The Bradshaw Variations

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Extract

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There's nothing remarkable about it. All one has to do is hit the right keys at the right time and the instrument plays itself.

J. S. Bach

[Bach] taught us how to find originality within an established discipline; actually – how to live.

Jean-Paul Sartre

I

What is art? Thomas Bradshaw asks himself this question frequently. He does not yet know the answer. He used to believe art was a kind of pretending, but he doesn't think that any more. He uses the word *authenticity* to describe what he thinks now. Some things are artificial and some are authentic. It is easy to tell when something is artificial. The other is harder.

In the mornings he listens to music, to Bach or Schubert. He stands in the kitchen in his dressing gown. He waits for his wife and daughter to come downstairs. He is forty-one, the age when a life comes out of its own past like something out of a mould; and either it is solid, all of a piece, or it fails to hold its shape and disintegrates. The disintegration is not difficult to imagine. It is the solidity, the concrete form, that is mystifying. Disintegration does not involve questions of authenticity, but of a solid form the questions must be asked.

Mostly, in fact, it is the lodger Olga who comes down first. He hears her tread on the stairs and doesn't recognise it: that is how, every day, he identifies her, by hearing her quiet, slightly plodding step and wondering who on earth it belongs to. She ducks her peroxided head at him, flashes her uncertain train-track smile. For six months now Olga has been embroiled in protracted dentistry. Beneath the metal braces her teeth are grey and disorderly. As a child her mother apparently never took her to the

dentist. This was not out of neglect, Olga has told him. It was because Olga was frightened of going, and her mother couldn't bear her to be frightened, or to feel pain. She has told Thomas that she is saving up for a bridge and a set of caps. She has three different jobs and all the money goes on her teeth. She complains of the expense: in Poland the cost of dentistry is much lower. There, she could have all the work done – 'All!' Olga repeats, making a chopping motion with her hand – for what she pays here for just one monthly visit.

These conversations do not entirely engage Thomas. When he talks to Olga he is both there and not there. He is waiting for Tonie to come down, as the platform guard waits for the London train to come through. Tonie's appearances in the kitchen are brief. Like the train she stops, disgorging activity, and then departs again. It is a matter of minutes, but he needs to be ready. He hears Olga – in some ways he even identifies himself with her, both of them platform dwellers – but when she speaks he cannot reciprocate. He is as though sealed behind glass. He wonders if she realises this, realises that she can see but not touch him. She drinks tea from a giant Garfield mug and eats cereal, topping up the milk frequently from the plastic container that stands beside her bowl. He glimpses her bare, mushroom-coloured legs beneath the table, her feet clad in large soft slippers. He turns the music up a little: it is an offering, a form of explanation. He wants her to know that he is aware of his own limitations, of his failure to make anything of their conversations in the morning. Sometimes this failure appears to him as something intrinsic to time itself, as an inner force, like decay. They pass and are forgotten, these interludes

in the kitchen. And yet they are always the same: he could stand here for a hundred years and still have much the same conversation with Olga. There are, it seems, limitless copies of this conversation, but it never goes anywhere or develops. By the same token, it never dies. It has no relationship to time. This may be because it lacks authenticity.

At seven thirty Tonie comes down and Olga goes up. Olga has a cleaning job at the hospital: her shift starts at eight. Tonie gets the seven-fifty train. It interests Thomas to see that while Olga's priority is food, Tonie gives precedence to her appearance. She stays upstairs until the last possible minute, while Olga sits at the table for half an hour or more in her dressing gown, working at her mug and bowl. Upstairs doors bang, taps run, Tonie's footsteps stalk to and fro. Olga gets up and slowly carries her dishes to the sink, her slippers dragging and hissing across the floor, and reties her dressing-gown cord before beginning her unhurried ascent to her room. Sometimes she and Tonie pass on the stairs and Tonie says, 'Hi, Olga,' in a voice that is half whisper, very deep and throaty, very exotic and *distrait*, as though she has just disentangled herself from a situation that is too complex and passionate to explain. 'Hello!' Olga replies, cheerful as a trumpet.

