**Festschrift**

Can there be, can there honestly be a more stirring monument to the depthless mysteries of the male mind than this: that there exists, for each and every one of us, a lifetime tally of sexual accomplishment? A number it is given to few to know precisely, but an empirically valid one nonetheless. It is the figure you look back on, on your deathbed, and, proverbially, would never wish lower than it is. Not, you understand, the number of distinct sexual partners, which is after all a more manageable and quantifiable statistic, but of the individual acts themselves, stacked up in fair years and fallow.

It was my ex-husband who uncovered to me this most secret measure of the world. We were in bed, and he said, in the moment after he rolled himself off me, lying there beset already by gasps of laughter, that he wasn’t even sure if that one *would count* (the laughter starting mid-thrust – or, more precisely – at the completion or apex of a thrust, when he’d said, having suddenly ceased all movement, as if struck dumb, or religious, I think I’ve come.

You *think*…

I can’t tell. Can you tell?).

What do you mean, *count*? I said.

You know, he said, flopping the back of a hand onto my tummy.If it’ll count. In my running total.

That mystical number, he went on,when he saw I’d no idea what he was talking about,that I’ll be able to look back on, as I draw my last breath, and only ever wish it had been higher than it was.

I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.

It’s what people say, isn’t it? No one ever says, when they look back on their life, that they wish they’d had less sex.

Is that what they say, I said.

I don’t mean to seem flippant, or maudlin, but this is what I was thinking of, as I lay in my wide and comfy conference bed, in my well-appointed conference hotel, and thought of my friend and mentor Leonard P­­eters, asleep as he probably was – as I hoped he was: soundly, painlessly – in some other room of this hotel, in this other country of the world, hours away by plane from our native land.

 And I conjured my ex-husband, as I sometimes do in times of stress, or insomnia, or self-pity, and I turned on one elbow to face him. What about this, then, I said. What about my feelings for this man, feelings of pity and – yes, perhaps – of regret? This man I respect, immensely, that I have spent most of my professional life actively and instinctively respecting, but who I declined to go to bed with when he asked – or not even asked, really, but merely obliquely indicated his wish to do so. Whom I turned down when he drunkenly – probably – courageously – probably – and regretfully – definitely – propositioned me, that one time. Which he never did again. He was most considerate about it.

And now, looking back, I think – and this is the maudlin bit – what would have been the harm, in the grander scheme of things, if I had said yes? No question but I’ve said yes in instances I regretted – and sometimes regret to this day – far more than I would most likely have had cause to then, and instances too that were no less free of the taint of the workplace. I’ve failed to say no to worse men, men far inferior to him in character, and for all I know in bed too. And he was harmless, of that I’m sure. A fuck would have been a fuck. He’d divorced not long before, and was of an age of which I understand, now, the strange and desperate disorientation, and I was recently on the scene, and it was Christmas, and I think it just came over him, the animal need to pitch yourself forward, reach after something, steady yourself.

Work is the measure of all things – this is a belief of mine, perhaps even a maxim – and when you have sat across a boardroom table from someone in a departmental meeting for even five minutes there can be, there can surely be no surprises for you when you face them in the bedroom. Leonard was harmless – *is* harmless – and what harm can it have done to have slept with him that once? So that now, when he looks back on his life, he has one fewer regret. Or two fewer regrets; for, knowing him as I do, the regret that he never got to sleep with little old me would surely have been compounded by the second regret, following quick on its heels, and lasting far longer, that he asked me at all.

So why ask me? you might say, blinking your eyes and widening them in that way you do when I wake you up from wherever it is you sleep, when I think you back into existence.

Or, just as likely, you’d say, When was this? Was this when we were married?

You’ve turned onto your side, now, too, and so we lie facing each other, a foot of rumpled bed between us. We are mirrored, our heads propped on hands. You say it jokingly, camply, as if what you really want to say is, Was it because of *me* that you turned him down? Out of *fidelity* to our *marriage*? But you don’t say any of these things. What you say is, Why are you asking me this now? And I see that you’re serious, that you’ve seen through me, or through yourself, as conjured by me, and so I have to answer you.

This morning, during the coffee break before the second morning session – each coffee break a late Beckett play, one of the ones with diagrams instead of dialogue – I slipped away for a cigarette, as much to get some air on my face as for the thing itself, to rinse out my brain a little with traffic noise.

