

Preamble

My grandfather, who's English, often says that the stories of our lives are shaped by History. My grand-mother, who's Welsh, immediately argues the opposite: History, with a capital H, is the sum of all sorts of personal histories.

- So, what begets our 'personal histories'? growls my grandad.
- Depends, replies my grandmother. Satin sheets, pearls and silverware launch the lives of the rich. For people like us, it all starts with cabbages, mud and pebbles.

Rigor mortis

My first encounter with the spoon is the night my father died.

I'm leaning against the side of his bed. Motionless. My mother, grand-parents, two brothers, Labrador, and doctor Aymer are dotted around the bedroom, lost in thought and vaguely reminiscent of *The Death of Germanicus*, though nobody's wearing a Roman toga and no-one's been poisoned – I think.

The bedroom's silence is a noise in itself. Something dense and sustained, like when you hold your nose under water. The only real sound is the click of my brother's teeth, Al always chews the skin around his nails when worried.

Pallor mortis, the doctor announced, draping a sheet over my father's pale face. Latin to distance himself from the situation. Doc Aymer is hiding behind erudition my father would say. I can't stop staring at the sheet. I think his feet are moving. I won't look at mum. My eyesight is odd anyhow. Unfocused. Blurry.

Brain-slide backwards.

I remember banging the kitchen door two or three hours ago. Two minutes ago – or ten? – Nana burst into my bedroom.

– Seren, quick love!

– What's wrong?

– Oh *cariad*. Your dad...

Poor old Nana. Breathless because of the stairs.

A pyjama fold has escaped the sheet. Grey stripe, blue stripe, grey stripe... colours merge, stripes hover, four-dimensional. I'm out-of-focus again. My fingers check the existence of my eyelids. Everything is alright. *Nothing is alright*.

Dai, my second brother, crouches down to stroke the Labrador. *There's a good boy*. Groan of satisfaction from dog. This night is absurd. As I switch in and out of the blur, I catch sight of mum patting my father's chest in an affectionate, mundane, sort of way. Mother, he's dead, remember? Of course, I don't say that. Now she's uttering a soundless little yelp. A stunned squeal of air. To be honest, we all look stunned.

Especially my father. Under the sheet.

English test tomorrow. A-levels. I wonder if Death of Parent is a valid reason for absence. The sheet concealing his body is linen. Beige linen, possibly a dash of pink. Difficult to tell in this light. *Linen, line, linear, lineage, linger...* Am I imploding? No, digressing.

I tend to digress. Mum often says my dashes and parentheses confuse her. My dad says he needs footnotes to follow my train of thoughts.

Mum slips the rebel pyjama fold under the sheet. She must have sensed it was freaking me out. When I press my thumbs against my eyelids, my brain's digressions become vaporous filaments that sting. Eyes. Open. There's the bedside table, there's my father's *ultimate* cup of tea, and there's –

I see it.

The Spoon.

– What's that spoon?

My entire family looks up. Correction: *my entire family* except for Al, busy chewing his skin, and my father, for obvious reasons.

I rephrase: Where does that silver spoon come from?

Mum smiles, with difficulty:

– I don't know Seren love, hasn't it always been around?

My heart breaks. My mother is attempting to smile. She's just become a widow. I carry the spoon into my own bedroom and spend the rest of the night sketching it.

I digress less when I sketch. Or my digressions only orbit the object being sketched. The silver spoon strikes me as both familiar and unfamiliar, a good case of *jamais-vu* and *déjà-vu*. As mum said, it may have been around for years. The Chough Hotel possesses tons of cutlery. I can imagine the spoon mingling with our other knives and forks and spoons, on tables, in the sink, buried inside jars of rice and flour, forgotten at the back of a drawer. I simply never noticed it.

Within this strange night where no-one sleeps, I realise that we live surrounded by things to which we grant no interest until they disappear, break or are revealed under a new light.

At dawn, when the telephone's constant ring launches the mortuary rites, I put aside my pencils and contemplate the spoon in the light of the day.

