

QUILT

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Then certain Shrouds that muttered head to head
Came and were gone.

W. B. Yeats

Part One

In the middle of the night the phone rings, over and over, but I don't hear it. First it is the hospital, then the police.

Ω

– These things happen from time to time, my father says.

He is lying on the bed, his single bed alongside the other which, still made up, was my mother's, dying two years earlier, and the covers are off and I am trying to get him up and dressed, ready for hospital, but I'm weeping. Tears are streaming down my face making it difficult to see. Unenvisaged, embarrassing. Until now I have managed to remain quite calm, like him. I discussed the case over the phone with the doctor and agreed the best thing would be to get him into hospital where they could make him more comfortable.

– If it's possible to persuade your dad, see what you can do, I know old folk don't necessarily want to shift.

And for all the antiquarian power of his habits he could always amaze me, turn out to have been thinking,

or not, entirely elsewhere, for years impossible to get him to go somewhere, come out for a drink, walk by the sea, drive down the country lanes over the hills. I didn't expect him to agree but he did without the faintest remonstrance:

– Yes, take me to the hospital.

He's lying on the bed and he is my flesh, so simple, his body mine, and so difficult, so complicated he'll say shortly in a portmanteau coming apart at the seams, just when it will have become to my mind most straightforward, so deluded. Give up the thought of the sentence, he seems to tell me, and I am in his grip, he mine, here and from now on, I prop him up, help him sit, help him remove his bedclothes and get him dressed, 'stertorous' is the wrong word but hangs in the air, a signpost to how the most ordinary thing, getting dressed, becomes impracticable, fateful, tangled up with words and images from a song or book, the grotesque persnickiness of Edgar Allan Poe, the stertorous breathing of Monsieur Valdemar, figure of impossible, resuscitated putrefaction. It hangs in the air like a silent spy-plane, shadowshow of gallows. That is where living backwards begins: to pronounce dead is to murder, he wrote. All the time the other bed, by her, my father and I all the time aware, though we do not exchange a syllable, unoccupied.

Yesterday I called the doctor in, he asked my father if it would be possible to go upstairs so that he could examine him on the bed and we all went up together, one by one, three bears, me at the back, the doctor in the middle, each of us holding onto the handrail as we went, the doctor remarking with admiration on its crafting, smooth but knotty trunk of a young pine fallen in the

garden years ago meticulously bolted to the stairway wall by my father. Solid *silva*, yes, *silva silvam silvae*, the way words twinkle to others' uses, other to her, solid flesh, melting into dew, slivering into you. My father makes to lie down on his bed but the doctor asks him to lie down on the *other* bed, because it is closer to the window and he'll be able to see better. My father is nonplussed, looking over at it he says:

– But that was my wife's bed.

My wife, he says, pronouncing the words very carefully, his speech become fuzzy, especially in the preceding few days, and he strives to overcome it, I can hear the struggle. At innumerable moments in the past he has referred to her as *me wife*, in deliberate loving lapse of propriety, that was me wife's bed, but he doesn't venture it now, we seem to be embarked on some new phase of language. For some days there has been an eerie formality, an explicitness, almost disembodied, in referring to his anatomy and bodily functions, urinating, retraction of the penis, excreting, liquid stools, incontinence, as if this new emphasis on the proper heralds some strange homecoming, the rending mystery of my father. Is there fear and confusion or only loving respect, even awe when he objects, as if to say: But I cannot lie down there, that was my wife's bed. Yet the doctor insists on that bed, it is closer to the window, he says, he'll be able to see better, to see to see, what is it, magically thinking, my father complies.

But now it is today, nearly twenty-four hours later, and we say nothing about the other bed, unoccupied, constantly in our minds.

No, not stertorous, rather *wheezeful*, softer, gulping, an immeasurably beautiful strange ancient fish glooping

glooping groping grasping rasping for air, at air, sitting up, slowly so slowly to get dressed, article by article, until the socks, I am dressing my father for the first time in my life, his, due to him melting to me all his body mine, mining me, me father. A miner, yes, that thought is never far away. Underground, he carries it within him, for three years during the Second World War a coalminer day after day deep down in the dark and apparently relishing it, sheer subterranean strength, coming up for air at the end of the day face blackened, hot shower, then tea at his digs, a couple of pints at the local, and bed, then before dawn down again into the earth, mole of my life. It's as I help him dress now I have this searing sensation, smell and feel and look of his body mine, mined out, to have and to hold, every article exhausting and he has to rest, catch or fall back seeking breath respite resources from somewhere unrecognisable. He insists on a vest, shirt and two pullovers even though it is almost the end of July, a hot summer's day. We get to the socks, he is lying down and his feet calloused alien corn swollen, one of them worryingly red, a rash that runs up over his right foot to above the ankle. I haven't been aware of it till now, something else to be looked at in the hospital. I inch on the little soft grey cotton socks for him and the tears begin trickling down my cheeks. I try to conceal this, it is not the place for crying, not in the presence of my father, he does not weep, he whom, yes, incredibly only now for the first time it flashes, I have never seen weep, and he's evidently not about to start now. But I'm blinded: the tears are pouring out of my face. Why merely this word, *tears* or *teardrops*, but no others, like Eskimo snow lexemes? Why not a new language invented

