

A Guilty Victim; Recovering Creativity after Trauma and Abuse

by Toby Ingham,
with illustrations by William Smith

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“To restore the human subject at the centre – the suffering, afflicted, fighting, human subject, we must deepen the case history to a narrative or tale.”

Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*, 1985

‘I see it differently now, but back then I was in an impossible situation and I suppose I just went along with him. He was a priest, priests ran the school and you did what they said. He said if I came with him he’d let me smoke in his room. I only wanted tobacco.’

William Smith, 2018

Introduction

This is a true story of a man's struggle in psychotherapy to free himself from a dangerous self-destructive mindset. I've given him a pseudonym, William Smith, to protect his identity, but this account has been written with his full consent.

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When I first met William, he was 54 years old and battling with feelings of worthlessness and depression. He had been suicidal at earlier periods in his life and came to see me because he had concerns that those feelings were returning. We worked together for several years and in that time, we began to see how he had internalised a critical and aggressive attitude which picked on and bullied what might be thought of as his true self. Any attempt to express himself creatively was met with fierce prohibition. William could do things for other people but not for himself. Towards the end of our work William created a set of pictures, a timeline of his life, and he suggested that I write text to go with the pictures. This book is that text.

Over the course of a long period of psychotherapy a great deal of information is gathered both about a client's life and experiences, and about the process of working together to uncover those details. Information emerges organically, piecemeal, and that can create a problem of how to organise it. Writing an account of the work and basing it around William's illustrated timeline, provided a framework and solved a problem of how to structure this account.

The central idea of the book is that we suffer not because there is something wrong with us, but because of things that have happened to us. The problem is we often lose sight of those things, or don't pay them enough attention.

Case studies are a valuable way of showing what happens in psychotherapy. By necessity they are often extracts from therapy rather than a full account, and they are often created around composite individuals because of the need to protect a client's identity. It is unusual to have the opportunity to write a case study with a client's permission and approval. I felt that if this was to be written up, then it should be aimed at as wide a readership as possible. A book for general readers, not just for academics, psychotherapists, and counsellors but for people who might be able to relate to the story and might be inspired to investigate their own lives and timelines further. I didn't want this to be a technical book, and I have intentionally avoided jargon and professional explanations and tried instead to show the way the process of psychotherapy unfolds in a series of ordinary if unusual conversations. Throughout, I have tried to keep William's story at the fore.

Psychotherapy isn't about saying clever things or making clever interpretations. It's about being reliable and predictable and trying to find a way to be with someone so that they might be able to settle, their defences lower and their emotional stability improve. Something has brought the client to psychotherapy, we can never be entirely sure where that impulse began, but we can try to nurture it and see where it might be trying to go.

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Among other things, I hope that this book will contribute to the way people think about early trauma, boarding school syndrome, and grooming. Grooming isn't the whole of this story, but it is part of it. Also, that it might contribute to an understanding of the creative dimension of psychotherapy.

A Guilty Victim is told in seven parts and is written in the form of flashback dramatisations interspersed with extracts from psychotherapy. William's timeline pictures are included in part five. The book begins with a series of four psychotherapy sessions which illustrate how trust began to develop between us. Initially things were touch and go, but gradually the defences that had built up within him and which kept William apart from his creativity, started to soften and he was able to say more about what he had been through. This led us to the story of his early childhood, and to a set of traumatic experiences that left him, as a schoolboy, vulnerable to the attention of a paedophile priest. Vulnerability is one of the key traits that predators pick up on.

Though the psyche may have been ravaged by toxic experiences it still possesses the capacity to develop, recover, and to grow, and so go on to form new and healthy psychological adaptations. Although this is William's story, it might be every person's story too.

I gave William a pseudonym, William Smith, and I decided the narrative worked better if I gave myself one too, so in the text any reference to Julian Tate is a reference to me. I have written this account from my session notes. William has seen and reviewed every word.

Part I – Psychotherapy Begins

Chapter One

High Wycombe, 2012

When someone asks me what psychotherapy is, I say this. Psychotherapy is a unique form of conversation, it deepens and unfolds over time. Speaking about emotional pain can feel risky, but discovering the courage to put your experiences into words can be the start of developing

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insight and self-confidence. Over time, as the conversations develop, profound worries and anxieties can gradually take on more ordinary proportions. But of course, at the start none of this can be taken for granted.

Before William came to see me we'd spoken once on the phone and he'd told me that he was looking to speak about his persistent low mood. At that time I worked from a room in my garden, it was away from the house and had its own parking area which made it discreet and private. I remember William arrived on time, that he delayed before getting out of his car and then stood for a moment looking around, he was a tall and imposing man. When I opened the door to meet him, he seemed apprehensive and took his time organising himself before coming in. I guessed he was about fifty, about my age.

Watching as he wrestled his green jacket off, I pointed to a hook on the wall.

'It's fine,' said William, flattening the jacket against the bulk of his stomach and glancing around the room. I kept the furniture simple, two chairs, the one nearest the door for my clients so they wouldn't feel trapped, a couch, a few pictures of landscapes, and a print of Van Gogh's *Room at Arles*. From his body language I had the impression that William might not be staying long.

I told him this was a confidential conversation, and that we had fifty minutes to think about what had brought him, after that a short silence ensued.

'Should I start?' said William.

'Sure,' I said, I try to avoid leading conversations.

He leaned forward, elbows pressed into his thighs, most of his jacket disappearing. I noticed a hint of aftershave, something lemony.

'I'm not sure where to start, I've been trying not to think about it, but I'm unhappy, depressed, self-critical, I've never been anything else.' He raised his eyes and creases spread across his forehead. 'It's the endless negative thinking, any sense of personal achievement triggers feelings of worthlessness in me, stops me doing things, didn't want me coming today. And it's old, it started at school. I was unhappy there and I found a way of fitting in by emulating some other boys.'

'Emulating,' I said, the word caught my attention.

'Yes, I found a way of fitting in by emulating them, I was good at sport. I wasn't particularly interested but it gave me a way in. At school if you're good at sport you fit in, so I copied other boys, emulated them, and it worked, for a while, but then we fell out and

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everything changed. When I left school I started drinking and I've never stopped. I need to get on top of the anxiety, the self-doubt, the endless critical monologue, the hyper vigilance and the destructive drinking.' He leaned his head back against the padding of the chair. 'I wasn't sure if I'd tell you all that.'

'You said you've been trying not to think about it.'

'I worried that if I thought about it too much I wouldn't come. I need to find a way out of this, there are things I want to do.'

'What kind of things?'

'Oh... ' William gave a vague hand gesture, I noticed a silver ring on his right hand. A hint of a smile came and went, perhaps he sensed encouragement. 'Stop beating myself up for one, allow myself the freedom to follow my ideas, creative ideas.'

I asked him if he'd been in therapy before.

'I've seen a couple of people over the years, it's never worked, but I need to change.'

Then after a pause he added 'Why did you ask about emulating?'

His question was quick, direct, I thought of him having to emulate to fit in, and the pair of us, meeting for the first time, how were we supposed to fit together?

'I wondered where you'd learnt to emulate,' I said.

William didn't seem to care for my reply.

'I haven't come here because of where I learnt to emulate. I'm here because I beat myself up.'

'Yes I see that,' I said, aware that the conversation had acquired a critical quality.

William drummed his fingers on the pale veneered arm of the chair, his left hand moved across his jacket. I thought he might be about to get up and leave. I noticed his pale blue eyes fix on the Van Gogh.

'Why have you got that picture in here?'

'You don't think it should be here?'

'No.'

'What don't you like about it?' I said, I felt put on the spot but tried not to be defensive.

'The picture is fine, it's rather moving, do you know the room he's painted?' I did, but I kept that to myself. 'That's his bedroom at Arles isn't it, the psychiatric hospital,' said William. 'I like the picture. I just wonder why it's here?'

Thinking how best to reply I said;

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‘I think it mirrors this room, in a way.’ He seemed to acknowledge there was something in that and leant back, the chair reclining with him. I felt myself relax a little. ‘But you don’t think it should be here?’ I said, interested to find out more about what he didn’t like. William looked unsure of whether to say any more, but then sat up.