My smoking spot here, that a member of staff showed me on the first day, os a small courtyard down a dog-leg corridor from the suite of seminar rooms. Courtyard too grand a word. Poured concrete walls on three sides, with thick skeins of cables running along them and then disappearing around the corner, and, if you looked up, a single thin horizontal wire that trailed from it a creeper of some kind. It was only that, the green waterfall of toxic-looking leaves, and the off-set square of blue sky beyond the rising storeys, that told you where you were – or that you were somewhere even at all. At home I’m down to one cigarette a day, and have been since… well more or less since the divorce papers came through, thank you very much. I’m only really a smoker at conferences and the like, these days. It’s so much more useful a vice now that so few people do it.

This, time, however, I had barely taken that first deep, and deeply freighted breath, before I heard the door open behind me, and a man came through it. Having, clearly, followed me.

‘Hi there,’ he said. ‘Mind if I join you?’

I had the elbow of my cigarette arm cupped in my other hand, and I waved the tip of the cigarette in as tight an ellipse as I could manage without seeming rude.

‘Nice spot,’ he said, and tamped a cigarette on his pack, as he looked up and around him. He looked at me to see if I was responding, was perhaps looking up, too, as if I hadn’t noticed how nice my spot was until I’d had it pointed out to me. I kept my eyes on him, though, and sucked on my cigarette. He seemed to take this on the chin; he nodded, tucked the pack back into his shirt pocket, and lit up, with a match from a book from the hotel bar. Perhaps he’d been driven to it, too. He had slicked-back unwashed hair with winding streaks of grey in it, the hair thick enough to swallow them whole and spit them out again, further back. He looked Greek, or something like it. Handsomeness part-way compressed by the great gentle fist of poor diet and age.

‘So you know Leonard how?’ he said.

‘Manchester,’ I said. I waited a moment, then went on. ‘He was my PhD supervisor, and then I got a job there.’

He made a show of looking for my name badge, which I wasn’t wearing.

‘Eleanor Prose. Like the bad joke.’

‘Eleanor *Prose*. *Right*. No, no jokes at all.’

He seemed impressed, and asked about my keynote address – which I will be giving in something under twelve hours, now, as I lie here, facing you, thinking all this through, trying to find a way out through its far end – and I said something in reply about his paper, which he had given that morning and of which I retained more than I pretended to.

He smoked faster than me, and when he came to the end of his cigarette he brushed it down the wall to dislodge the burning tip, which fell, complete, like a scab from healed skin. It landed and lay on the floor like a dead insect, iridescent. He placed his shoe over it.

‘If Leonard could see me now. Shit. Makes me fucking hate myself.’

He shook his head, but this time when he looked at me my incomprehension must have shown. He gestured with the butt he still held. ‘Leonard,’ he said.

‘Leonard.’

‘You know, Leonard.’

He stopped – stopped speaking, stopped himself in the act of speech – then started again. ‘Leonard, you know…’

The point at which he realised he was going to have to tell me was also the point at which he no longer had to.

So much that is spoken in life is redundant. Verbal communication as an overlapping and repetitive series of superfluities. White noise, chatter, birdsong. A doily all cutwork and no mat.

Leonard had lung cancer.

Leonard had lung cancer and he was dying of it. Everybody knew it. How could I not know? How did he, how could that *be*? It was far gone, my new Greek-looking friend told me, beyond all beyonds, and everybody knew. The fact that everybody knew was clear from his shock at the fact that I didn’t. Everybody there, at the conference, everyone but me. The other speakers, my peers, friends and colleagues that would sit facing me the following afternoon – the coming afternoon, now – in the main lecture theatre, when I spoke to them about Leonard, his career and his work: they all knew. The early career academics from Bangkok and Sao Paolo: they knew. The grad students from the host university, smart and crisp as new-baked macaroons in their conference clothes, that stood aside at the coffee table, at my approach: they knew. That they withdrew and conversed in whispers when I approached was not because of me, my books and ideas and the fact of my presence, here in a hotel in their city, pumping thin black coffee from a vacuum flask along the trestle table from them, but because of me, how I could walk around like this oblivious when Leonard was dying of cancer, dying, as good as dead.