It is beautiful and solid and mysterious.

The opposite of my life, it seems, at this point in time.

Asking Oneself Deep Questions

The beekeeper's track flows through the woods onto a narrow road. The fact that I'm driving behind a tractor gives me the leisure to admire the green and brown hues of the trees without worrying about crashing into another car. I can even check the beekeeper's map, more for pleasure than necessity – only one road lies before me.

As we drive out of the forest, light falls all around us but we only pass two desolate hamlets. This area of France obviously suffers from the same desertification afflicting pockets of Wales. I'm hungry. An *omelette* and a few slices of *saucisson* would be nice. And I need to find a post-box for Mum's postcard. The sky is a deep blue flat speckled with placid clouds. I wonder what comes next. Tranquil rains, a cold patch or a heatwave? This land is a stranger.

After a while, the road encounters two choices: straightness bordered by plane trees to the north, bends and zigzags to the south. According to the beekeeper's map, the southern region of Burgundy boasts more *chateaux*. Ten minutes later, I'm parking the Volvo near a village square in a quaint village with a yellow letter-box and a café prolonged by a terrace bathed in shadows and sunlight.

The lady who brings the menu hovers beside me as I stare at the words and try to organize them in my head and decide whether I feel like sweetness or savoury, and do I have enough Francs to pay?

She sighs. Says the kitchen is closed. *La cuisine est fermée*. Returns with a *plateau de fromage*. Three tiny and tough off-white cheeses, a blue-veined wedge and a crusty square of yellow cream. I'm sure there's an art to tasting them, an order, a sequence, but I improvise with colours then wolf down the slices of bread in the pink plastic basket.

As I sketch the village square, the sun tans my toes.

I don't think I'll send my postcard to mum after all. She has other fish to fry – or *cats to whip*, as the French say – than answering my list of interrogations. Such thoughts incite me to put aside my drawing pad and spend ten minutes crossing out superfluous phrases on the back of the postcard.

- Tourist, affirms the waitress, picking up my plate.
- *Ouais*. Where do I find myself, if you please?
- Here, now? *Charremoi*. And she would like a dessert?

I'm confused by the syntax, who on earth is she talking about? I'm the only person on the terrace. Perhaps the inhabitants of this village apply an indirect form when addressing foreigners. In the UK, people only do that in hospices and retirement homes. Pompom has told us to shoot him should he reach the stage when nurses ask: 'And how are *we* today?'. Nana said she'd shoot the nurse first.

The bland and pasty photographs on the dessert menu make me feel insecure. I finally point to *Tarte aux pommes* but the waitress comes back with sour ice-cream packed into a frozen lemon. One must eat cold today, she says.

People inexorably want me to do what they want to do. What do *I* want?

Who am I asking?

Is it futile to probe oneself with deep, unanswerable, questions? If I could answer, they wouldn't be questions... Such thoughts disappear on seeing the bill but I lack the vocabulary, and the confidence, to negotiate.

Dear Mum,

When you were my age you already owned the Red-billed Chough Hotel and had given birth to Dai. I don't want to ~~get pregnant~~, but I must do ~~something with my life~~ don't you think?

I've been wondering: Why did you mention that Dad knew ~~me so well~~? I didn't know ~~him at all~~. I knew his passion for boats and his perseverance with Al, his impatience with the Long-Time-Clients, his jokes for Dai, his aversion to Conservatives and the government in general, I knew about the rheumatisms in his jaw, and his love of diagrams, fossils and the Pleiades... ~~but~~ really, I knew nothing about him. For instance, ~~what did he think about every evening, sitting on the cliff, staring at the sea?~~

~~He often said~~ I botched everything. Why? And why did you choose him? Mum, why did you fall in love with an Englishman ~~who was so much older than you, it was obvious he'd die?~~

Last question: ~~Would Dad have encouraged me to study Fine Arts?~~ I wonder if ~~that's why he told Al~~ my drawings must be kept? I'd like ~~to know~~.

I love you. I miss you. This trip is amazing.

Seren XXXXX.