‘Van Gogh suffered. You might like the picture, but people who suffer might not want to look at it, all the strange perspectives, it might remind them of misery.’ I found myself thinking he was making a good point, but almost immediately he seemed to back track. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘I don’t mean to be rude.’

‘I don’t know if you’re being rude, I think you’re making a point, thinking about who you’re with, what sort of therapist puts Van Gogh’s room on his wall?’ I realised as I said it that I wasn’t sure myself. William swivelled in his chair and closed his eyes, from outside the room I heard bird song and the murmur of traffic.

‘I like your shed, I’m sorry, I mean office, I feel I’m being rude again.’

‘It is a kind of shed,’ I said, though I was still thinking about the painting and wondered if I’d made a mistake putting it there, but it felt like we were on friendlier ground and I decided not to pursue it further for now.

‘No,’ said William, ‘it’s nicer than that, it’s a very nice shed. I was thinking I’d come for a few appointments, just to see what it’s like, this time works for me, could we keep this time for the next few weeks?’

I checked my diary.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘this time is fine.’

‘How do you like to be paid?’ said William, his wallet appearing from his coat pocket. I told him I would give him a bill at the end of the month.

‘That’s rather trusting,’ said William, ‘the last person wanted cash each time.’

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After William left, I remember leaning back against the desk thinking we’d only just avoided everything falling apart at the start. I wondered if that was how his previous therapies had gone and I recalled him saying that his self-critical side didn’t want him coming today, it made me think of the things that got in the way of his creative ideas.

First sessions often give indications of what is to come and William had made an impression on me, the way the mood changed, warm then cold then warm again. I knew that

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you couldn't make people come to psychotherapy, that something in William had to hook into something in the therapy, and I felt some sympathy for him, this quick-witted man who could suddenly turn on himself, or me, with his direct questions, and I felt uneasy about the picture. Had someone come who would challenge everything about my setup? Had I put an image of suffering, self-harm, and suicide on the wall? I wondered if everyone who came thought the same? What to do? Removing it would be reactive, for better or worse it would have to stay.

Chapter Two

When the weather turned I would leave my house early to check on the heating before clients arrived. Sometimes on stormy days when I opened the door the linen curtains would billow out at me like melodramatic ghosts. I often wished I had a room in the house. Firing up the gas heater, I checked my diary and read through my notes. I have always been a prolific note taker and in the ten-minute breaks between clients I write up sessions from memory, it's a habit developed during years of training that I've never given up, part conscientious, part driven by a guilt complex that pushed me to keep records, to be accountable. Sometimes I ended up writing so fast that I struggled to decipher them later.

William and I had now been working together for several months. During that time he had been punctual and never missed a session, but he was cagey, and often found it hard to trust me. I was interested in the history of his low mood, but whenever I tried to find out more he'd shut my questions down and tell me that I was missing the point.

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'I'm not sure I'm getting my point across,' said William, he bit his lip, took a breath then tried again. 'All the time I am scanning for threats and,' he pointed hard at me making sure the emphasis wasn't being missed, then seemed to catch himself and pressed his hand back into his green jacket pocket. 'Sorry, but I must keep it all secret. My family mustn't worry.'

'This is serious,' I said, trying to demonstrate by my tone that he might not be worrying me.

William grunted.

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I became aware again of the gale blowing outside, of the rain lashing at the room, shaking the cedar roof tiles and spilling over the gutter. One of the curtains swayed as if by itself, the wind having found its way in.

‘I don’t know how long I am going to come here, but I want to try and tell you how it is. I’m scanning all the time, trying to spot everything, other people can have nice things, not me. You’re ok to talk to, but I don’t know if this does anything for me. Every morning it’s the same voice, “I’m a piece of shit. I drink too much.” It doesn’t make any sense, I might not have drunk the night before, that doesn’t matter, whatever I’ve done, the aggressive thoughts are at me, telling me I’m worthless.’

A small branch, broken off by the wind clattered on the roof, interrupting him. William looked up, I winced, embarrassed that we were sitting in this lightweight garden shed.

‘Sometimes the sneer is even worse when I haven’t been drinking, it doesn’t make any sense. In the morning, when I go to the bathroom, when I shave, it’s there.’ William puffed out his lips, sighed, closed his eyes, ‘anyway, that’s the point.’ He put his hand down, opened his eyes, ‘were you going to say something?’

‘I was thinking about the way that voice reacts to you coming here. It sounds like these sessions stay on your mind during the week.’

‘What? Do you think that’s a good sign?’

‘I’m not sure,’ I said, trying to add a moderating tone to our conversation, ‘but it caught my attention.’ Outside the rain eased up a bit, the tension seemed to lessen a degree, perhaps two, I had become more used to his directness and tried to amplify my point, ‘and it seems worse when you have a spontaneous thought.’

‘That’s also true,’ said William, becoming more engaged, ‘anything spontaneous sets it off,’ he made a sort of snort laugh, ‘Really I could be talking about my father. My father loved the golf club and his golf club cronies, horrible Daily Mail people. A nasty bunch of misogynists, failed marriages and low handicaps. He liked to joke that he once had three children under five, the same as his handicap.’ He gave me a measured look. ‘Do you play golf?’ Before I could think to reply William said, ‘I don’t like golf clubs. Anyway, don’t tell me. I sometimes played golf with my father and his friends, they put everyone and everything down.’

‘You haven’t said much about your birth family.’

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‘I suppose I just started talking when I first came here,’ said William. ‘My mother and father are still married, to each other, sorry that’s another one of my father’s jokes. I have an older brother and sister, then there’s me, then there’s a gap to my younger sister.’

‘How big is the gap?’

‘What?’

‘What are the age differences between you and your siblings?’

‘My elder brother and sister and I are the three under-fives. Then there’s a gap, eight years, to my sister.’

‘Do you know why there was a gap like that?’

‘Does it matter?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, ‘that was why I was asking.’ William looked at his hands, tapping his knuckles together.

‘Maybe they wanted a break after me.’ He swivelled his chair and looked out of the window. ‘I don’t know. I’ve not thought about it.’

‘When you first came here you told me about falling out with friends at school, but I think this is part of an older story.’ William turned back to me.

‘I want to stop what’s going on now, I’ve always linked it to events at school. I didn’t see any reason to bring up anything else.’

‘I wondered if learning to emulate, to copy, was older than that?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said William.

‘I know you don’t think so,’ I said, holding to my line.

‘You think that something was going on before I went to school?’

‘Well, I wondered about your early life.’

William pushed back in his chair, retreating into himself. I noticed him glance at the Van Gogh, his right knee tapping a fast rhythm all by itself. He shot a glance at the small objects on my desk, a small bronze owl and a bust of Odysseus, then looked past them and out at the garden. We both watched the olive tree being blown about, I could feel the cabin brace against the wind.

‘You’re really out in the weather here.’

‘You could say so,’ I said, ‘but we know there is more to you than this hyper vigilance.’

‘How do we know that?’ said William.

‘We know how much you care for your family. When it comes to your wife and children nothing is too much.’

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‘But that’s part of the set up, I can do things for other people.’ He swivelled his chair towards the window. ‘Last year I had to write a legal letter, for work. I spent hours over it and became more and more immersed in the details of what I was writing. And at some point I realised that the critical soundtrack had stopped, and there was no negative thinking. It was temporary, it came back, but for those hours I was free of it. When I leave here, after one of our conversations, I sometimes feel better, lighter, then I get in my car and almost immediately I,’ he broke off searching for a word, ‘I flip, and all the good feeling is gone. There is just that voice saying I’m a piece of shit. It’ll be waiting for me in the car. I’ll look in the mirror and it will look back at me, and I’ll go and buy cider and gin on my way home and then I’ll drink and attack myself.’ He shrugged and started to gather his things, leant forward in his chair and stood. ‘I don’t know why, but I’m not able to keep good feelings.’

I didn’t think it was the right time to say anything else and I stood by my chair as William pulled the door shut behind him, careful not to catch the curtains, he had learnt the knack of them.

I watched his car edge out of the driveway, and I thought of disappointments, of the ghosts of disagreements people had come to have with me, issues I’d become embroiled in. People who had come often for more obscure reasons than could be quickly understood, but who in the end had lost heart or patience with the process and abandoned the idea.

William’s ghosts waited in his car, pooled in his rear-view mirror, waiting to gang up on him. They thought he was making a mistake talking about all this. Like all the other mistaken attempts he’d made.