every time? What's pouring out of my face has never happened before.

I've succeeded in getting him dressed and can begin to negotiate the business of getting him downstairs and out to the car and drive him to the hospital but I cannot see anything, with all this streaming. I have to tell him, I have to bring myself under control, the thought steadies me:

– I love you, Dad, I say, now standing up between his bed and hers, holding him by the hand.

– I love you too, mate, he says, and the tears flow from me with renewed force, impossible to restrain, strain stain in tears. My father says: don't worry, it's alright. Or he doesn't, no, not that exactly. The precise words are delivered as if from such an unfathomable distance I hardly recognise them:

– These things happen from time to time.

Not even his body which seems, in the wake of this remark, transported to another world, ventriloquism of his heart's desire, not even his body knowing or himself, as if there could be another voice, a strange guardian of my father now remarking that these things happen from time to time; it doesn't occur to me to ask him to clarify, the words might be dreamed, spoken in some walk-on part, picked up snatch on the radio. I came here yesterday, a couple of hundred miles across country, to be with him because in the past week or so, since last seeing him, I had been in regular contact with the doctor and neighbours and gathered from them, as well as from daily telephone conversations with him, a sense of his having significantly declined. A farmer's wife down the lane told me over the phone a couple of days ago:

– He doesn't have long by the look of him, your dad.

I help him sit and stand, finally, and we make our way downstairs. I collect a few things, a couple of books, a notepad, some money, mobile phone. Together we put his jacket on and attempt the shoes, but his feet seem swollen and his slippers are easier. Unspoken sense once more of a slip in the proper course of events, wearing slippers outside, these things happen from time to time. Hobbling out to the car, leaning on me step by step, a month ago he was mowing all the lawns, fit as you like. I help him lower himself into the passenger seat, both of us knowing he never likes to be in a car unless he's driving. Only two days ago he was still making it down to the local shop to collect his newspaper: he's too weak for that now.

I bring the car right up to the hospital entrance, find a wheelchair and ease him into it, stow him in the entrance way next to a large aquarium while I go to park the car. Then I wheel him through to the ward where a nurse welcomes us. We're led to a room in which there are two other patients, a man who is blind and another who, I'll later be informed, has learning disabilities. A couple of nurses shift and winch my father, after a struggle, onto a bed.

– The doctor on duty will come in half an hour or so and have a proper look at him, says one of the nurses pleasantly. Then they leave.

– Things are becoming so com-pli-cated, my father tells me, with a piercing smile of resignation.

And he is right, so viciously true, even though I want to tell him: no, this is simplifying things, it makes sense to be in the hospital, they'll be able to examine you and with luck make you feel more comfortable, we need to

find out what's going on, and what can be done to make you stronger and better. But I can't speak. I'm on the verge of streaming tears again. Translucent soldiers lining up, throwing themselves out without parachutes, come from some unknown zone I am struggling like a fish on land to grasp. What to talk about in this simple, abject desolation of a hospital, his body in a foreign bed, mine in a chair alongside? We watch the blindman: two words in the dark and wide, 'blind man', collide. In silence we watch him make his way without a hitch to the lavatory and back.

– No need to turn the light on in there, I'm fine, nurse, he says.

The other man restless, sitting on his bed in a dressing-gown, then walking about a bit, then sitting on his bed again. My father needs some new underwear and pyjamas. His incontinence, lack of time to get any washing done before coming to the hospital. Sentences stop, leak, caught, soil themselves short.

– I'll go and buy some new underwear for you while we're waiting for the doctor, I tell him. And he tells me about the one and only satisfactory brand and style of underpants and points out, with an ironic smile, that there are none to be had in the local town: I must drive to a specialist, old-fashioned hosiery shop in a village on the coast, about twelve miles away.

Ω

The ray lurks, impenetrably, around the origins of philosophy. In Plato, for example, it occupies the space of something like *déjà vu*, it disturbs thinking, dislocating