
Opening Extract from...

The Bellwether Revivals

Written by Benjamin Wood

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THE BELLWETHER REVIVALS

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FOR MY MOTHER

PRELUDE

June 2003

They heard the caterwaul of sirens, and saw the dust rising underneath the ambulance wheels at the far end of the driveway, and soon the darkening garden was a wash of flashing blue lights. It only seemed real when they told the paramedics where to find the bodies. There was one upstairs on the top floor, they said, another in the organ house, and one more at the foot of the garden—the last one was still breathing, but faintly. They had left him on the riverbank in a nest of flattened rushes, with the cold water lapping against his feet. When the paramedics asked for his name, they said it was Eden. Eden Bellwether.

It had taken too long for the ambulance to arrive. For a while, they'd assembled on the back porch of the rectory, thinking, panicking, staring out at the same old elms and cherry trees they'd stared at a hundred times before, hearing the wind disturb the branches. They all felt responsible for what had happened. They all blamed themselves. And so they argued—about who was *most* to blame, who should feel the guiltiest. The only one who didn't talk was Oscar. He leaned against the wall, smoking, listening to the rest of them bicker. When he finally spoke, his voice was so calm it silenced them.

'It's over now,' he said, extinguishing his cigarette on the porch-rail. 'We can't go back and change it.'

Just a few months ago, they'd been sitting out on the same sap-spotted decking behind the rectory, chatting about nothing too important—the rules of badminton, some Alain Resnais film they'd all seen and hated, the saddening obsolescence of the cassette tape—all six of them just winding down, a bruise of clouds spreading darkly across the Grantchester sky. They'd gathered round the same wooden patio table, picking at the citronella candle drippings on the wine bottles, throwing dry wax at the midges. Everything had been different back then—so weightless and loose and easy.

Now they watched the first paramedic working on the riverbank, feeling for Eden's pulse, strapping an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth, feeding in a drip. They heard the murmur of the other medic's voice coming over the dispatcher: 'VSA. Purple plus. Over.'

They didn't go with Eden in the ambulance. They weren't prepared to follow in their cars. Instead, they went into the organ house to see the other medic wrenching off her latex gloves. She'd placed a green sheet over the body and it was quivering on the breeze. 'Don't be going anywhere,' she warned them. 'The police are on their way.'

It had been the hottest June day but a cold breeze had been gathering strength all evening, and now it was sweeping across the garden, through the open doors of the buildings. It was blowing into the broken pipes of the old church organ, a weak and tuneless drone that sounded on and off, on and off, with the steadiest of rhythms, like some machine that had found a way to breathe.

FIRST DAYS

If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties.

—*Sir Francis Bacon*

One

Incidental Music

Oscar Lowe would later tell police that he couldn't remember the exact date he first laid eyes on the Bellwethers, though he knew for sure it had been a Wednesday. It was one of those late October evenings in Cambridge when the gun-grey light of the afternoon had faded well before six, and the cobbled avenues of the old town were dark and silent. He had just finished an eight-to-five shift at Cedarbrook, the nursing home on Queen's Road where he was a care assistant, and his mind was slow and heavy, laden with the details of his workday: the vacant faces of the older residents, the pallor of their tongues as they took their pills, the give of their skin as he lifted them into the bath. All he wanted was to get home, to fall upon his bed and sleep right through until tomorrow, when he would have to wake up and do the same things over again.

By cutting through the grounds of King's College, he knew he could shave some time off the walk. In the old city, everybody cycled: the students skittered along the narrow lanes with loaded backpacks, the tourists pinballed from college to college on rented wheels. At any time of day, on any given pavement in Cambridge,

someone could be found unlocking a bike from a lamppost and riding off towards the next one. But Oscar preferred the solace of walking.