‘Get yourself a drink’ they hissed, over the click of the indicator. ‘And don’t start telling him any of that.’

I found out later that when he left his sessions he would drive to different off licences, always trying to find ones he’d not been to before.

*

For change to happen, the problem that has brought the client needs to come to be felt to be active within the therapeutic relationship so that it can be worked on between therapist and client. You can’t make that happen on demand, a psychotherapist isn’t there to force things, but together you might be able to work towards it.

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The way I understood it William thought that his problems related to his destructive mindset, low mood and drinking and he saw this as linked to events that happened at school, the falling out. While I could see this was true, I still wondered about the word ‘emulating’, it made me wonder about him having already learnt to do something, to copy, to cover things up before he went to boarding school. He was resistant to my suggestions, and I was aware that pushing my ideas could easily cause him to stop coming, after all he’d stopped therapy in the past.

I now had a better grasp of the relationships in his family, and I wondered about the eight-year gap between him and his younger sister. I had a sense of his father, his anger, but very little idea about his mother, he’d said almost nothing about her.

He had made the point that things were worse for him when he had time on his hands which made me think of him having been left waiting for too long, but I hadn’t learnt anything more about that. Psychotherapy requires patience, being able to wait and tolerate not knowing things. I focussed on trying to keep things predictable so that William might come to settle.

Chapter Three

William missed his next session. He later told me he ‘got stuck into his work, thought this will do, no more navel gazing, fuck that. Fuck stupid therapy woke bullshit.’ He said his father would have approved.

While his wife, Meg, was at work he holed up in his office. He tried to concentrate on his accounts, VAT, making money, and took his mood out on cold callers. He forced himself to focus, move on, get on with his life, do some exercise, lose some weight, get on with a photography project. It was down to him to sort himself out.

I sent him an email. He ignored it.

I found out later that he’d started drinking more, in secret, sipping gin from the bottle when he was alone in the kitchen, trying to self-medicate away the relentless anger and frustration. He cursed himself for the weight he’d put on, for wasting his time and money on therapy, for being a “worthless piece of shit.”

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He drew figures within geometric shapes, trying to calm himself, then mocked his ‘shit drawings.’ His moods swung. He later said he felt guilty for letting me down.

The next week, I sat waiting for him in my room as the clock showed five then ten past the hour. Afternoon sunshine began to slip through the window and across the desk and I thought I might not be seeing William again. I read back over pages in my notebook looking for clues, things I might have said, things I might have overlooked. His words, the routines and rituals of meetings were but part of the story, so to speak. Being late, being early, missing sessions, withholding payments, or overpaying, these were all part of the process, part of an attempt to try to understand and change long ingrained and unhelpful patterns.

Tutting when I couldn’t read what I’d written, I shut my eyes and dropped the useless notebook in my lap.

*

Meanwhile William argued with himself, go, don’t go. He couldn’t find any peace. To get away he drove up the high sided narrow Chiltern roads, lanes once cut into the hills by horse drawn carts. He drove up through Turville and along Christmas Common. There he walked in the woods trying to find answers to his problems amongst the bluebells. Back in his car his sneering face gazed back at him from the mirror, it hissed ‘Why don’t you just top yourself you useless cunt?’

He drove back through High Wycombe. By the hospital at the roundabout, while he queued to make his way home, a group of uniformed girls crossed in front of him. They were walking to the grammar school and he saw that behind them, one girl walked by herself, she stayed near to the flint wall, head down, closed off, trying to make herself invisible. He later said that he saw his shame and isolation in her, that it was seeing her that made him think twice about throwing the towel in, and he decided not to go home, instead, he drove his conflicting thoughts and feelings to my room. He arrived twenty minutes late. As soon as he came in he started telling me stories, it was like he’d come to confession.

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‘When I was small, my friend Neil and I were chased by some boys, we ran to his house, but before we got there his father appeared at the back door. I thought his dad was angry with us, but he was angry with the boys that’d scared us.’

I could see he was still surprised about it now and I wondered if William thought I was going to tell him off for missing last week’s session.

‘Neil told his dad what had happened and his dad ran to find them. I’d never seen anyone run as fast, like a man possessed, arms and legs pumping, I found it frightening. He caught two of them and dragged them back across the field. I remember feeling uncomfortable and thinking this is wrong, you shouldn’t treat me like this. I don’t deserve it.’

‘He thought you did,’ I said.

‘He was called Stan, he was the sort of man my father would have looked down on. I didn’t tell my parents about it, I never took problems home. I spent a lot of time trying to be helpful at home. I had another friend, we used to draw together, his father drew cartoons for a newspaper. My friend got out this big roll of paper and pushed it across his bedroom floor, it rolled all the way to the door. He said, “Come on, let’s draw, we can draw what we want.” I was excited but I had this overpowering sense that I shouldn’t. I’ve always felt that around creative things. I sometimes get an impulse to draw or make something and almost immediately this feeling that I’m not allowed to comes over me. His father liked me, he drew me a birthday card, a cartoon version of me standing on a snooker table hitting the balls with a golf club.’

‘Sounds like he knew something about your feelings for golf clubs,’ I said. William smiled.

‘I didn’t show it to my father. I’m aware of these memories coming back to me. It’s good remembering these things, but why can’t I keep hold of them when I leave?’ The question hung between us, interrupted from outside by a screech of cars breaking, a long blast from a car horn rang out, then a shout, then another, angry men, road rage.

‘I have this image of a mallet smashing up my ideas’ said William. ‘Any sign of an impulse to do something and this massive über mallet comes crashing down. I can work, I can do things for other people, but nothing for me.’

‘It’s something that it let you come back here,’ I said.

‘It can be different here,’ said William, ‘but when I leave it gets me, and then the only thing I can do is drink, attack myself with drink. I don’t even like drinking that much. I was thinking about making a kind of trompe l’oeil image, thought I’d give myself the target of

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sending it to the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, but the über mallet got me. I ended up hiding all the art materials, then I drank. I carried on doing things around the house, making supper, making sure everything was nice for Meg, I sat watching television programmes I have no interest in when I could be working on ideas.'

'You can do things for others, but apart from that you're alone with destructive drinking rituals.'

'Alone with my destructive rituals,' said William. He nodded to himself, 'I thought I should just send the Royal Academy an enormous wooden mallet. Exhibit A, My Über Mallet. I could send them a bottle of gin to go with it.' I thought that sounded apt. William looked at the floor, quiet for a few moments, 'I'm sorry about not coming last week. I just couldn't come. I ignored your email, I should've got back to you.'

'That's ok,' I said, 'you can't say much to an über mallet,' William gave me a half smile. I was aware that there must have been a break in the cloud because the afternoon sun moved across the window and I noticed William watching a gold rectangle that spread across the couch.

'Does anybody use that couch?'

'What do you think?'

William grunted.

'What do I think? Maybe. I wouldn't. I wasn't sure about coming here when I saw that.'

'You should have said.'

William smiled.

'If my twin was here, I could imagine saying to him "use the couch, rest, recover." Other people can have things like that, not me.'

'You said everything went wrong at school, but these memories are older than that.'

William remained fixed on the rectangle of light on the couch.

'These rituals,' I continued, 'the drinking, the über mallet, I think these are older than school too.' He shifted forward in his chair.

'At primary school someone's duffel bag hit me in the stomach, I'd never been winded before, I couldn't breathe, I thought I was dying. But I remember thinking that I shouldn't ask for help, that it would be better if I took myself off and died on my own, that if I asked for help something worse might happen.' He spread his hands in front of him, mouth open. 'I was only about six.' He swallowed, put his hands on the arms of the chair and looked out of the window. 'If that happened to someone else, another boy, if it happened to you, I'd say

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“Shit, are you alright? What’s happened? Let’s get help.” I’d want to help. Yet if I ask for help for me, something worse might happen. What’s that about?’

I noticed I’d become a friend of William’s in the story.