The stairs run through the core of the tall, narrow house and the treads are uncarpeted. The footsteps go up and down them like arpeggios up and down a keyboard. To Thomas the rooms at the top have a sweet, tinkling atmosphere, light-filled and harmonious. The kitchen, where he stands in his dressing gown, is in the basement. It is deep and sonorous: it underpins the melody of the

house with its static, structural confirmations. Tonie does not like being in the kitchen. She is always carrying things on trays up to the higher regions. She has taken down the curtains to let in more light. Sometimes she cleans it, thoroughly and punitively, but her feelings do not change. Thomas, however, is happy down here. He likes the atmosphere of the bass clef, its fundamentality, its insistence on necessities. It is in the basement that he has begun to consider time, and its relationship to authenticity. It is here that he has discovered an underlying structure, a plan. Often he doesn't change out of his dressing gown until eleven or twelve o'clock. By then he is finished with the revelations of the bass clef. He turns off his music. He is ready to read. Reading, he admits, has to be done on a sofa, upstairs.

Tonie eats, drinks coffee, standing up at the counter. She wears bracelets that rattle when she lifts her cup to her lips and glances at her watch. She has, he thinks, an atmosphere of quest about her, of honour. She will join the seven-fifty as the soldier joins his departing regiment. She will not think about him all day; she will not think about Alexa, nor about the sun moving in golden panels across the floorboards of their room, the clock ticking in the hall, the sounds of cars and voices that drift in from the street and then vanish, the day passing through the house, passing irretrievably through its core, its very fibres. She will be valiant not to think about these things, but she will derive, he knows, a rudimentary pleasure from it too. It is the pleasure of self: Thomas knows because he has felt it himself. Once it was he who stood there, clean, bright-eyed, dressed for departure, and Tonie who remained behind to witness the day's passage.

Did she wear a dressing gown? He isn't sure. He can't recall what she looked like when he was leaving her. She was part of a pattern, like a figure in a tapestry, woven into her setting.

She puts things into her bag. She says something, but the music is so loud that she has to repeat it, raising her voice. It is Schubert's *Fantasiestücke*. She says,

'I've got a meeting. I won't be back before eight.'

'Okay,' he says loudly. 'Fine.'

He goes to turn the music down but it is too late. She has swung her bag over her shoulder and is moving towards the stairs.

Alexa is still asleep. She lies in her bed like a girl in a fairy tale. In sleep she is very soft. She exudes something, a kind of mist, as though when she sleeps she sets aside her solidity and takes on the transmutable properties of light and liquid and air. Thomas doesn't want to dwell too much on his daughter's beauty. He looks at her but he can give no name to his looking, no motive. He would like an artist to paint her. It would be easier to look at a painting of Alexa than at Alexa herself.

Later, downstairs, she sits at the table, neat in her uniform. She wears her hair precisely parted and brushed into a ponytail. She is so orderly: every day it is the same.

'Are you going to the shops today?'

Thomas muses, rubbing his chin.

'I don't know,' he says. 'Why, what do you want?'

'I need batteries.'

He stands at the window, looking out at the garden. It is September. The year has always been fixed at this point, pinned to its backing of time like a butterfly in an

exhibition case: September is the skewering place, the heart, where the pin of routine is thrust in. But this year it is different. For almost the first time in his life he has not gone back into harness at the summer's end. He has not returned to work: the pin has not been driven home. He is free or he is cast out, one or the other. Alexa is speaking to him.

'– size for my clock,' she says.

'What? What are you talking about?'

'You need to get the right size for my clock.'

'What clock?'

'My alarm clock. It's stopped.'

He sighs. A little thread of headache is inching across his brow. Why does an eight-year-old child need an alarm clock? It is the pin of routine again, searching for its mark. She is standing in front of him now.

'I'll try to remember,' he says.

She has something in her hand. She places it on the counter in front of him.

'That's the size of battery you need,' she says.

'Where did you get that?'

'I took it out of the clock. It doesn't work any more. I need two. Please don't forget.'

'I might forget. I said I'll try.'

She is frustrated. She wants to impose her will on him, to exact his promise. It is artificial, this conversation. He sometimes has conversations with Tonie that are like this, that are showcases for the determination of one or other of them.

'Please,' she says.

'I'll do my best.'

The doorbell rings. It is her friend Georgina, tall and

strong-limbed and responsible, reassuringly earnest. They walk to school together in the mornings, Georgina gripping Alexa's arm when they go over at the crossing and looking wildly about her for cars, as though they might at any moment find themselves under enemy fire. He kisses Alexa goodbye. Later, when she comes back, she doesn't ask about the batteries. He has forgotten all about them. It is only when he is putting her to bed that he remembers.