He crossed Clare Bridge and took the shortcut through the grounds of King's, hearing the flat echo of his footsteps on the path, still glassy from the afternoon rain. Everywhere was quiet. The clipped lawns seemed unusually blue with the indolent glow of floodlamps, and, somewhere close by, woodsmoke was rising from a cottage chimney, giving the impression of fog. As he went by the face of the college chapel, he tried his best not to look up, knowing exactly how it would make him feel: tiny, irrelevant, godless. But he couldn't help staring at it—that formidable gothic building with its tall spindles needling the sky and its giant blackened windows. It was the picture-postcard on every carousel stand along King's Parade. He'd always hated it. Up close, in the near darkness, the place only haunted him more. It was not the architecture that troubled him, but the age of the building, the scale of its history; the royalty who'd once communed there, all the serious people whose faces now thickened encyclopaedias.

A service was underway inside. He could already hear the muted thrum of organ music behind the chapel walls, and when he turned into the Front Court, the sound grew louder and sweeter, until he was close enough to make out the fullness of the instrument—a low, hoarse purr. He could almost feel it against his ribs. It was nothing like the over-powering dirges he remembered from school Christmas services, or the blundering renditions of 'Abide with me' he'd strained to sing over at his grandparents' funerals. There was a fragility to this music, as if the organist wasn't pressing down on the keys but hovering his fingers above them like a puppeteer. Oscar stopped in the entrance just to listen, and saw the sandwichboard near the open doorway: 'Evensong 5.30, Public Welcome.' Before he knew it, his feet had carried him all the way inside.

Stained-glass windows surrounded him, barely showing their

colours. The vaulted arches of the ceiling seemed to roll out into the distance. At the heart of the building, a wingspan of organ pipes bellowed from a wooden partition, and he could see the sombre congregation waiting in the candlelight on the other side. He found an empty seat and watched the choir filing in. The younger boys stood on the front row in their white gowns, cheerful and distracted; the older boys stood sheepishly behind them, aware of themselves in that teenaged way, fidgeting with their sleeves. When the organ stopped there was a momentary silence, and then the choir began to sing.

Their voices were so synchronised and balanced that Oscar could hardly tell them apart. They surged and retracted with the ease of an ocean, and he felt a rush in his heart as he listened. He was sorry when their hymn ended and the reverend stood to recite the Holy Creed. Across the aisle, people were gamely muttering the prayer, but Oscar stayed quiet, still thinking of the music. By the time he noticed the blonde girl a few spaces along his pew, the congregation had reached, '… And sitteth on the right hand of God …' She was mouthing the words grudgingly, the way a bored child recites times tables, and, when she saw that he wasn't joining in the prayer, gave a slow roll of her eyes, as if to say: 'Get me out of here.' The simple profile of her face excited him. He smiled at her but wasn't sure that she noticed.

Now the reverend was reading from Jeremiah ('… if thou take forth the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as my mouth …') and Oscar watched the girl and her encumbered, self-conscious movements. Like him, she didn't seem to appreciate the strange etiquette of the church. She kneed the hymn book to the floor midway through the sermon, causing the reverend to pause, and while his dreary lesson continued she toyed with the bezel of her watch, until two pale-faced choristers began a new hymn and the organ started up again.

The only time the blonde girl sat still was when the choir was singing. Her chest rose, inflated; her lip quivered. She seemed

awed by the tapestry of their voices, the clarity of their sound, the swelling harmonies that flooded the yawning space above them. Oscar could see her fingers counting out the rhythm on her knee until the final 'Amen'. The choir sat down and silence—like a deployed parachute—descended in the chapel.

At the end of the service, people filtered out by order of importance: first, the choir and the clergy in a procession of white, then the congregation. Oscar hoped he could follow the girl to the door, get close enough to spark a conversation, but he ended up between a group of men debating the merits of the sermon and a softly-spoken French couple consulting their guidebooks for the route home. He lost the sound of her small, scuffing steps behind him as she disappeared into the crowd. Weary tourists moved slowly along the aisles, putting on their jackets and packing away their cameras; young children slept in their fathers' arms while their mothers baby-wiped their fingers. Oscar couldn't see the girl anywhere. He put some change on the collection plate as he went out, and the reverend said, 'Thank you, good evening.'

In the vestibule, the air seemed colder, sharper. Darkness had settled fully over the city and Oscar could feel that familiar, constricting tiredness returning to his shoulders. He turned his collar to the night. It was then, as the crowd dispersed in front of him, that he saw her in the shadows, leaning against the grey stones of the chapel.