‘I didn’t deserve help. I still don’t, I’m outside the rest of humanity. What I’d like is for a surgeon to snip the hot wire that runs through my brain, I’ve always thought that must be how ECT works. People who’ve had shock treatment talk about their memories being disrupted, that they lose some of their depression because they no longer remember what depressed them.’ He turned to look back at the light on the couch. ‘That makes a lot of sense to me. I wish I could hang onto the things that interest me, but I know when I leave that I won’t.’ William turned back to the light gliding across the couch. A bird landed on the roof, I tracked its movements. ‘I couldn’t face you last week. But I have arranged to speak with a photographer, someone local. He seemed to understand what I was talking about. The perspective image, the trompe l’oeil effect. I’ve been meaning to follow up on that for ages. I may need to move our session, if I keep coming. It depends when he can fit me in.’

‘Right, I said, feeling my heart sink, I might have become his friend, but I didn’t understand him, ‘we can see what we can do.’

‘I’ve got an idea about making advertising posters, optical illusions that draw the viewer in. I don’t want to say too much. Don’t want to jinx it. It felt good to organise it.’

‘Yes, I can see.’

‘It might be a good outcome for these sessions, getting into a creative project. This has been ok, talking here, I wouldn’t have looked up the photographer without having spoken here. But I think this might be making things worse.’

‘Right,’ I said, I heard a noise above and saw a magpie fly away, I remember thinking ‘one for sorrow,’ I sensed the tide of the conversation running away from us.

‘Talking here, sometimes I get interested, sometimes I remember things, feelings, but when I leave everything resets.’ William looked out of the window and then back at me. ‘No, it’s stronger than that, it’s more than a reset, it’s violent. In the car, I flip into nasty critical thoughts, then I drive home and drink gin in secret. That’s got worse since I’ve been seeing you.’

‘I think two things are happening,’ I said, ‘in one you remember and make connections, in the other you attack yourself, a bit like in the Stan story. It’s like you accidentally make a valuable connection with yourself, but then you react because you feel you don’t deserve it.

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Or with Paul, you feel you don't deserve to draw what you want. I wondered if that is what's going on with the photography.'

'You think I shouldn't do it?'

'It sounds like something you want to do, but it made me think of you needing to find someone who understands you better than I do. It sounds like it might stop you coming here.'

'And you don't think I should do that?' said William, 'shouldn't stop coming here?'

'No,' I said. 'I don't.'

'Oh,' said William, pulling a mock face, 'an opinion.' His eyes skimmed over the knots in the walls. 'I can't come here forever.'

'I don't think you'll come here forever, but I think you've got more engaged in working here than you thought you would, and at the moment that seems to coincide with a pressure to attack yourself.'

'Stopping this would be attacking myself?'

'I think that's involved. Not the whole story, as I say I can see you want to work on your photography.' William gave a sigh.

'I don't know,' he spread his fingers out. 'I might ring him, see if he could meet another day.' He leaned back in his chair, shut his eyes. 'I hadn't thought that I was putting myself in my place, not with the photography, but it might have led to me breaking off here, it's strange the way you come at things.' He glanced at the Van Gogh print, 'is it time to stop? It must be about time.'

'Almost,' I said, regretting the fact.

William gathered up his things and left me looking at the empty chair. *An opinion*. Then I checked my watch, reached for my pen and drew a picture of a stickman in a wood smashing up a shed with an oversized über mallet.

But the thing that most interested me was that he'd missed a session and then come back. He'd decided to stop and then changed his mind, that was unusual. Plenty of people stop psychotherapy prematurely, maybe most people, but not many come back. I felt that this suggested that William might have become more engaged than he realised, clearly things were still in the balance, but coming back was unusual. Still there were the critical aggressive destructive feelings, the über mallet, but there was more than that, I felt we were onto something, developing elements of trust.

William remained attached to the idea that there was something wrong with him, whereas I thought that things had happened to him. I tried not to rush him, to a significant degree it

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was beyond my control, but him coming back made me think that a defence had softened, and that there might be more for him here.

In therapy, problems sometimes need to be worked on until a more benign position is developed. Evidence of such benign development is the establishment of trust, and the wish, the emergent capacity, to reveal more. It takes care to nurture and create such benign therapeutic moments and getting past the über mallet and deciding to come back was such a moment.

I was aware how interested I'd become in our work. I discussed it in supervision, I had presented it at various case discussions, and I could see that other people were interested too.

Chapter Four

'These sessions might be having an effect on me,' said William. 'Meg and I went for a curry. Three men at a table near us started telling misogynistic jokes. I got annoyed, stared at them. The one who was telling the jokes couldn't see me, but his friend did, he stared back and for a moment I thought we might be on the verge of a confrontation, but I wasn't backing down. Then he dropped his gaze, turned to his friend, and quietened him down. I was surprised, then I relaxed, drank some lagers, but I didn't drink in secret when we got home. When we walked back up the road Meg said how relaxed I was, she said me coming here has made a difference, she didn't see what happened, but I did feel good. It's unlike me to express anger.' William put his glasses, keys and wallet on the table beside him, the light in the room dimmed, clouds gathering. 'Well of course I do, but only towards myself. The über mallet, the secret drinking, that goes on. But that night, when we walked back up the high street, I felt good, different. It's unusual that I'd feel like that. Do you see what I'm saying?'

'This was different,' I said.

'Exactly. And I don't think it would have happened if I wasn't coming here. There was something about the feeling, it was... appropriate.'

'Appropriate,' I echoed the word back to him. William leant forward, elbows on his knees.

'I can't tell you how unusual it is for me to feel like that.' He smiled, I smiled back. 'I never have appropriate feelings about myself,' said William.

'It sounds like the way you've spoken about being complimented,' I said.

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‘Yep, no compliments or appropriate feelings. Why? I’ve always thought that it was because I’m bad in some way, that there is something wrong with me.’

‘I don’t think it’s because there’s something wrong with you, but I do think things may have happened to you.’

‘It’s not that there’s something wrong with me. It’s that something has happened to me,’ repeated William, ‘that’s what you mean?’

‘Yes. You’re so caught up thinking there is something wrong with you, that you’re never free to say more about what’s happened to you.’

A frown moved across William’s brow.

‘You think that things have happened to me, which I think are my fault?’

‘It wasn’t your fault that the men were telling misogynistic jokes.’

‘Normally I shouldn’t be angry, I shouldn’t glare at them, but this was different.’

‘It sounds like it may have been appropriate.’

‘You’re saying it’s like the other thing, it’s not that there is something wrong with me?’ said William.

‘Yes.’

‘That things have happened to me.’ William repeated it to himself. He scratched his head, his phone fell from his pocket and onto the floor, he picked it up and put it on the table.

‘Normally I’d apologise for dropping that, but I won’t.’ He let out a tiny, muted sob, bent forward and covered his face with his hand. ‘I’m welling up,’ he sniffed, ‘I want to shut the feelings down, it’s like being given a compliment, like I’m feeling something I shouldn’t. I want to shut it down.’

‘I’m not sure that you should.’ It was the first time he’d cried in one of our sessions.

William wiped his eyes with a man size tissue, lowered his hand, rocked back in his chair and went back to looking out of the window. ‘This time is fine by the way, let’s keep this time. If that’s ok with you?’

‘Right,’ I said.

‘In fact, I wondered if you ever see people more than once a week. I think it might help if I came more often. Just to see what it’s like. If you could? Might speed things up.’

‘Let’s have a look.’ I reached for my diary. ‘In a way,’ I said, ‘it seems like you’ve been shown something now, the feeling that welled up. I think it fits with feeling annoyed at the restaurant too.’

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William mulled that over. ‘Do you think it’s linked with wanting to come here more often?’

‘It might be, you’re coming here, you’re trying to set up the meeting with the photographer, you’re trying to...’

‘This sounds a bit close to a compliment, compliments aren’t for me,’ said William, staring at me, I thought of the men in the restaurant.

‘I can compliment you,’ said William, ‘but I don’t want to be complimented.’

‘No.’ I turned his logic over in my mind.

‘You’ve said something interesting though,’ said William.

‘Is this you complimenting me?’ I said, William smiled.

‘Yes, that’s how it works, I can compliment you, and I am, because you’ve said something interesting; it’s not that there are things wrong with me; it’s that things have happened to me.’ He sat back in his chair, glanced at the Van Gogh. I wished I’d never put the picture up.

William looked at his watch, then the window. He turned back to me.