I had been intending, for the second morning session, to sit in on a seminar featuring my old friend and colleague Derek Boener, also once of Manchester, but I didn’t. Instead I went to listen to a fringe panel that Leonard was chairing. So like him, to rock up to his celebratory conference, his Festschrift, the pinnacle of his career, a lovingly constructed peak from which he could survey the forest that has sprung up around the globe, all grown from seeds carried on the four winds from his originating tree, and instead of listening to us all sound off grandly about how important it all was, he’d head up a panel of grad students from Bupkiss, Ohio, or Dubrovnik or wherever, who are actually taking his ideas and doing something with them. Not leaving them in any decent state in the process, it has to said, but that’s Leonard for you. And grad students. I slunk into the back row, to sit with the other no-goodniks, slid my tablet onto my lap as cover, and watched him. His ease at the table, leaning first to his left then his right, pouring glasses of water for the presenters, one of whom was actually visibly shaking with nerves. Taking off his watch and placing it, in that classic trope of academia, on the table in front of him. A combination of gaucheness and verve that would have been disarming, if I hadn’t already been thoroughly, comprehensively disarmed, dismembered, irradiated.

The first presenter, the nervy one, stood up, went to the computer and opened her slideshow. The sheaf of papers in her hands, as she faced us, shivered, a constant, delicate movement. I thought of my father sifting flour in the kitchen. Mid-twenties, smartly turned out, she could have been me, twenty years ago. I’d puked in the loos ten minutes before I gave my first conference paper. That’s still the taste of academia, to me, the acid bite of reflux. She wasn’t shaking from nerves, the girl, she had a condition, multiple sclerosis or somesuch. I slipped a pill of chewing gum into my mouth, fervently wishing it were cyanide, and rested a hand like a visor over my eyes to watch. She talked, and people listened, sure enough, but the rushing in my ears was easily enough to drown out any words.

Instead, I watched him. What I was looking for, I don’t know.

I do know. I was looking for the mark of death. Such a thing must exist. In the realm of the cancerous, at least. My auntie Evelyn died of cancer of the stomach, and you could see it in her from half a mile away. She, too, was prone to vomiting, the confused response of the body to something inside it, that it wanted to get outside, and that it thought it could simply wash out with the rest of the garbage. There was no mark on Leonard, though, that I could disentangle from the general marks of age, which is nothing more than death smudging you with its thumb, smearing your features, letting you know you’re not forgotten, you haven’t been passed over. Christ, listen to me.

I’m listening.

When the session ended I headed out quickly to the foyer to ambush Derek, positioning myself by some fabric-covered display boards with A4 sheets tacked on them. He was practically the last person out of his room, swept out on a wave of admirers, all flagrantly nodding and smiling and listening and talking as they manoeuvred themselves around him, never quite jostling, never quite flinging him to the floor and ripping the flesh from his skeleton.

I reached in and pulled him out by the sleeve, firing a barely human grin at the nearest hanger-on, and marched him over to the window.

‘Did you know?’ I said, practically hissing out the question.

Of course he knew.

How was it that I didn’t know, was the real question. Had I been under a rock for the last twelve months? The information had been disseminated sensitively, but rationally. Someone must have told me. Probably Leonard did himself. (Could it have ended up in spam?) Or had I simply not processed the information, let it pass undigested through my system?

‘Look,’ he said. ‘We’re going for lunch. Come along.’ He nodded to where Leonard was coming into the foyer, with his own coterie – did they know – surely they knew – but then how could they even *talk* to him if they did?

I backed away, giving another smile that this time was surely no more than a flinch, and slipped myself into the general exodus. Flinch. Such a beautiful word.

‘You alright?’ someone said. It was my American friend, walking at my side.

He asked if I wanted to go and get a bite to eat.

Why does everyone want to go for lunch? What does it signify, lunch? Does it even have a point? Stand facing the wall and eat a sandwich. Eat a burger or a kebab if you must. Eat a cigarette. Lunch is just a question of what you want to end up smelling of afterwards, and as such – yes, I know it’s your line – rather like sex.

I went back to my room, where I’m lying now, and lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling. Alone with my thoughts. Those interlopers.

Well, you say, as we stare at each other, here in the dark, with only the small, incidental sounds of a hotel room to accompany us. Little noises, like creatures, like insects that you are quite happy to share the space with. What do you want me to say? you say. That you’re a heartless bitch with sociopathic tendencies? All that ‘I don’t do networking, I don’t do chit-chat, life’s too short’ bollocks: that it’s just a cloak for an innate lack of sympathy? Or not a lack, an *incapacity*. Is that what you want to hear?

