." When Benny told us that, we felt pity for Tom. Of course Tom would not have wanted that. He would have spit our pity back in our faces. Nobody wants pity. They just want to get the hell out of there, out of sight, to alleviate the sting of ridicule, and then they want to forget about the entire miserable experience. They can't do that walking the halls to retrieve magazines. Benny returned to Tom's office ten minutes later with back copies of *Car and Driver*, *Rolling Stone*, *Guns and Ammo*. Tom was sitting on the floor of his office, winding his watch. Benny said, "Tom." Tom didn't answer. "Tom?" said Benny. Tom continued to wind his watch. Then he stood, opened a desk drawer, and pulled out one of the corporate polos he used to wear many days in a row. The blue one (Benny's) and the green one (Jim's) were also in the desk drawer. Tom took off his button-down and put the red polo on. "They think I'm a clown," he said to Benny. Benny replied, "No. Nobody thinks you're a clown, Tom. They got you by the balls, man — everybody knows that." "Hand me those scissors," said Tom. Benny said he looked behind him and saw a pair of scissors on Tom's bookshelf. Benny told us he didn't want to hand scissors to Tom. "They think I'm a clown," Tom repeated as he walked over to his bookshelf and grabbed the scissors himself and began to cut into his nice pleated slacks at the knee. "What are you doing, Tom?" asked Benny, with an uneasy chuckle. He was still holding Tom's old magazines. He watched as Tom cut all the way around with the scissors until the trouser leg fell to his ankle. Then he started working on one sleeve of the polo, on the opposite side to the cut-off trouser leg. "Tom," said Benny. Tom's tan-lined arm was soon visible all the way to the shoulder. A tattoo of barbed wire snaked around his biceps. "Tom, seriously — what are you doing?"

"Will you do me a favor," asked Tom, "and cut a hole from the backside of my shirt?"

"Tom, why are you doing this?"

Sometimes drastic measures were called for. There were occasions when someone needed to get into a car with a package and drive all the way out to Palatine to the FedEx station that had the latest drop-off time *in the state* just to guarantee the arrival of an overnight delivery. A new client pitch due Monday meant a full week of one o'clock nights and a few hours of sleep on random sofas on Sunday. It was called a fire alarm, and when one came along you had to drop everything. There was no going to the gym. Theater tickets were canceled. You saw no one, not your five-year-old, not your marriage counselor, not your sponsor, not even your dog. We feared the fire alarm. At the same time, we were all in it together, and we could be taken by surprise, after five days of grind, by the transformation of the team. Eating takeout, laughing around a cubicle, putting our minds together to solve something hard — five or six days of that and there was no immunization against the camaraderie. The people we worked with, with all their tics and pieties and limitations — we had to admit it to ourselves, they weren't all that bad. Where did *that* come from? Whence this *friendliness*? "'The love flooding you for your brother,'" said Hank Neary, quoting something or other. He was always quoting something or other and we hated him for it, unless we were in the middle of a fire alarm, in which case we loved him like a brother. That love would dissipate in a week. But while it lasted, work was a wellspring, a real source of light, the nurture of a beloved community.

Then the downturn came and there were no more fire alarms. No speeding out to Palatine, no one o'clock nights, no love flooding us for our brother.

Benny went down the elevator with Tom. With his clothes cut to shreds, Tom looked like someone washed up on shore after a shipwreck, tattered and clinging to a single plank. His shoes and socks were off, left inside the office with the abandoned magazines, the Kmart portraits of his kids, and the discarded swatches from his trousers and polo.

"What are you going to do?" asked Benny.

"What do you think I'm gonna do?" Tom asked rhetorically, just as they had reached the lobby. "I'm gonna find a new job."

"No," said Benny. "I mean right now. What are you doing right now?"

They exited the elevator. Tom had emptied out the pens and pencils from a mug he kept on his desk and that empty mug was now his only possession. Tom stopped in the marble elevator bank and watched for the descent of the other elevators. "You ever read Ralph Waldo Emerson?" Tom asked Benny. Benny didn't know where to stand. He told us he didn't know why they had just stopped in the elevator bank. "What are you planning to do, Tom?" "Listen to what Emerson said," said Tom. Tom began to quote. "'For all our penny-wisdom,'" he said, "'for all our soul-destroying slavery to habit, it is not to be doubted that all men have sublime thoughts.' Did you hear that, Benny? Did you hear it, or you need me to repeat it to you?" "I heard it," Benny replied. "They never knew me," Tom said, shaking his head and pointing up at those bastards. "They never did."

The first elevator arrived, and lunchgoers from the law firm emerged. Tom held his empty mug before them. "Help out the unemployed?" he asked them, shaking the cup. "Hey, help out the jobless?"

"Tom," said Benny.

"Benny, get the fuck off me! — Help me out, guy, please? I just lost my job today."

And that was Tom's final hour.