‘I saw the photographer, then later I worked on my project. The maths is complex, getting the numbers right, and when I thought I had it, I printed a test. You have to fold the image carefully, and I was looking at the print, looking at where to fold it, suddenly I had this strong feeling that I was in trouble, my heart was racing,’ he looked up at me, ‘but in fact, I’d done something right. It was a success, the image I mean. And it was the success that was wrong, that’s where the trouble was. The next moment I shut it all in a drawer, emailed the photographer and said I wouldn’t be going back. I drank a lot, all weekend, drank in secret too.’ William shut his eyes and put his head back. I wondered how often I’d been close to getting an email like that.

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ I said.

He reached into his pocket and took out a piece of paper and held it out to me. ‘I drew this.’ I looked at the image, I saw a triangle, I couldn’t make out the details. ‘It’s a boy folded in on himself, in a triangle. A worthless triangle boy. Me.’ William put the image back in his pocket and turned back to the pine walls.

‘I have this memory, when I was small, I’m with my mother, and she’s being cuddly. I don’t like thinking about it. I start to think about being with her, then it’s gone. I don’t know. I spoke to my elder sister, she said I was with my mother when she became ill.’

‘Do you know what she is referring to?’

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‘My sister said she thought my mother had a miscarriage, that I was with her when it happened.’ William laced his fingers together, a silence developed, he made a shallow cough. ‘Dad swore us to secrecy. You asked me about the gap between me and my younger sister, I suppose it was a big gap.’

‘Eight years I think you said.’

‘Do you think that means something? I’ve wondered whether my father was violent to her. He had a temper, he was very physical with us, he liked to put us in our place.’

‘That’s what you say when you speak about flipping, you put yourself in your place.’

‘If I think you’re complimenting me, I react. It shouldn’t be happening to me. Not my place.’

‘Your triangle place?’ I said.

*

Being able to draw and show me the picture of himself in the triangle marked a turning point in our work together, it was another benign therapeutic moment. It wasn’t just that he was revealing something, it was that he did so via a picture, I knew that typically there were severe prohibitions, über mallets, blocking his creativity.

Now we’d established a new level of trust, and from here, and based on the information he was able to check with his brother and sister, we were able to piece together his early childhood in greater detail.

This was the first time William spoke about these things. They were important, particularly in the context of his adult emotional experience; the persistent low mood that had brought him to me in the first place.

Part II – William’s Early Life

Chapter Five

July 1966, Leicester

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It's late on a Sunday afternoon and the Smith family are together in their sitting room in Leicester.

Sunshine from two west facing windows slants across the floor. William's mother is translating a passage from a Greek textbook at her table, his father is reading the paper. His brother, Graham, has stopped trying to build a house out of the coloured blocks and has joined his sister. They are trying to put an oversized wooden jigsaw of a farm together. They argue over some of the pieces, then slot them together, now there are two pink pigs and the beginnings of a fence.

Across from them, William toddles, moving from chair to chair. He is concentrating, mumbling to himself and a large cuddly grey black dog that hangs from his mouth by a saliva-soaked ear. William makes noises as he moves and calls out indistinct half words. He opens his mouth and the dog falls. He lets go of his chair and shifts to face his mother. He takes a step towards her, then another, then falls flat on his face into the sunlight like he is falling into a paddling pool. He shrieks with laughter, his brother and sister laugh.

'William's funny!' said his sister, Flo.

'Look at William, he's funny mummy!' said Graham, then to his sister, 'look Flo there's another stinky pig.'

'William's doggy stinks,' said Flo, screwing up her nose. She looks at the piece Graham's pointing at and makes a grunting sound.

His mother makes a distracted noise but doesn't look up. His father mumbles something from behind his paper and starts to fold the page to get at the crossword, he stretches his arm, flexes his hand. It is unusual that his father is present, but for an elbow strain he'd be at the golf club.

William stands, he squints, he raises a hand to shield his eyes from the sunlight, and sways back towards the chair. He rests for a moment, his weight balanced loose against it. With each movement of his chubby legs and body he emits sounds, half formed words, an enthusiastic commentary on the afternoon. He is happy, he toddles, falls and laughs again. This time his mother turns to look at him and smiles, she looks across at her husband who is absorbed in the crossword, William shouts louder and more high pitched. Graham laughs, Flo tries to mimic the high-pitched noise.

William starts to repeat the process once more.

His mother turns back to her books but as she does so, she doubles over on herself in a sudden movement. She cries out and tries to swallow the sound back with one hand covering

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her mouth, the other is tight against her stomach. The noise is strange and sharp. Everyone stops what they are doing and looks at her, even William's father lowers his paper to see what's happened, he hates fuss.

William hears her cry out and, balancing as he is, turns to look. He sees her bent over, leaning forwards across her chair. He starts to toddle towards her, making noises as he does so, he's not sure what's happened but he wants to join in, he wants to play, he wants more laughter. He falls over, arms spread, shrieking, at the very same moment that his mother falls out of her chair and onto the floor next to him. They are nearly nose to nose. William is almost hysterical with laughter, he loves it when he can get her to join in with his games. She isn't.

In an instant William's father reaches down, scoops him around the middle and the next thing he knows he is being rushed out of the room and up to his bedroom. It's like the flying game but it's less fun, he can hardly breathe. His father is moving fast and is rough with him. William bounces against his hip as they rush into the hallway and climb the stairs to the landing. They reach William's bedroom in seconds where he is dropped, not onto his new bed, but into his old faded buttermilk yellow cot. Dazed by the speed of events, William just manages to turn and call out 'Daddy!' as the door shuts on him. He hears his father pace back towards the landing.

William hauls himself up against the bars of his cot and stands, confused, shaking. He calls out to the empty room, the shut door, his family beyond.

There is no reply.

He cries and then wets himself, it soaks through his nappy, through his blue shorts and runs down his legs. He calls out again. And again. He lurches up and down on the mattress and shouts. He doesn't like being in his cot, he sleeps in the bed now.

He waits, he gets no reply, he slumps down.

William doesn't want the door shut, he's too lonely. He doesn't know why his father has done that. It's one thing being in his room with the door open, but quite another when it's shut, he feels cut off. He calls out again, he shouts anything he can think of, he wants his father to come back and take him downstairs, he wants them all to be together again laughing, he wants to make them all laugh. Then he remembers doggy, his comforter.

'Doggy's downstairs! doggy's downstairs!' he shouts, then quieter, to himself 'I miss doggy.' He puts both hands on the bars of the cot and calls out, 'Mummy!' then he calls 'Daddy!' then 'Doggy!' He shouts their names over and over.

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There is no reply. No one comes. He sucks his thumb.

He plays the waiting game, where he waits and is patient and then when he is a good boy he gets the good thing, like the mashed-up eggs on soldiers when they're ready, not when he wants them. He plays the waiting game for a long time, he's never played it for so long, he doesn't think anybody has. He tries to be quiet, patient, to be a good boy, but he can feel all of the fun afternoon slipping away from him. His nappy and shorts are wet and uncomfortable and his bottom is cold and sore. His mother hasn't put the cream on him.

The afternoon light starts to turn now, the yellow fades, weaker than it was downstairs.

He thinks it can't be bedtime because he hasn't had his bath yet, and for a moment the thought gives him hope, but it doesn't last. His head hangs forward, heavy, pressed against the bars. He slumps down on the mattress. In time he falls asleep, curled up, sucking his thumb.

*

Sometime later he is woken by a sound from somewhere in the house. A door slam? Was it his door? Were they with him in his room? Are they outside his room? His mouth is dry and sticky, he says 'Mummy.' There is no reply. He climbs up, leans against the bars and calls out again. He calls 'Mummy, mummy' until his words start to get mixed up. 'Mummy, Murry, Mummy, Murry, Mummy, Murry, Mummy, Murry.' He calls out, over and over, falling into a rhythm. The longer he says it the more unhappy it sounds. He doesn't know what he is saying anymore. If they come he won't be cross, he will make them laugh and laugh, he will make everything better, he will pull himself up and toddle and fall, they love that. He will make them all happy and doggy will be happy too. He shouts, 'I want doggy.'

But still they don't come. He plays the waiting game again but his heart isn't in it.

It is darker now but the curtains are still open. He doesn't understand it, they always shut the curtains, there are elephants on them and he always says goodnight to the elephants, and good morning too, but now there's just the dark window. William is unhappy about the elephants.

