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# Becoming Strangers

Louise Dean

## Chapter 1

'This is the great private problem of man; death as the loss of self. But what is the self? It is the sum of everything we remember. Thus what terrifies us about death is not the loss of the future but the loss of the past. Forgetting is a form of death ever present within life.'

Milan Kundera

Before he'd had cancer he'd been bored with life. Since he'd taken dying seriously, he'd been busy; he was occupied with understanding the disease and training his body to resist it. How hardy he was, physically. Six years of operations and excisions, starting with his chest, then the cancerous cells had metastasized to his lungs and on to his liver. A suite of initial excisions revealed each encampment to be partially malignant. He'd insisted on warfare. Each time the doctors told him and his family the chances of recovery were poor and the recurrence of cancer a likelihood. Year after year a fresh crop of cells emerged, excisions followed and he lived. The knife-and-forking of his body seemed to give a perverse impetus to his will to survive.

His tenacious hold on life was partly begotten by the conviction that his life must have accrued some value over time. What about all the sights and sounds recorded, all those thoughts tracked? They must be worth something. They must add up to some meaning. Billions of words over the years ordered into a handful of simple notions. His mother! His country! Right and wrong!

He gave up work. He took to reading. Politics, philosophy, biographies.

An exploratory probe of his pancreas had revealed further metastasis just two weeks previously. They could not operate again, they said. He shook the doctor's right hand with both of his hands and nodded. Later that evening, he overheard his wife sharing the news over the phone, from the study, door closed. 'He's ridden with it. They can't do anything for him now,' Annemieke said.

About three days later, their two adult sons had come by with the tickets for two weeks in paradise, a hotel spa resort on a Caribbean island. Very exclusive. Very final. He'd shaken their hands with both of his and nodded. Annemieke had kissed them.

'He's getting weak,' she had said, looking at her husband, 'the travelling won't be so easy. But I am strong enough for us both,' she'd added, then excused herself to answer the phone.

He had sat with his boys, holding the gift card between his fingers, pursing his lips, stroking his moustache, murmuring in bass tones, weighing reason as he listened to

their news. The older boy was running his own Europe-wide Internet search business, the other finishing a PhD in philosophy at the University of Brussels. He tried to see them as real people.

Meanwhile, he could hear snatches of his wife's excitable conversation in the other room.

'Afterwards,' she was saying repeatedly and with emphasis.

He read the gift card again. The instruction was, 'Vermaak jullie!' ('Enjoy yourselves!'), the implication that once that was done, he could come back and die properly.

This was going to be their last holiday. They had had a few last holidays previously, but this was going to be truly final. His wife's way of confirming this was to remind him now, on the aeroplane, that they had had some good times during their thirty-six years of marriage. She sighed from time to time as she turned the pages of her magazine before setting it aside.

'So many things,' she said to him, resting her jaw on her palm and looking into his face, 'and so empty, so meaningless.'

He agreed without looking at her.

'Very nice, very well made, but next year it is finished and if you are going to spend so much on something . . . oh, it just drives me crazy.'

Removing peanut matter from a back tooth, mindful of her lipstick - she was an attractive woman - and taking a last swig of her gin and tonic, she told him that she had calculated they had had over forty holidays during their marriage. She handed the plastic glass, small bottle and tonic can to the flight attendant. The peanut packet she had rolled up and inserted into the can's opening.

He thought of paperbacks, triangular-heaped, wet and spineless by poolsides and of shellfish detritus left on dinner plates, pink and drying. He thought of the night-time efforts to kick away tucked-in white sheets. Hotels, hospitals; both had required from him a degree of submission. His wife did not submit. Her chin was hard. She used it to conclude her sentences. Her eyes sparkled. If she was pragmatic then she had reason to be. Initially he'd been given six months to live, he'd taken six years so far. It had caused her to be severe.

'Six, nearly seven years of lucidity,' Jan thought, catching her eye and looking quickly away, 'clarity come upon me like the word of God.'

'Excuse me,' he said, as his elbow knocked hers off the central armrest by mistake. He had confirmed his belief, hospital stay after hospital stay, that human relations were best conducted courteously; he was thankful for good manners. The existence of love, unconditional love, he doubted. He even wondered about his children. He had no idea whether he was ready to die; it didn't come in degrees after all, allowing one

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to get accustomed to it. Death was a binary affair, not cumulative. On/off. The starter pistol fired not a second before it fired.

Now, with the 'fasten seatbelts' lights illuminated and his wife tucking a spare miniature vodka into the pouch in front of her, he reminded himself of his resolve to make it up to her. He barely knew her and he had gone to a great deal of trouble to know her less in the last few years. It was reasonable to think that neither of them was entirely to blame and it was possible, even now, that they might quit each other as friends. That was what he hoped this holiday was for; he hadn't told her as much, but he assumed she felt the same way. Given that he was, in fact, dying now.

To his left, he saw a segment of fellow Northern Europeans squinting and wincing at the sudden sheath of equatorial sunlight. He reached across his wife and with a neat action, using his forefinger and thumb, raised the shade over their window.