She was reading an old paperback, tilting the pages into the second-hand light of the vestibule with one hand, and cradling a clove cigarette between the fingers of the other. Her reading glasses were too big for her face—square with round red corners, like large projector slides. After a moment, she glanced up from her book and smiled.

'One thing I know about church,' she said, 'is to learn where the exits are. It's like being on a plane. Have to get out in an emergency.' Her accent was genteel, proper, the stuff of elocution lessons; but there was also something uncertain about the way she

spoke, as if she was trying hard to rough up the edges of her sentences (she had dropped the 'g' of 'being' and it sounded strange).

'I'll try to remember that for next time,' Oscar said.

'Oh, I don't think you'll be coming back in a hurry. Too much Jeremiah, not enough choir. Am I right?'

He shrugged. 'Something like that.'

'Well, I can hardly blame you. They were almost perfect tonight, weren't they? The choir, I mean.' She offered him her cigarette pack and he shook his head. 'Sometimes the beaters aren't concentrating and their timing suffers, but tonight they were really with it.'

'Yeah, I thought so too.'

As Oscar stepped closer, she studied him with a quick motion of her eyes. He wondered if she would see the same things in his face that he saw in the bathroom mirror every morning—those straight, innocuous features that might just pass for handsome, the beginner-slope nose that water streamed down when it rained, that narrow jaw he'd inherited from his mother. He hoped that she could see past his workclothes: the faded leather jacket he wore over his nursing uniform, and the trainers he'd put through the washing machine so many times they were clean but somehow grey.

'Are you sure you don't want a cigarette? I hate smoking on my own, it's so depressing.' She lifted the paperback and examined its cover. 'What about Descartes? We could smoke *him*. There's enough material here to roll a good cheroot.' She snapped the book shut before he could answer. 'Yes, you're probably right. Descartes would be a bit dry, wouldn't he? Much too heavy on the stomach . . .' There was a moment of silence. She drew on her clove again. 'So do you have a name?'

'Oscar,' he said.

'Os-car. That's nice.' She spoke his name out into the night, pondering it, as if she could see it scrolling across the sky, on a banner pulled by an aeroplane. 'Well, Oscar, don't take this the

wrong way or anything, but church doesn't really seem like your scene. I was watching you in there—you didn't know a bloody word of any of the hymns.'

'Was it that obvious?'

'Oh, it's not a bad thing. I'm not exactly St Francis of Assisi myself.'

'To be honest, I just sort of stumbled in. Something about the music, the sound of the organ. I can't quite explain it.'

'That's my excuse, too.' She breathed out another whorl from the side of her mouth. 'My brother's the organ scholar. That was him playing tonight. I'm just a tagalong.'

'Really?'

'*Really*. It's not the kind of thing I'd bother to lie about.'

'Well, he plays that thing better than anyone I've ever heard. You can tell him from me.'

'Oh, he doesn't need any more positive reinforcement,' she said, laughing at the thought. 'His head's going to swell up like a bloody zeppelin when I tell him you only came inside for the music. He'll take all the credit for that. I love my brother dearly, but I'm afraid the humility gene passed him by.'

Oscar smiled. He could see the Gatehouse beyond her shoulder, yellowed by the desklamps in the porters' lodge, and she was almost outlined by the glow. 'I suppose you're a postgrad,' she said, flitting her eyes towards him again. 'I can tell postgrads from fifty paces. You're all baggy leather and comfortable shoes.'

'Sorry to disappoint you.'

'Alright, okay then—a post-doc. My radar's off.'

'I'm not any kind of student,' he said.

'You mean, you don't go here *at all*?' It was as if she'd never met anyone from beyond the hallowed grounds. 'But you look so—'

'So what?'

'*Serious*.'

He didn't know if this was a compliment or an accusation.

'I mean, you're practically a fully-fledged member of society

already,' she went on. 'I bet you pay taxes and everything. How old are you?' She raised her cigarette to her mouth, left it waiting at her lips. 'I'm sorry. I know it's rude to ask that question, but you can't be much older than I am. Sometimes I can't imagine what else there is to *do* here besides study.'