'I'm sad mummy,' he says to the empty room.

He can't make sense of it. He can't make sense of the elephants. Try as he can, he can only see the edges of their trunks and ears, he wishes he had doggy, they could look together. He likes it when the elephants look at him and doggy. He starts to think that maybe the

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elephants don't like him, that they have turned their backs on him. He doesn't know why they would do that? He sits alone with his questions.

Has he done something bad? Has he got everything wrong? Are the elephants and his family cross with him? Maybe they didn't like him falling over and toddling around the sitting room and shouting? Is doggy cross with him? He doesn't like these thoughts at all.

He sits up and rocks forward, stretches his fingers out, but it's no good. Once he's thought it, it keeps coming back; are they cross with him? He looks around his cot, rocks his head from side to side. He looks at the door, he pleads with it to open. Then a new thought, worse still, occurs to him 'did I make mummy angry?' 'Did she fall out of her chair because she was angry with me?'

The thoughts gang up on him. He's thirsty, he wants water, milk, he wants everything to be different. He feels sick and scared. He wants the thoughts to go away.

He shouts out the joking noises that they like. He won't stop shouting until they come, or he falls asleep.

*

A bad dream wakes him. In the dream the elephants closed his curtains and told him to shut up, they were rough with him, they put the blanket right over his head. He tried to stand up and reach out, then he fell. It was a scary dream, like the one he had about the clowns.

He sits up, now more awake, then he sees that his curtains have been shut, and it all comes back to him. He thinks mummy or daddy must have come when he was asleep. He starts to cry again, he wants to see mummy, wants to hide under the blankets with mummy, wants to get away from the silence.

'Go boo mummy,' he says. 'Mummy likes that. Go boo. I'm tired mummy.' He wants mummy to come and make everything better, he searches in vain for something to make it better.

He wakes he is cold and hungry. It is dark and there is a thin strip of orange light across the ceiling, it reaches into the corner of the room. He knows that is the streetlight. He's puzzled. He shouts out.

'Stweet light.' He points, he shouts 'stweet light!' He thought it was odd because the elephant curtains should have stopped it. Then he remembers, and things don't feel funny, and he has the tummy pain, and he is sore and he feels panicky again. He calls 'Mummy

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Murry, Mummy Murry, Mummy Murry, Mummy Murry,' he tries to settle himself but can't.

He bangs his head against the bars, it hurts but it makes a loud knocking noise. He thinks they must hear that. Now they'll rescue me. He thinks, 'I'll bang my head and they'll come and mummy, and everything will be better again.' He mumbles 'Mummy, Murry, Mummy, Murry, Mummy, Murry.' His head goes 'knock! knock! knock!' on the bars.

*

William tapped his hand on the arm of the chair, then seemed to become aware of the noise he was making and stopped.

'I don't know what I'm telling you, I'm not sure what happened,' he bowed his head.

'I think I see that,' I said. 'I think it's hard to know quite what you went through.'

'It wouldn't stop, I couldn't make it stop.'

From somewhere outside, the cry of a red kite stretched out alone and friendless in the air.

William's head leaned against his hand, his fingertips rubbed at a point on his forehead.

'I think that's remained the problem, I don't think it has stopped,' I said.

'I think I sort of lost myself, it makes me feel sick just to think about it. Why didn't they come?' he closed his eyes. I tried to picture the bedroom, William distressed, waiting in the dark. William tapped on the arm of the chair, I felt myself drawn back to the knocking sound deep in the house.

Blank faced, William looked across at me, raised his shoulders, then let them drop back down, dejected.

'Everything changed,' said William, 'I couldn't seem to fit in. I felt I had to be in my place, keep everything to myself. I think it's still going on now, when I have time on my hands, that's when it gets me. It's like a force inside me, a sort of squashed uncomfortable feeling.'

'It makes me think of something traumatic and claustrophobic,' I said. 'That you were stuck in this and that's how it remained, with no apparent way out.'

'Other people could have things, I couldn't, I couldn't even have my cuddly dog, my parents threw it out, they said it stank. It's as if I was thrown away, who I was, the me I was before.' William sat up, and turned his chair away from me, he closed his eyes and sighed.

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‘Do you know what happened to your mother?’ I asked. ‘You said you remember her falling, do you know what happened?’ William shook his head.

‘No. I haven’t thought about any of this in a long time. I don’t think it’s ever been discussed, not with me. I told you my sister once said something, I think she remembered it. My brother once started talking to me at a family wedding, years after it all happened. He got quite emotional, he’d been drinking. He went to live in New York to get away from my dad. It was curious, coincidental, because we both flew to the wedding from the USA, different flights, I was on the west coast. He started talking about how he’d tried to get mum’s attention. He got upset, said he remembered how he tried to get her to go up to me. But we weren’t a family that talked about things. Or we weren’t after then,’ he raised his eyes, spread his hands. ‘I don’t know, something happened and everything changed and after that home wasn’t the same. I wasn’t me anymore, I was just an imitation me, doing everything for everybody else.’ He opened his mouth, paused, then said, ‘I don’t know if there is any point going over all this.’

I felt the weight of defeat, I wondered about what had happened to William’s mother but I wasn’t sure if there was any point trying to ask more.

‘There wasn’t anything you could do to change it back then,’ I said.

‘Talking here sometimes does something for me,’ said William. ‘If I remember something, tell you about it, it has an effect. An energy, I don’t know, something like that, but when I leave, I revert, I attack myself. After I showed you the triangle picture I got in my car, and as soon as I looked in the mirror I became consumed by shame, self-hatred, anger,’ he broke off and looked at the knots in the walls. I learnt later that he would sometimes see faces and shapes in the knots in the wooden panelling. He saw one of them start to contort and resemble Munch’s *The Scream*. William swivelled his chair back to face me. ‘And I’m drinking way too much. I think my wife is worried about my drinking.’ He looked at the floor, silent. I looked at his thinning hair, I was aware of how unhappy the situation was.

‘Things are very bad at the moment,’ I said.

‘Not at the moment,’ said William, looking up, an edge in his voice, ‘always. Always.’ He paused, clenched his jaw. ‘I don’t think you get that.’ He stared hard at me.

‘This is going on all the time,’ I said. William turned to look back out of the window. ‘I think, like you say, there are moments when it changes, like when you wrote the legal letter, or sometimes here, in the session the mood will change.’

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‘But it never lasts,’ said William coming back at me. ‘And when it returns it’s worse. It might change for a moment, but it doesn’t stop.’

‘I think that’s what it was like in the early memories you describe, unexpected moments in which things are suddenly alright, good even. But they don’t last.’

‘That’s what makes it worse,’ said William.

‘And it’s like what’s happening here. Out of the blue your mood might lift here, the energy like you say, but then when you leave something will put you back in your place.’

‘I’m not meant to have this,’ said William. I could see that, I wondered if he might be about to get up and leave, I knew we were at a delicate point. ‘Good things are for other people,’ said William. He turned his chair until he was facing the couch, he pointed. ‘If my imaginary twin had gone through all this and was here sitting on your couch telling us about it, I’d feel sorry for him. I’d say, “oh no, poor you.” But I can’t have this,’ he jabbed at his chest. ‘I can’t have good things. And what I worry about is that talking here just makes everything worse. I come here, I talk, then I leave, I revert.’ William gave a half laugh, ‘sometimes I think I am coming here for you, not me, that I’m just coming to tell you these things. Like I am trying to make things better for you, make you feel like you do a good job.’ William paused, ‘when I leave I feel worse. Is there any point to this? Tell me what the point of this is? Going over it all? Am I suddenly going to feel better about everything?’ he lent forward, his chair rocked under his weight, I thought he might topple over. ‘You don’t know what to say to that do you?’ said William.

‘Well,’ I said, trying to pick my words with care.

William tapped the arm of the chair, interrupting, ‘I feel pretty fed up with this.’

‘I can see that.’

William raised his voice.

‘Is this a plan to try to make me angry with you? Is that how this works? I get angry with you?’

‘I don’t think I’d call it a plan,’ I said, ‘but I think you had to take your anger out on yourself, and you still do, when you leave here, the flip. I think anger is part of what keeps you in your place.’ William stared at me, ‘I wonder if that is part of where the über mallet came from?’