It’s nothing I wouldn’t have heard from you before, I think. In which case – I know, I know – what’s the point in conjuring you here in the first place? If I’m just going to put old words in your mouth, what’s the point?

Well, that’s your call, you say. I mean, if I came out and said: that’s all a lie, it’s not you, not really. Would you even believe me? If I said that your manner, that people take as frosty, or disdainful, or even repellent – I’m *exaggerating*, no one’s ever told me they think you’re repellent, not in so many words – if I said that wasn’t who you are; at heart you’re a sweetie, and can be discovered as such, and considered as such, so long as no one treats you as such. If I said all that, you wouldn’t believe me, would you?

No, I say. No I wouldn’t.

I spent the afternoon in one of the few sessions conducted in the native language of our hosts. Which I don’t speak. But which is, I had thought, and now had confirmed for me, enchanting to listen to. The delightful play of intonation, rising and falling as if according to some foreign tide, with only the odd imported Anglicism to make one wish oneself entirely deaf.

In the evening there was a formal do, organised and official, and I decided I had to go. It was that or pack my bags and leave. It was in a hall over in the old part of the university, cool stone walls and the floor a stunning pattern of tiles, blue, white and yellow, almost sickeningly regular, like fractals.

Catering staff, the click of heels on tiles, drinks on trays, and a small music ensemble tuning up in the corner, bending their heads over their instruments like wise old birds, a quartet made up of various former colleagues of Leonard’s. A tribute, a surprise, they would be playing a mixture of folk and classical and whatever the music was they played here, in this country. The kind of thing you can improvise well enough, if you have half an ear, and know the ground rules. Though no doubt at least one of the serving staff would be dying inside with each lumpen stab and phrase. It’s funny, this might be the culmination of an academic career, the Festchrift conference, but where it takes place will be quite random, usually taking over an annual conference like a cuckoo’s egg in a warbler’s nest. A friend of my father’s was a cricketer, and I remember being dragged along to his testimonial, a farewell match from his club, with the meagre takings going to him, to help him on the way in his life beyond the crease. But then sportsmen and women’s careers end so soon, whereas academics’ just go on and on.

But do they? What actual proper work has Leonard done in the last twenty years? What, for that matter, have I done, in the last five? What will I do in the next twenty, until such a time that I stand there, like Leonard, glass in hand, soaking up the general admiration and love, as if that were some kind of consolation for the approach – for the onset – of death?

We speak of admiration, respect, friendship. But if the expression of that admiration takes the form of the sexual, who’s to say that’s not appropriate? The sexual gift speaks something that just cannot be said by keynote address, nor by sincere words spoken with rented glass of sparkling wine in hand. Think of the sexual gesture in a relationship, in a *marriage* – think of its manifold ends and uses.

Yes.

Think of it.

I’m thinking.

Even a hug can’t do it, the social gesture that mimics the sexual act so brazenly, and insidiously. The bliss of contact, the shock of boundaries overstepped; the breadth of physical coverage, as it happens; the brevity of it, when it’s over. And I don’t mean that in a facetious way, I say.

I know you don’t, you say, and I nod and close my eyes.

You were a good listener, after all, I think. I’m not making *that* up.

These, then, were the thoughts that buoyed along in my wake as I entered the room, took a glass from a tray and insinuated myself into the slow social whirlpool of the evening: that all these clever abstractions – these *ideas* – were a poor stand-in for the physical facts in which they originated, and which they seek to disguise, dispel, refute. Words are a poor cloth in which to dress our acts.

The thought, inserted like the tip of an unbent paperclip under the skin of my pride, that I might actually offer myself, now, in a belated show of esteem, or gratitude, or penance.

There’s something I want to tell you, I might say, but I can’t tell you it here.

Or, I think we have some unfinished business, Leonard.

What nonsense, you say, and of course you’re right.

I wouldn’t, couldn’t, say that, any more than I could clamp my mouth on his, take him by the tie and lead him, strutting like a whore, from the room. These were just goads, small injuries perpetrated upon myself, to bring myself to myself, put myself in my place, distract myself from the fact that in a few hours I would be standing up in front of everyone and addressing Leonard, and not knowing, not knowing in any manner or form, how I was to do it. What modulation of emotion was I supposed to apply to the words I had written for myself to speak; words that were, after all, not just to him and about him, but of him, from him, using him and his ideas, the bulk of his body of work, as if it could be some kind of compliment to dance around the room in someone’s clothes, or clothes you had made out of their clothes, and say, Look at me, even as you’re pointing at them. The global forest. The critical ecology. Ideas carried on the wind like seeds. What bollocks.