'I'm twenty,' he said.

'See, I knew you weren't much older.'

She was not the sort of girl Oscar had grown up around: the mouthy teens who talked inanely on the backs of buses and blocked the smoggy corridors of nightclubs on weekends, whose drunken kisses he'd experienced with cold disappointment on dark, windless recs. She had pedigree—that much was clear from her voice—and he liked the way she looked at him, curious not judgemental. There was depth to her, he could tell. A kind of unashamed intelligence.

'I work at a place called Cedarbrook. It's a nursing home,' he told her. 'But you don't have to pity me—I know how to read and write and everything.'

'*Pity* you? Christ, I envy you,' she said. 'Cedarbrook. That's the lovely old building on Queen's Road, isn't it? They have all that beautiful wisteria growing on the walls.'

'Yeah. That's the place.'

'Well, anyone who can make wisteria bloom like that every spring deserves a trophy. I walk past that house quite often, just to look at the gardens.'

'I can't take any credit for the wisteria. Not my department. But I'll pass it along.'

She looked down at the scuffed black toecaps of her shoes, rocking on the edges of her feet. 'This is my little corner of the world. I'm a King's girl. Medicine, second year, if you can believe it.'

'Must be hard work.'

'It's not too bad really. Not *all* of the time, anyway.'

Oscar could only try to imagine the way she lived. He'd been in

Cambridge long enough to know the hours the students worked, to see them on the other side of library windows late at night, red-eyed, ruffle-haired. But he knew as little about the everyday lives of Cambridge students as they knew about the daily machinations of Cedarbrook. What went on inside the closed-off doorways of the colleges was an enduring mystery to him. He only knew that it was better to be near to these places, to walk by them and imagine what high-minded discussions were unfolding inside, than to be somewhere like home, where every conversation was audible on the high street and the only landmarks were shopping centres.

When he asked for her name, she replied: 'It's Iris. Like the genus.' And he laughed—just a short vent of air from his nose, but enough for her to step back and say, 'What's so funny?'

'Most people would say *like the flower*, that's all.'

'Well, I'm not most people. I'm not going to say it's like the flower when I know perfectly well that it's a genus. And I'll tell you something else.' She broke for a gulp of breath. 'I know exactly which variety I am. *Iris milifolia*. The hardest one to look after.'

'But worth the effort, I'm sure.'

She gazed back at him proudly, the lights of the college buildings reflecting in her lenses. Though Oscar could feel the tiredness more than ever now, weighing down his eyelids, he didn't want to leave. This was where he was meant to be, talking to this strange pretty girl, with her clove and bergamot scent and her copy of Descartes. He wanted to stretch the moment out as far as it would go, tauten it until it broke apart.

'Listen, this might sound a little, y'know,' Iris said, letting the sentence drop away. She scratched the side of her arm and glanced at him. 'It's just, my chamber group has a recital later this week, out at West Road. If you're not doing anything on Sunday night, would you like to come? We could really use all the support we can get.'

He didn't need a second to think about it. 'Yeah, okay. I'll be there.'

'Won't be hard to get a ticket at the door, believe me,' she said. Then, for reasons that weren't clear to him, she laughed out loud.

'What?' he said.

'It's nothing. It's just—you're really going to go, aren't you?'

'Yeah.'

'Just like that?'

'Yeah.'

'But you don't even know if we're any good. I haven't even told you what instrument I play. I could be the world's lousiest trombonist, for all you know.'

'I'm not doing anything else that night. And if your brother's an organ scholar, you can't be all that bad.'

'How inductive of you,' she said. 'Do you even know what an organ scholar is?'

'No, but it sounds important.'