I could see William thinking the idea over. ‘I think, as it were, that some kind of system developed that works to keep you in your place. There’s a dominant idea that you should be good, as though if you’d been good, you wouldn’t have been left in the cot. I think it

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developed out of the experiences you've described. An idea that if you don't stay in your place something bad will happen. Something will get out of hand. And that something like that could happen here.'

'That I shouldn't be telling you these things?' said William.

'I don't think they are things that anyone listened to when you were young. And back then you would have done everything to try to keep your mother and father happy. Back then you had to stick to the story, your rituals.'

'I am not keeping to rituals here,' said William, 'that's for sure. Bringing the triangle boy picture. When I tell you about things, the memories, the bits and pieces, I start linking things together. I couldn't do that back then. When I've told you, then I feel conflicted. Part of me wants to leave, but part of me wants to keep on talking with you. But really whatever I do, when I leave and get in my car I'll flip, I'll take it out on myself. I'll buy more booze, drink more. And tomorrow morning when I look in the mirror I'll be cursing myself again. That triangle drawing is me, the boy folded up on himself, that's me. Every time that bedroom door shut on me I was more convinced that I wasn't good enough.' William stared at me, then he lowered his gaze and looked away, his fingers tapped on the arm of the chair..

Chapter Six

Flo's wedding, 1985

William sat alone near the back of the room. He undid his top button and took off his tie, he was drinking sparkling water and regretting he'd given up smoking. His brother Graham slumped into the chair next to him just managing to balance a glass of brandy which he held out to William. William raised his glass in return, they clinked. Graham set his glass down and ran a hand through his hair. *Dancing Queen* started to play and a man on the other side of the room threw his arms in the air and joined the dancers on the floor, the lights changed in time to the music and a spinning mirror ball sent tiny coloured discs off orbiting the room. Their parents sat with a group at one of the tables across from them.

'When are you back to the States?'

'I'm not,' said William, he slipped his tie into his jacket pocket, 'I'm not sure what I'm doing next.'

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‘Brave man. I’m back to New York next week. I always feel better having the Atlantic between me and dad.’ A bit late to the joke, William smiled, half laughed, the years apart had left an awkward distance between them. ‘I’m glad you came William, I wanted to speak to you.’ Graham turned in his chair and in an uncommonly intimate gesture put his left hand on William’s right hand, he gave it a brief squeeze and then let go. William, surprised by the touch, momentarily turned to look at Graham and then back to watch the lights spinning across the walls.

‘I wanted to say sorry William.’

William looked at him, he wasn’t sure where Graham was going, he wondered if this was the drink talking.

‘Thing is, I wasn’t a good enough brother to you. All that stuff that went on at home. I try to put it out of my mind, but I think it’s part of why I drink so much. Do you think about it?’ William half considered the question, he didn’t tend to think about the past, if he did it just reminded him of how bad he felt about himself. Graham drank some brandy and put the glass down on the table.

‘The nearer the wedding got it all started to come back to me again, the way you were left in your room, ignored. I did try to get mum to go to you, but she was always in her books, all that ancient Greek. I’d hear you making those noises, knocking, I hated the noise, and I’d tell her but she wouldn’t listen. She knew more about Thucydides than us.’ William smiled, sipped his water, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to get into this conversation, he watched the lights. He looked at the bubbles in his glass then at Flo on the dance floor, she looked happy. He felt Graham lean into him.

‘I started having nightmares, like something from an Edgar Allen Poe story, always set in our old home, outside Leicester. Someone being locked in a room. I knew they were about you and me, I hated that house, Great Bowden. I ended up in therapy in New York, spent a fortune with some man who never said anything. I managed to find someone more human in the end.’

Despite the music and the spinning lights William listened.

‘And the thing is, I remember going up to you and finding your door shut, and I tried to get mum to come but she never helped. Do you remember all that? I hope you don’t mind me telling you this, I thought it might help me if I told you about it. I thought if I told you then the dreams might stop.’

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William wasn't sure what to say to him, he knew he should say something. He stubbed out his cigarette.

'Nasty dreams Graham.' He looked back at the lights circling the room. The lights had a calming effect on him, he turned back to Graham. 'I don't know, I don't remember much from back then, maybe I tried to put it all out of my mind.'

Later, William said goodnight to Graham and left the wedding party. Then he went up to his room and drank everything in the minibar.

*

'Maybe all of my rituals started in that cot,' said William, shifting in his chair. 'All the head banging, name saying, all that Mummy Murry stuff. Lying under the blankets, rocking my head from side to side saying made up words, my own Greek words, maybe the über mallet too.'

'That might be right,' I said, 'I think these are very old rituals.'

'I remember when I saw a film of the Romanian orphans, the children in their cots. I could see their distress, I mean I think everyone could, but I felt I knew it too. I sort of related to them, banging their heads, I could see they were traumatised. When I saw those images I felt shame, I felt very uncomfortable about it,' he turned his hands into fists and then stretched his fingers out, he rubbed the palms of his hands together, they made a sibilant seashore noise. I listened, I thought of the whisper voice in the cot.

'I can see the distress for other people,' said William, still chafing his palms, 'but I can't see it relates to me.'

'You don't think about yourself having gone through trauma.'

'No, I can see other people might have. If it was anyone else I would see it, but not me.'

William leaned back in his chair, he swivelled it slowly from side to side. It began to rain, soft at first, I thought there was some comfort in the sound, the pair of us sitting together listening to the rain. Glancing at William as I did so, I turned my head to watch the small leaves of the olive tree dance when the rain drops fell on them. The olive tree made me think of William's mother reading Greek to herself, away in her hobby, of William left alone. William listened to the rain too.

'When I was still at the little school,' said William, 'with my brother and sister, one day we walked home in the rain, we got soaked. My brother was walking a bit ahead, my sister

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was holding my hand, I was worried about what was going to happen when we got home. We came across the gravel, up to the house, and my mother was standing, waiting, I thought she would be angry about how wet we were, but she couldn't have been more pleased to see us. All of us. And she was saying "come on, upstairs, quick." I thought I was going to be put in my room, but I wasn't, she had run a bath, a big deep hot bath. She helped us get out of our wet clothes and we all got in. I couldn't believe it.'

I could hear his surprise.

'We were all happy, and my mother was happy. And it got better. She got us out of the bath, wrapped us up in towels, and then we put our pyjamas on and went downstairs and she made us boiled eggs and toast. I loved that, and we were all sitting around the kitchen table all happy and warm, and she was happy. And I thought "thank goodness, it's all over." But it wasn't.' He watched the rain falling outside, it was heavier now, audible on the roof. 'I haven't thought of that in a long time. Why couldn't it stay like that? I don't remember what happened the rest of that day. I don't know what made her do that. It didn't last. I was soon back in my room again, I don't think I could understand what had happened to my mother, we weren't joined up anymore. I know she used to like being soppy, and I remember that rainy day. Why couldn't she be more like that?'

I could see William had never been able to predict her, one moment loving, the next withdrawn, isolating, away in her books. Love then no love. He never knew how she kept him in mind. Not quite the good enough mother. A woman who needed help herself.

'I think that made it all the more confusing, tantalising, never knowing what you would get from your mother,' I said.

'The only answer I could find was that it was my fault. That I must have done something, so I kept trying to do things to make everything better. Like I used to tidy up after meals, my brother and sister didn't do that, they didn't think they were bad or that it was their job to tidy everything up. I was smaller than them but after meals I would clean up, I tried to make everything right. If everything could just be fine, just like it was that day. I was always doing things that I thought would help.'

He trailed off and glanced at the clock, I could see there were ten minutes left. I watched William working through his thoughts. I thought over the details of the story, I wondered if we might sit in silence till the end. I had an incomplete idea about William and the traumas he described, I felt I should say something, but couldn't get the thought straight in my mind, weighing the balance up I decided not to speak. In the quiet my gaze drifted above William's

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shoulder and out of the window behind him. I could just see the bird box on the hornbeam, I wondered if any birds were sheltering there. I could see the beginnings of autumn. I thought of all the leaves I would soon have to clear up, all the work to try to keep everything tidy, it was always me that had to clear the leaves up. I heard William pick up the theme.