'I'll get them tomorrow,' he says.

She nods unhappily. Then she says:

'Can I borrow your clock for tonight?'

He is almost angry with her, but instead he feels sorrowful. He pities her for the inanity of her persistence. He is disappointed in her.

'All right,' he says.

'I want to wake up early,' she says.

'I can wake you up.'

She looks at him. She doesn't trust him.

'I'd rather have the clock.'

'All right.'

'Will you set it for seven?'

He laughs. 'All right.'

She sits back in her pillows, contented.

'From now on I'm going to get up early and have breakfast with Mummy,' she says. 'I've decided.'

His heart clenches, just as it does when the music gains its highest note, grasping and grasping out of its own confusion until it reaches its mark and the screw of emotion is turned. The confusion, he sees, is necessary, for it is what the resolution is born from. It was necessary, in other words, for him to misunderstand Alexa in order

that he might understand her. He is satisfied by this perception. He opens a book and begins to read to her. Every night he does this, sometimes for as long as an hour. At first he was self-conscious reading aloud, but he isn't any more. When he reads he feels as though he is flying through darkness, lit by the single bulb of Alexa's bedside lamp; he is unbodied, a soaring arrow, a force of pure narration. In her books he finds explanations for everything, for love and survival, struggle and pleasure, happiness and grief, for belief, for the shape and arc of life itself. The only thing that is never explained is reality. He sprawls on her bed while she sits neatly beneath the covers. Her eyes are brown, tawny: in the half-light they seem rich with age, like mahogany. Their beauty is at once his and not his. He does not own them, yet they are within his possession. She does not look at him while he reads. She looks into empty space – she is visualising. This is one of the causes of his lack of inhibition. Were she to look at him, he would instantly regain the formality of personality. As it is, he can forget himself. At some point, usually, he begins to weep. Unlike most of the people he knows, Thomas has never mislaid his ability to cry. They are clear, abundant tears that roll soundlessly down his cheeks as he reads. It is the stories that release them. Freed from reality, he weeps over the image of life.

Afterwards he wipes his cheeks and kisses her goodnight, and goes downstairs to wait for Tonie to come home.

II

On the train, Tonie thinks about sex. It's like some old friend she hasn't seen in years and then bumped into on the platform. She rides with it in the carriage, her old friend sex, who one way and another she lost touch with, somewhere around the time when Alexa was born, when love seemed like a mathematical problem to which, all of a sudden, she had found the answer.

The other passengers, daylight chorusing in their faces, the mood transitive, a shedding of properties: the train flies through the September morning and Tonie feels it, an element that is all surface, all publicity. She is a little suspicious, almost resentful. It is as though she has blundered uninvited into some event and discovered that everyone she knows is there. So! This is what people are up to, while women care for babies in wholesome rooms, while they push strollers through the slow afternoon, satisfied that they have solved the problem of love. The rest of the world doesn't care about love at all. The rest of the world is pure self, present tense, neither bad nor good, just flying free through the morning's instant. And it comes over her in a rush, the memory of what it used to feel like, being alive.

On the way home she bumps into it again.

A month into her new job, the evening train, the mood reflective. There is a rushing darkness at the windows and yellow portraits on the glass, like the steady images a

light makes from a black river of film. What has she been doing all this time? This is the question, after an eight-year absence. At intervals, her husband has turned to her in their bed and posed questions with his body: do you still love me? Is everything all right? And she has acceded, as often as she has been able to, not wanting to trouble him with her strange numbness, her indifference. What else? Giving, caring, watching, remembering, feeling, but not – not truly – participating. It's been like reading a great book, life represented as fully and beautifully as it could be but the commodity itself suspended. All her sympathies have been engaged, and left her body motionless, inert.

At the station she gets a taxi.

Thomas, in the kitchen, slightly tired-looking, the crow's feet standing in bright starbursts around his eyes. It is nine fifteen. He has made food for her, something heaped on a plate in the oven, keeping warm. He is wearing an apron. She laughs. She reaches around his waist, trying to untie the strings. He looks bashful, a little foolish. He looks shy, embarrassed, like a young girl with someone trying to undo her bra strap.

'I'll do it,' he says.