'In the college, *yes.* In the real world, *no*.' She told him that two scholarships were awarded every couple of years at King's. There was great competition for places amongst undergraduates, and usually a first-year and a third-year were appointed. Her brother was one of the only students in the history of the college to be awarded a scholarship twice. 'A normal person wouldn't want all the extra hassle in his final year, but that's my brother for you. He's irregular.' It was the organ scholars' job to play at the chapel services; they worked on a shift rotation: one week on, one week off. They also assisted the Director of Music in his duties. 'If the Director can't make it for some reason, the organ scholar has to conduct the choir. It hardly ever happens, though. Maybe once a year. My brother's always hoping something horrible will befall the Director, but he's healthy as an ox.' She stubbed out her clove on the drainpipe. 'Anyway, I'll be very glad to see you on Sunday, if you still want to come.'

'Are you an organist too?' he asked.

'Me? No. *God*, no. I play the cello.' She gave a little sigh, as if she'd been saddled with an instrument she had no interest in. As if one day in a school music lesson all the triangles and tambourines had been doled out, and her teacher had handed her a hunk of wood and said, *Here, play this until I find you something better.* 'I haven't been practising much recently. Not the recital pieces, anyway.'

'Why not?'

'Because studying medicine is quite demanding of my time.'

'Right.'

'And in my free time I read stuff like this.' She raised the book. 'Things my brother tells me I should be reading. I suppose I'm a glutton for punishment that way. *The Passions of the Soul*. Tell me honestly: am I wasting my youth? Should I just be out there getting drunk with the rest of them?'

'That would be a bigger waste, I think.'

Her face slackened. 'My problem is, I'm too easily steered off course. Have to be doing several things at once.'

'You're a butterfly catcher,' he said.

'What?'

'That's what my father would call you.'

'Well, I suppose that's a kinder phrase than *hyperactive.* He must be more patient than my parents.'

Oscar just nodded, peering at the ground. It was strange to hear someone speaking well of his father, because he rarely thought of him that way. He could only recall the rain-soaked building sites where he spent most of his school holidays, helping to heave plasterboards up narrow flights of stairs, and all the weekends he lost stuffing insulation into wall cavities, filling skips with office debris. He could remember the bitterness of his father's voice when they used to argue on the job: 'Go then. Leave me. I'll do it myself. You've always got somewhere better to be, don't you? A butterfly catcher, that's what you are.' This was not patience, Oscar knew, but a resentful kind of endurance.

By the time he turned back to Iris, her attention was elsewhere. She'd noticed something over his shoulder and was gathering herself to leave, fixing her scarf, patting down her coat. The remains of her cigarette lay trodden at her feet. 'My brother's here,' she said. 'I better go.'

Oscar heard the gentle tinkling of bike spokes, and spun around to see a man in a pinstripe blazer wheeling a shiny Peugeot racer, dynamo lights strobing on the path. His corduroy trousers were turned up at the ankles, and a mass of wavy hair was spilling from the edges of his bike helmet. There was something ungainly about the way his blazer hung on his body—shoulders and elbows still prominent beneath the fabric, like a sheet thrown over an upturned table.

'Just a sec,' Iris called to him. She took off her glasses and pushed them into the top pocket of her coat. Without them, her face was more evenly proportioned. 'Here,' she said, tossing the Descartes to her brother. 'Say what you like about French philosophy, but it's no good when you read it in the dark.'

Her brother caught the book and stuffed it into the back of his trousers. 'I'm not letting you off the hook that easily. You're getting it back first thing tomorrow.' He squinted at Oscar as if appraising an antique. 'Who's your friend?'

'This is Oscar,' she told him. 'We've been shooting the breeze, as Yin would say.'

'Oh, yeah? About what?'

'Religion, flowers—all the big issues.'

'I see.'

'Did *you* know the iris is a genus?' she said.

Her brother lifted an eyebrow. 'I think I knew that *in utero*.' Propping the bike-frame against one knee, he leaned to offer his slender hand to Oscar. 'If we wait for her to introduce us, we'll be here all night. The name's Eden.' His grip was solid and unforgiving. 'Thanks for keeping her company.'

'My pleasure,' Oscar said. He couldn't quite see Eden's face—

it was partly drawn over by the shadows of the chapel spires—but he could tell that his skin had the texture of a seashell, smooth yet flawed. 'Was that really you playing in there? I've never heard an organ sound so good.'