‘I was always trying to make everything right. When we got pocket money on Saturday morning we would go to the shops, my brother and sister would buy sweets for themselves. Not me. I used to find things, gifts to buy for my mother and father, it didn’t cross my mind that I could buy something for me, a comic, sweets. All the effort I was going to, to make everything nice for them. If someone else was telling me these stories I would feel sorry for them. I’d think it awful, some poor child desperate to make everything better.’ I thought of the burden William was carrying, trying to look after his family’s needs. ‘Other people’s homes weren’t like mine, other children at school didn’t have to do everything for their families. At primary school the headmaster said that we could bring packed lunches and I rushed home to tell my mother, I was so pleased, the food was so awful, but she was cross when I told her. Said I would have to make them myself. I was embarrassed. And the next day I got up early and made my own sandwiches. We used to keep the butter in the fridge, a big hard block of it. I tried to make marmite sandwiches and the bread tore as I spread the butter. My friends had these immaculate lunch boxes, I had an Action Man lunch box. I remember how worried I was that I would drop it, and everyone would see. They all had their neatly wrapped sandwiches, an apple, snacks, I could see the effort that their mothers had gone to, they were showing off how good they were, how good their children were. I sat on my own and ate my shit sandwiches, that’s what they looked like, shit. All torn bread and messy and wrapped up in that horrible grease-proof paper we used to have, it was like the toilet paper we had at school. Shit sandwiches wrapped in toilet paper, I couldn’t understand my mother. She’d changed, I’d changed, everything had changed.

‘Yes, I can see that it had, and fixing it was beyond your control.’

‘Everything was different, we were changed,’ said William.

‘Something valuable had been lost from your home,’ I said.

‘Vulnerable?’ said William.

‘I said valuable, but I think you were vulnerable too.’

‘I can’t think like that about myself. When I did things for them I felt closer to the rest of humanity. I didn’t get pleasure from it but it made me feel safer. Nothing would go right. I remember my dad coming to my primary school, looking around my classroom. I was excited

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to have him there, to show him my letters. We were learning handwriting. I'd put a lot of work into it. And I showed him, I got him to sit down at the table on the little chair. "Dad look, look how neat my letters are, look at them." I was proud that I'd managed to do the letters right. I loved the way they flowed, that's what you did, you tried to make them flow and be in between the straight lines. I was so pleased I had something to show him. Do you know what he said?'

I didn't expect it would be a compliment.

'Do you?' said William.

'No, but I don't expect it...' William interrupted me.

'I don't care what it looks like, I only want to know what it says.'

The edges of William's mouth turned down. I thought it would be something like that. I wondered if William's mother had gone to the school too.

'I could feel myself folding up, sort of creaking inside, I felt a door was going to slam shut inside me. I had got a silver star for this, not a gold one, but silver was the next best. He must have been able to see that. The teacher had stuck it on the fucking page.' He held up his hand, 'I'm sorry'

'It's ok.'

'I tried to speak, but I couldn't get the words out, I was stumbling over them and I knew my dad was getting annoyed about that. I wanted to say; but it was just letters, they weren't words, they were just the letters I'd been practising. Couldn't he see that? He must see that. "But what does it say?" he said, he'd tilt his head and raise his eyebrows at me and nod, "what does it say William?" My hands were tight little balls at the end of my arms, like a cartoon. I could feel I was on the edge of crying. He was supposed to be pleased and he wasn't. It was happening again, it was all going wrong again. Other children's parents weren't like this. The other children didn't get this. It was all shit again, like the shit sandwiches, I couldn't spread butter on bread but I could make my letters flow. One of the nuns looked over at my dad, they looked at each other, I looked at my letters. Then my dad said it was time to go home.' William shrugged his shoulders, pinched his nose between his thumb and forefinger, put his hand on the arm of the chair.

'I couldn't concentrate. I liked doing the letters at school, I liked drawing, but I couldn't concentrate.' He shut his eyes for a moment, then turned his chair, looked at the knots on the walls. 'Sometimes I'll have a creative idea, start to try to draw an image, make something, it will happen by chance, spontaneous, I feel myself become interested, but almost immediately

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I shut it down.’ He turned back to me. ‘The children I was at school with, their families weren’t like mine, they weren’t cowed and shamed. If something happened to them, if one of them got winded they asked for help. Their parents were interested in them. When my dad came to school and saw our handwriting, there were other parents there. Their parents were paying attention.’ William rubbed his jaw.

I was aware of all the stories and memories gathering in the room with us.

‘I know I spent a lot of time alone in my room. I didn’t understand what was going on, but I knew I shouldn’t make any noise because that just made them angry. And the longer it went on, I don’t know, I changed, like I didn’t know how to be me anymore. I’d hear my father coming up the stairs, walking down the hall towards my room. When I heard him, I would go quiet, if it was night I would see the shape of his shadow blocking out the light from the hall. I would know he was there and I would go very quiet. I wanted help. But I knew I should be quiet. All I wanted was to be let out of my room, to be taken downstairs and join in with the others. Yet at those moments, when he was there, I kept absolutely silent. I didn’t want him to come in and tell me off. I’d lie with the blanket pulled up over me, just rolling my head from one side to another. Sometimes I’d want to go for a wee, but I would just lie there, it might be a cold morning and I would pee, all the warm pee, then cold and stingy. No one came. I think if they came they wouldn’t know where I was anyway.’

He stopped, rubbed his eyes, looked at me, ‘what does this sound like to you? All these stories, banging my head against the bars? Saying made up names, singsong like, over and over. I went into myself, I don’t know, I went somewhere, I went into that triangle. I went into a place inside me through that triangle. It sounds pretty crazy doesn’t it?’

‘It sounds very uncomfortable,’ I said. I thought of the way these early traumas had undermined William.

William grunted, ‘it sounds pretty mad to me. Very uncomfortable, oh yes. And the more I went into it, the further I got from the smell of my bed, the horrible rubbery sheet, from all of it, from the shame, the worthlessness.’ William puffed out his cheeks and exhaled a long breath. ‘Well, something like that.’

‘I’m glad you brought the triangle image.’

‘I don’t think I should have,’ said William

‘I don’t suppose you do.’

‘I’m surprised I brought it.’

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I nodded. We sat in silence. I felt the mood ease a little, I crossed my legs, then uncrossed them. My eyes settled on the foot of the couch. It was only then that I noticed that I hadn't straightened the blanket, or the pillows. I wondered if William had noticed? He hadn't said anything about it. I wondered if William noticed all of my inconsistencies. I worried about being picked up for making a mistake and sneaked a sideways look at the Van Gogh print. I looked away, back at my shoes. I was aware that I'd lost my train of thought and I thought perhaps I should say something.

'Are you working on any other pictures?'

William stared at me.

'You think I go home and work on pictures?' William leaned forward. 'What do you think this is about?' his voice forceful, confrontational. I thought I should make my thoughts plain.

'I think you went through something traumatic,' I said, attempting to recover myself, 'and that you never knew when it would end. In some ways it doesn't sound like it has ended.' William sat back, his expression mocking.

'Me going through trauma? I can't take that in.'

'No,' I said, 'I don't think you can. That's what I mean about it not having ended.'

William gave me a quizzical cross face look. We sat, quiet. Outside a red kite called, lyrical, plaintive, it got no response. It called again.

'You think I went through something traumatic and that it hasn't ended? That I'm still in it?' said William.

'Yes', I said.

William nodded, not mocking now.

'I'm not sure if I see it.'

I nodded.

We were silent.

The kite called out again.

'Can you say something?' said William, 'I think the silence is making me anxious, like I'm being judged.' I looked at him. I thought of William's father, of impending judgement. 'Well,' said William 'then I'll tell you something, I am reading about Freud.'

I raised my eyes.

'Ah ha!' said William, 'got you! I thought you'd be interested.'

'What got you to Freud?' I said, I gave a small laugh.

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‘Amazon, a book came up in a category search’ said William, he seemed pleased with the reaction. ‘It’s interesting, long winded, and dry too, but the thing it says is that there is no substitute for doing the work in psychotherapy. I was pleased to see that. What? Why are you looking like that?’

‘I was wondering if you are emulating me?’ I said.

William laughed.

‘That’s a good one’ he said, ‘I’ll give you that. I’m emulating you.’ It was time to stop. He collected his things, gave a short laugh and left.