No wonder I’ve come as far as I have.

I crossed the room, then, ignoring Derek’s discrete wave from one group, my American friend’s raised glass from another, and walked directly to where Leonard was, cutting across the aesthetic logic of the tiles as surely as if I were chopping the hands from the statues of saints. I felt falling from me as I went, as if they were items of clothing, all the things I thought I might have said, the prepped and primped and manicured lines, such that I felt sure I looked, to the onlookers, whether they were looking or not, not just naked, but obscene. A middle-aged woman, with no clothes! And no idea of the right thing to say!

Leonard saw me come, and moved to welcome me into his group.

I leaned forward – I was in heels; those were my heels clicking – to hold his arm with my free hand, and press my wrinkled lips against his more wrinkled cheek.

‘Leonard,’ I said, and he said my name back to me.

‘You’re looking well,’ I said, and drained my face of any possible physical indication that I might mean more by the words than simplest social nicety. Or in fact that I might not. I tried in other words to give the impression that we were both safely beyond the point at which such a statement might be in any way ambiguous or uncertain. Communication as blind exchange, a corrupted potlatch in which blankets are piled up on the shore, in a world where nobody needs blankets. Or where blankets offer no warmth, no protection.

Whether anyone else there was persuaded by this, or even cared, I don’t know, but in any case Leonard – graciously, or naively, or just plain normally – seemed to take it as face value, and his acceptance seemed to put the others at ease. They smiled, and let me in their conversation, which was about the fly-past of a dozen hot air balloons they had seen in the skies above the city that day. I stood and listened, trying to mentally align myself with whatever angle they had taken vis-à-vis the whole death and cancer thing. Sure, why not, let’s talk about hot air balloons, but are we talking literally, metaphorically, obliquely, palliatively, heartlessly? In any case the music recital started quite soon after this.

And in any case I was soon on my third glass of sparkling wine.

You know where this is going.

You shake your head. How can I? you say.

How can you not?

We sat in rowed semi-circles of seats and listened, and it was good to give myself over to the tedium of the music. To know that we all submitted ourselves to it by way of a tribute to Leonard, his miraculous stoicism, his courage physical and intellectual. That he could be alive, and his death stepping ever closer, and yet that he would choose to sit and listen to music, when all it does, all it can do, is give that death a cue, a rhythm, a dance step by which it may approach.

After we had listened for a while there was a break and the music mutated from a formal recital to a sort of disco, if that’s the word (and it’s not). The players, as I said, were colleagues or ex-colleagues of Leonard. Or friends. Perhaps they were just friends. Perhaps that is what this was all about. Chairs were moved, instruments plugged into amplification. The players started again, standing now, the tempo altered, though not the music that was played, it seemed to me, and people danced. I couldn’t have been more surprised.

You danced, of course, you say.

Of course. Why do you say it like that?

Like what? I was only stating the obvious. I’ve never known you not dance. You’re a good dancer.

Well, thank you.

You’re welcome.

I danced, yes, and Leonard danced, whom I suppose I must have seen dance before, at some point, in the twenty-five years of our acquaintance. Our friendship. Our acquaintance. He danced in a way that I found intensely moving. He was like a baby elephant, swaying around the dance floor with a complete lack of coordination or, really, self-awareness, or awareness of others. People sort of ignored him, and sort of acknowledged him, giving him space. An old man, or nearly old man, or nearly dead man, aping the moves and affectations of the young, or of what he thought of as the young – even I knew enough to know that no one danced like that anymore. Not that any of the real youngsters danced – they were too uncertain about the social-academic etiquette of how to dance in an ancient hall of an ancient university hosting an international conference that was stuffed with your elders and betters. This wasn’t like a wedding, where the celebration of the happy couple’s hopes for the future was a license – or an edict, really – to abandon your usual constraints and dance, damn you, no matter how poorly. The only higher agency that applied here was Leonard’s impending death, slinking its way around the outer edges of the group, and our knowledge of it – and how, as a post-grad or early career researcher, you were supposed to express yourself with regards to that through the medium, as they say, of dance, would have been beyond me, I’m sure.

A couple of youngsters did dance, I saw, eventually.