We heard it from Benny just after he told us the story of how Tom arrived at the Naperville house with an aluminum bat when he knew the children were at the grandmother's and everything deemed legally "Tom's" in the divorce settlement, everything that was "Tom's" and could be smashed or shattered with an aluminum bat, suffered Tom's swing until the authorities arrived to subdue him.

Amber Ludwig, who had the compact, athletic body of a seal, with very small hands and dark, closely set eyes, said she feared Tom was going to return like you hear on the news and open fire. "No, seriously," she said. "I think he's come undone. I don't think he was ever done to begin with."

Amber wasn't showing yet but everyone already knew. She was debating an abortion but, to Larry Novotny's great disappointment, looked to be leaning against it. Larry would have to decide what to do about his wife, who had just had a child herself not that long ago. We felt sorry for Larry, who worried the curved, finger-smudged bill of his Cubs cap endlessly that spring, but we also thought it was pretty obvious that he should have kept his pecker in his pants. We felt sorry for Amber, too, but as everyone knows, it takes two to tango. We just hoped they weren't doing it on our desks.

We asked Amber if she really, honestly thought Tom capable of a bloodbath.

"Yes," she said. "I wouldn't put anything past him. He's a madman."

We tried to convince her that that sort of thing happened only in factories and warehouses, and then only on the South Side. A debate ensued. Was Tom certifiable? Or was he just a clown? What was that at Janine's little girl's funeral, when he wept and continued weeping even after we got to the bar? Wasn't that proof the guy had a heart?

"Okay," said Amber, "okay, but what do you call standing on the heating vent and mooning the swimmers from his office window? What was that?" she asked.

She was referring to the Holiday Inn rooftop pool Tom's office looked down on, and Tom's tendency to get right up to the glass with his butt cheeks. Hijinks! we cried. Fun! That's not insanity. Amber was outvoted. We knew Tom. We knew Alan Glew, Linda Blanton, Paul Saunier. We knew Neil Hotchkiss and Cora Lee Brower and Harold Oak. They weren't any of them coming back here with a nightmare in a backpack. They had been let go. They packed their things. They left us for good, never to return.

***Enduring Love***

A mighty fist of wind socked the balloon in two rapid blows, one-two, the second more vicious than the first. It jerked Gadd right out of the basket on to the ground, and with Gadd's considerable weight removed from the equation, it lifted the balloon five feet or so, straight into the air. The rope ran through my grip, scorching my palms, but I managed to keep hold, with two feet of line spare. The others kept hold too. The basket was right above our heads now, and we stood with arms upraised like Sunday bell ringers. Into our amazed silence, before the shouting could resume, the second punch came and knocked the balloon up and westwards. Suddenly we were treading the air with all our weight in the grip of our fists.

Those one or two ungrounded seconds occupy as much space in memory as might a long journey up an unchartered river. My first impulse was to hang on in order to keep the balloon weighted down. The child was incapable, and was about to be borne away. Two miles to the left were high-voltage power lines. A child alone and needing help. It was my duty to hang on, and I thought we would all do the same.

Almost simultaneous with the desire to stay on the rope and save the boy came other thoughts of self-preservation and fear. We were rising, and the ground was dropping away as the balloon was pushed westwards. I knew I had to get my legs and feet locked round the rope. But the end of the line barely reached below my waist and my grip was slipping. My legs flailed in the empty air. Every fraction of a second that passed increased the drop, and the point must come when to let go would be impossible or fatal. Then, someone did let go. Immediately, the balloon and its hangers on lurched upwards another several feet.

Because letting go was in our nature too. Selfishness is also written on our hearts. Mostly, we are good when it makes sense. A good society is one that makes sense of being good. Suddenly, hanging there below the basket, we were a bad society, we were disintegrating. Suddenly the sensible choice was to look out for yourself. The child was not my child, and I was not going to die for it. Then I glimpsed another body fall away and I felt the balloon lurch upwards. The matter was settled. Altruism had no place. Being good made no sense. I let go and fell, I reckon, about twelve feet. I landed heavily on my side, I got away with a bruised thigh. Around me - before or after, I'm not so sure - bodies were thumping to the ground.

By the time I got to my feet the balloon was fifty yards away, and one man was still dangling by his rope. When I stood up and saw him, he was one hundred feet, and rising, just where the ground itself was falling. He wasn’t struggling, he wasn’t kicking or trying to claw his way up. He hung perfectly still along the line of his rope, all his energies concentrated in his weakening grip. He was already a tiny figure almost black against the sky and as the balloon and its basket lifted away and westwards, the smaller he became and the more terrible it was.

Our silence was a kind of acceptance, a death warrant. Or it was horrified shame. He had been on the rope so long that I began to think he might stay there until the balloon drifted down. But even as I had that hope we saw him slip down right to the end of the rope. And still he hung there. For two seconds, three, four. And then he let go and ruthless gravity played its part. And from somewhere a thin squawk cut through the stilled air. He fell as he had hung, a stiff little black stick. I've never seen such a terrible thing as that falling man.