When they kiss it is fumbling, slightly awkward, and Tonie laughs again, against his teeth. There seem to be folds and folds of blankness between them. She struggles to break through it. He is like a well-packaged object she is trying to get to, tearing away the blank wrapping. It is as though he is resisting her, as though he doesn't want to be found. Her determination begins to drain away. There is too much reality, too much light in the kitchen, too much visual detail of ordinary things. And she has a sud-

den fraternal sense of Thomas that is like a bucket of cold water poured over her head. He is over-familiar. They have stood together in this kitchen too many times.

The kissing peters out. They hug, comrades.

'What's in there?' Tonie says, still in his arms but looking out, down, at the humming oven. Usually it is Alexa they look out and down at, the view from themselves, the distraction that has become a necessity. But the oven will do.

'Fish pie. Do you want some?'

So Tonie eats it, the pale mound of fodder, the creamy potato that sticks to the roof of her mouth, and it is hard to reconcile this filling of herself with the wanting feeling she had earlier. The potato stops her tongue, sits like a boulder in her stomach. It is a kind of imprisonment, to feel so full, when it was something else that she was asking for.

But the next night it's different.

She comes back even later, ten o'clock, and this time there's no food and Thomas is more alert, more mysterious. They sit in the sitting room on opposite chairs.

'It won't always be like this,' Tonie says. 'I'll get quicker. I have to read everything four times. I have to suck up to everyone.'

'We're all right. Do what you need to do.'

He's wearing a dark blue shirt that makes him look sharper, clearer, less fuzzily familiar. Seen objectively Thomas is good-looking, pale fine-grained skin, fine black hair that falls over his face, something light and boyish about him though he is tall and broad-shouldered. Tonie's female friends make envious jokes about Thomas. They see him objectively, but Tonie doesn't. She sees him

in pieces, from particular angles. Sometimes, when they are away from the house, she is amazed to see him walking down the street towards her, whole.

In the bedroom she turns away while he undresses. She waits until he switches out the light. She is determined to hang on to this gossamer inspiration, desire. She knows that if her eye falls on the alarm clock with the big ear-like bells, on the toys Alexa has left on the floor of their room, even on Thomas himself, it will break. She needs Thomas to become a stranger again. She needs to reinvent him. Is that wrong? He might think it was, if she told him. But not telling is what will make a stranger of herself.

And it is exactly as she had hoped, in the way that a performance of a play might be, the feeling of a structure, an event, passing through time unharmed. The form was honoured: nobody made a mistake or fluffed a line. It is strange, that transcendence should occur not by abandoning structure but by adhering to it exactly. Thomas turns to her, strokes her hair. In the darkness he is a shape, autonomous. It is a long time since she has felt him to be so distinct from herself. It is from the distinctness that the closeness, the harmony, has arisen.

In the middle of the night she wakes up and he is still there, the shape, draped in shadow. He is as beautifully turned as a musical instrument, as finished, as mute and solitary lying on his side in the darkness. The desire is this: to find him, to use him, to make him respond. It is the only way that she can possess him, as the musician possesses the instrument, and though it feels like youth again it is not, not at all. As a young woman she did not possess the bodies of men. They possessed her. She was the instrument, in those days. And the time in between

has been a blank, a silence, because after Alexa was born she was neither instrument nor performer but creator, alone suddenly, her body a slump of giving, all untouchable aftermath. It did not recognise the discipline of performance. It wanted only to be left alone.

She puts out her hand and touches the skin of Thomas's neck, his back, his taut rounded shoulder. He wakes up. She feels it, the vibration of life under her hand. He turns to her, mouth slightly open, eyes shut. He obeys her.

Montague Street runs straight downhill towards the city. It is steep, so that the bottom looks remote from the top, the hazy geometric spill of buildings levelling out below with its light-inflected blocks and angles, its wreath of pollution, its drone of traffic and sense of life as something inalienable and general rather than fragile and particular, though close up this illusion is successively unmasked as the moderate scale of the reality becomes clearer. The town is just a picturesque, convenient, middle-sized town an hour from London. But from the top, where the Bradshaws live, it has an appearance of grandeur and ruination.

Theirs is a region of parks and churches – the former small and crowded, the latter large and empty – and of row after row of red-brick two-storey Victorian terraces that rise and fall across the undulating townscape, and that again conjure up an atmosphere of generality, the image of a contented and solidly unexceptionable bourgeoisie, as opposed to the fretful-looking, badly paid liberal professionals who for the most part live in them: academics like Tonie, teachers, social workers.