Eden glanced up at the sky. 'Oh. Well. Thank you. I try my best.'

'You couldn't save his soul, though,' Iris said. 'He's a non-believer.' She perched side-saddle on the crossbar of the bike, placing an arm around her brother and kissing him softly on the cheek. 'Shall we go?'

Eden received the kiss, barely reacting. 'Yes, let's,' he said, 'before the porters catch me on this thing. I've already been warned about riding through.'

'I don't know why you insist on cycling. Just take a cab.'

'It's become something of a battle of wills. First man to blink loses. Can't let that happen.' Eden lowered his voice to say something into her ear and she laughed, hitting his arm playfully. 'Shut *up*,' she said. 'Don't say that.' Then, with a stiff movement of his legs, Eden started to pedal away. 'Good to meet you, Oscar,' Iris said.

'Yeah. Same.'

'See you Sunday.'

'Yeah. Sunday.'

They were quite a sight, the two of them: Eden pumping hard at the pedals just to keep the bike upright, and Iris with her long legs stretched out a few inches above the ground. As they approached the Gatehouse, where the lawn turned at a right angle, she called out into the hazy lamplight, but Oscar couldn't quite tell what she was saying.

Dr Paulsen was sleeping in the leather armchair by the window. His head was limp against his shoulder, heavy as a lettuce, and the sun was edging across his face. 'How are we this morning?' Oscar said. He gathered a pillow from the bed and waited for the

old man to stir. It was after nine a.m. and he knew that Dr Paulsen would want to be woken; unlike the other residents, he was not a man who was happy to sleep the day away. He didn't like to waste time on television the way the others did, or spend a whole week assembling a jigsaw that only revealed a picture of a sunny foreign vista he was too old to visit. ('I've never understood the concept of the jigsaw,' he once said. 'I mean, the picture's already on the box—where's the mystery?') His room was very different from the others: bright with natural light, dense with furniture and books, and the scent of urine was fainter here than anywhere else in the building. Oscar put this down to the extra care the nurses took in emptying Paulsen's bottle—the old man was so cold to most of them that they were terrified of spilling a drop.

Dr Paulsen lifted his head, a web of drool caught against his chin. 'Oh, it's you,' he said, looking at Oscar, dew-eyed. 'Is it that time already? I was having a wonderful dream about … well, about something. I think Rupert Brooke was in it. Somebody was swimming naked in the Cam, anyway. If I were thirty years younger, I would've found it all quite arousing.'

Oscar placed the pillow behind the old man's neck. 'Are you coming down for breakfast today? Or are we still keeping ourselves to ourselves?'

'I haven't decided.' Paulsen sat upright in the chair. 'The more I look at these same four walls, the more I feel like Edmond Dantès. A heroic bearer of injustice.' He narrowed his eyes at Oscar. 'You're very chirpy this morning. What's got into you?'

'Nothing.'

'Rubbish. Did you get a pay rise?'

'No.'

'Good. The rates here are already extortionate.'

Oscar smiled. With a groan, he lifted Paulsen up by the elbows, and when the old man was steady on his feet, he said: 'Actually, I sort of met somebody last night. A girl.'

'Hand me my dressing gown, would you?' Paulsen said. 'I have to process this information.' Oscar retrieved the old man's silk robe from the hook and held out the sleeves for him. Slowly, Paulsen reached his arms through and, with knotted, arthritic fingers, made very hard work of tying the cord. 'Okay, let's pretend this imaginary girl you're talking about is real. Tell me about her. I'll humour you for a moment.'

'Oh, she's definitely real.'

'Convince me,' Paulsen said.

Oscar tried to describe Iris in every last detail—the glossy whites of her eyes, her cigarette smell, the gentle drape of her hair against her neck. When he told him about the book she'd been reading and where she was studying, the old man interrupted: 'Warning lights are flashing now. But go on. Tell me you got her phone number.'

'I didn't quite get that far.'

'You're hopeless,' Paulsen said. 'It's a good job she's imaginary.'