I saw, because one of them, perhaps I’d seen her in the audience, or at the coffee station, was dancing with my American friend, whose name you may have noticed I’ve refrained from using, out of delicacy, or something like it. She was dancing very close to him, and he to her, and I watched them as I danced. My dancing, as you know, alternates between phases of heightened awareness of the other dancers, and phases of a complete lack of the same. He wasn’t a bad dancer, he had a very limited repertoire of moves, but was always moving, slightly, ponderously, rather as if wanting to give the impression that at any moment he was aboutto start *really* dancing. She, on the other hand, *was* a bad dancer, but was making up for this with a familiar repertoire of affectations that somehow took the place of dancing: placing herself provocatively close to him, shaking her hair, throwing back her head to laugh, responding every time he touched her arm.

They were dancing at the edge of the floor, where perhaps they thought they would be less seen. But they had been seen, I could see. I could see, because he kept looking at me, or for me; every time she lowered her head to drink, or turned her head to look at her friends, who were looking on with something like awe, something like nervous ecstasy, he would shoot a glance over at me. The look in his eyes was one I recognised. It was a plea, a defiance, a confusion: the emotion that rises to the surface of the male psyche whenever it is confronted by something it thinks it wants but isn’t sure. When it is confronted by the possibility – such a shock to the male mind – that it doesn’t want what it wants to want.

I lie in bed and look at you, and wait for you to say something. You lie there, propped on your elbow, looking back at me, and I feel once again the sharp clenching pain of having done the thing that was right, but which left me bereft. I was the one who left, yet I am left like this. Left, left, left. Felt, felt, felt. You would help me with this, I feel sure, this snare of words caught in my throat, caught in my mind’s throat. You’d get down on your knees on the floor next to me and untangle it, like a drawer-ful of cables.

Perhaps if I had gone to bed with Leonard, that time, things wouldn’t have happened the same. Things brought to a head sooner would have sorted themselves out easier.

What happened with the girl and your… American friend, you ask.

The young woman – the girl, really, they are girls at that age, what claim can they have to womanhood? – the girl left the room, to go to the toilet, I assume. If she had gone for a cigarette, after all, he would have gone with her. Unless he was scared of losing sight of me. I watched her go, then danced my way across the floor to him. He stood there, wavering slightly, while the music built itself into another meaningless crescendo. He looked forlorn, as if he’d already had sex and this was the comedown. He looked unequal to the gale of possibilities buffeting around him, all whirling to the rhythm of the violin and the guitar and some kind of drum.

‘Hello,’ he said.

‘Who’s that then?’

He knew her, I knew. I could tell. She wasn’t just some early career researcher from the other side of the world. She was from his department. I took the glass that he was holding for her from his hand, and drank from it.

‘That... Ah.’ He laughed, and I smiled for him, for his laugh.

I don’t know what I was thinking – perhaps you can help me. Perhaps that’s why you’re here. To tell me what I was trying to do. Tell me, was I trying to save him from doing something he would regret, something that might cause him harm, even though I owed him no duty of care, and her, certainly not?

And her, was I trying to rescue her from something I’d been busy telling myself all along that I now wish I had never avoided, myself? For he, my American friend, would one day be dying of something – this much was certain – and this notch, this drunken conference notch, was something that would one day be regretted, if it didn’t exist.

Or was I acting for none of these reasons, but simply following my own impulses, those clichés, whatever they are, if they even exist anymore, I don’t know. I’ve lost the capacity for impulse. All is encoded, all is programmed, pre-programmed, a Calvinism of the genes. Our foolishnesses, mistakes and humiliations are written out from before our birth. We prove as much every time we dance, every time we open our mouths to let out an endless twisting double helix of self-incrimination.

And the worst of it is, I fear I won’t know your answer, now, when I need it most of all – not now, and perhaps not ever – for, just as I was anticipating your next words, or framing them in my mind, your next kind words – and you knew how to be kind, you do know that, don’t you? It’s just that you didn’t know how not to be cruel, too, how not to be *vicious* – just then, as I say, the body in the bed next to me, there where you were lying, looking at me across the foot or so of rucked and fucked-in bedclothes, moved, turned and made a sound that seemed to mark an entry into semi-consciousness, and, as if we’d actually been speaking out loud, you and I, for real, and we’d woken him with our hushed words, his two eyes opened, and looked at me, and the mouth smiled, and it wasn’t you, for it was you.