In Tonie's experience, these are people whose capacity for deep, undisclosed suffering and worldly indifference, for extreme feats of virtue or nihilism, for the repression of passions and staunchness in the face of reality, is so violent that it ought to leave some visible mark on their surroundings; and yet the surface of their lives is so bare as to suggest a reluctance to impose themselves on the world that runs deeper still. Time and again she has visited her neighbours' houses and found them to be lacking both luxuries and necessities, found rooms empty of furniture or ornament, stained walls with no pictures on them, cardboard boxes that have never been unpacked, desolate shelves, and in the face of it all a kind of impregnable vagueness, a dreaminess, that acquaints Tonie with her own alertness, her fathomless determination, and suggests these qualities are not, after all, entirely normal. Take her friend Elsa, for instance: entering Elsa's house for the first time, Tonie assumed they had only just moved into it, so powerful was its atmosphere of unoccupation, when in fact Elsa and her husband had lived there for years. In the hall there was a strip of wallpaper hanging loose, which Elsa admitted having torn off one day to see what was underneath – blood-coloured flowers and creeping foliage, better not to have known – and which hangs there still. Tonie would have had the whole lot off in an evening, would not have rested until it was all gone and something new and good put in its place; and yet Elsa is a virtuous woman, a woman who teaches disabled children, who would drop everything to help if Tonie was ill or in trouble, who has welcomed time into her face unprotestingly, though it has been brutal to her. When Tonie sees Elsa, sees the torn tongue of paper still lolling

from the wall and the sitting room still full of boxes, she wonders what the meaning, what the moral value of her own competence is. She sees that she herself is not virtuous, in spite of the fact that she is driven by what feels like guilt or compunction. She would not rest until the imperfect was excised and the good accomplished, and it would feel like rightness itself was thrashing her and egging her on. But in Elsa's tattered hall she acknowledges that it is not rightness: it is the desire for success.

The houses in Montague Street are different from the rest, narrow and tall and white, Georgian, impractical. The world always offers a small opportunity for difference, among a large majority of things that are all the same; and equally unfailingly Tonie takes it, only remembering afterwards that being different is not the same as being right. She was besotted with the house at first, so that rationality, calm consideration, common sense could get no hold on her. They manifested themselves as purely hostile, as things that had only and ever sought to frustrate her, which made it right – rightness again – to defy them and cast them off for good.

It's true that the house is unusual. There is something fantastical about its narrowness and height, its overhanging windows, its quivering appearance of unfeasibility. It is more like a drawing – a sketch – than a building. It takes only a few paces to go from the front of it to the back: you walk through the door and the tiny garden is staring you in the face. When people come in there is always a moment of startled hesitation, a sense of spatial misjudgement, as though they were about to lose their footing on the edge of a cliff. They exclaim, half in wonder, but just as much out of consternation. Tonie does not like it when this happens.

For seven years she and Thomas have lived in this house, and the steady disclosure of its shortcomings, its particular flaws, has had something almost sermonising about it. The rooms downstairs are dark; the windows are draughty and the garden too small; the sloping doorframes and uneven boards, most of all the ceaseless going up and down, up and down like a tune in search of a resolution – these things fray Tonie's nerves and exhaust her. Stuck with her choice, Tonie is being taught a lesson, which is that desire is dangerous, because it is magnetised by its antithesis, actuality. And actuality, no less automatically, is drawn to desire. What are you meant to do with a desire if not act on it? Living in her thin and fantastical house Tonie has been haunted by new desires – for the anonymous, the spacious, the frankly horizontal. She has imagined large suburban lawns and garages, broad avenues, a house low and wide. It appears to her now that it would be easier to distinguish yourself in such a house; that time would stand more still; that the human subject would be picked out, highlighted against the neutrality, so that the glamour of being alive – so ineluctable, so hopelessly entrenched in the province of desire – could finally be actualised.

What happened was that all those years ago, she fell in love with the house: she fell in love with it, and then as she came to know more and more about it the love was divided and subdivided until each piece of knowledge was larger than its allotted share of affection. This is the lesson, the sermon: that facts outlive emotions, and that knowledge is therefore more powerful than love. There are infinite things to know, but the capacity for love is just that, a capacity, a space that can hold so much and no more.

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