Dr Paulsen was the only resident at Cedarbrook whom Oscar could talk to. He was born in Oxford but had been an English professor at Cambridge and a Fellow at King's College for over thirty years. He kept a library in his room, hardbacks stacked alphabetically by author on dark wood shelves. There were more books in his room than anything else, in fact; more novels and poetry collections and anthologies than stripes on the wallpaper. He wouldn't let the other nurses touch them, but he allowed Oscar to read them in his company, and, for a year now, he'd been letting him take home a book at a time.

They had an understanding between them. Oscar was the only nurse who recognised Paulsen's need for privacy. The others tried to force him to be sociable; they'd set a place for him at the dinner table and wonder why he wouldn't come downstairs, meal after meal after meal. The old man could be gloomy, abrasive, downright rude. But in the few years Oscar had been

working at Cedarbrook, he'd found a way to overlook Paulsen's fits of temper, because he knew he was capable of genuine kindness. And he was learning so much from the old man, simply by reading the books he recommended. In the last six months, he'd read novels by Graham Greene, Herman Hesse, the collected stories of Gianni Celati, Katherine Mansfield, Frank O'Connor, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and essays by George Orwell. He had almost forgotten how much he loved to read; the private cadence of the words as his eyes passed over them. His parents were the kind of people who owned bookshelves but no books. They didn't understand the pleasure of reading and never thought it was something they needed to encourage. In their lives, books were optional, things foisted on children at school by dishevelled English teachers. Oscar was raised to believe that if he stayed in his room reading about made-up worlds it meant he didn't appreciate the life he had, the possessions his parents had worked hard for, like the TV and the video and the newly-turfed back garden. If he read books, his father would ask him if he was okay, if he was feeling unwell, and whatever happened to that friend of his who came over once for tea. Back on his parents' estate in Watford, life was easier if he didn't read. So he trained himself not to want to.

But ever since Dr Paulsen invited him to borrow from his library last year—'Choose something. Anything. I don't do recommendations'—Oscar had begun to recall the joy of reading. Sometimes he could get through three or four books a month if things were slow at Cedarbrook, more if he worked nights. There were evenings when all the residents had been put to bed and the nurse-call buttons were no longer chiming, and he could spend long hours in the empty parlour, reading in the lamplight, his fingers dry against the pages, smelling of antibacterial soap. These were the times when he was happiest.

'Alright, let's go and see what they're passing off as breakfast,' Paulsen said. 'Might as well start making an effort.' He held out

his arm, like a gentleman asking a lady to dance. Oscar retrieved the old man's walking stick from the foot of the bed and placed it into his hand. 'Should I expect a red carpet or what?'

'They'll be sounding the trumpets for you.'

'Good, good.'

Oscar led him down the dim corridor. After a few steps, the old man spoke into his ear: 'Listen, you want to be careful.'

'About what?'

'About fraternising with Cambridge girls. Their daddies don't like them being with boys like you for too long. They consider it a waste of school fees.'

'Well, I'll keep my wits about me.'

'Make sure you do. Besides—' Another resident, Mrs Brady, stepped out into the hallway and Dr Paulsen went quiet. He stopped walking. She peered at them both and creased up her face, confused. There was a silent standoff between them, like two old cowboys meeting in the thoroughfare of a pioneer town. Then Mrs Brady turned, disappearing back into her room, and Dr Paulsen started walking again. 'What was I saying?'

'Besides.'

'Right. Yes. Besides, Cambridge students are very strange people, in my experience. They know so much about science and literature it makes them have peculiar habits when it comes to other things. Like dancing, and decorating their homes. You're best away from people like that. Stick with the salt-of-the-earth types like me.'

'I would,' Oscar said, 'except you're the strangest person I know.'

They reached the top of the stairs. He took the old man's cane and heaved him safely into the stair lift. Paulsen said: 'I should have a copy of the Descartes somewhere. It's yours if you can find it.'

'Thanks.'

'Just don't go scribbling love hearts in the margins.'

Oscar smiled. He placed the cane across the armrests, as if it were a drop-bar on a roller coaster, and when he was sure that Paulsen was secure, he pressed the green button and watched him descend, gradually, noisily, to the floor below.