

The Little Book · David Hughes

DEAREST, I SET OUT wanting to write the unwritable bible for you. You know, the little book that told you everything and made you feel good? I wanted you to have it among your things, so that if we weren't together for the rest of your life you would always know what I meant with the whole of mine.

So it's only for you. It's the big exploratory act which any boy wants to share with his girl when he crosses the ocean and comes up with the eldorado. It's the letter that hides nothing, the late-night call across the continents when everyone else is asleep. It's the complicated child we missed having together, and you and me snatching the chance to meet—lunch in Marseilles, Rome airport, a Greek afternoon—with our hearts beating time and nothing ever just normal. It's naked bedrooms. It's the mood of music at its sugariest, the propriety of love at its most improper, the uncrackable mystery of every damn thing we clap our eyes on. And most of all it's me in my absurd glory. A testament.

But such a book is still unwritable, so I'll fall back on telling you the story of what happened when someone else bloody well sat down and wrote it.

This little book of someone else's came out of nowhere at the beginning of the eighties. It was so simple that at first glance it seemed meant for children. It was also quite short, in fact no longer than the pages you now have in your hands. And it was called, of course, *The Little Book*.

My first thought on learning of it was that many people might be put off by the less than inscrutable echo of a certain oriental leader. But this work never buttonholed: no hint of sermon or declaration of the obvious, no sketchy poems pretending to be as deep as music or goads to violence disguised as wisdom. The book had a still centre.

Indeed, if read aloud in the slack of night by a thoughtful adult, I guessed, the book would tempt him, or her, if not both, to take a wholly different view of practically everything, not least of themselves.

A book to end books.

The book came out quietly during a torrid summer. We were struck down by heat. Tempers frayed; flies gathered on the uneasy afternoons. The deep cool of the book, it seemed, could only condense at night—by which time I was

Copyright © David Hughes, 1981

often asleep and failing to remember dreams. The book slipped out of my hand. And hit the floor.

I kept missing the point.

The anonymous author began by saying that his name was not on the title page because I, the reader, now had to make my own book. It was too late for any writer to do it for me. He could offer me a bit of guidance. But the book was really in my own mind, my heart knew what it wanted to say. I was free at last—of the tyranny of words or any other rule.

This sounded like a simple challenge for anyone, especially as the volume took a tabloid reader only about an hour to get through. It was the length of a television play, a stint of digging in a retired Suffolk garden, an after-dinner snooze in Birmingham on a Sunday, a buffet snack on an Inter-City to Leeds, a political rally in a cold hall to the west of Bath, a very large whisky, a cross-country walk between Itchen Abbas and Winchester, a psychiatric session at twenty pounds a time, a swim off the South Coast or a drive in Wales, an average domestic quarrel anywhere in the world, or making slow love ditto.

Reading the book was, in fact, the right length for anything anywhere. Nothing need ever be longer again, either longer than the fuck or larger than the whisky or healthier than the swim or more argumentative than the rally or tastier than the snack or dreamier than the snooze or more satisfactorily egocentric than the hour on the couch.

This book, darling, in my opinion, was to fit the human predicament like a birthday suit.

I really longed to know who wrote it, if only because I had this feeling I had written it myself.

I want to hold you in my arms in the panic of the night, the book said. I want to escort you into the sun. It bit. And hurt. And pleased.

The first pages claimed that all the author could do was allow me the ghost of a chance to be myself. To make up my own stories as though telling them to a child. The campfires of narrative were dowsed for ever, the gaudy courts of my mind needed a jester no more. Meanwhile this author could teach me some tricks of the trade, if I were ready to learn.

I thought at first I might be alone in responding to this novelty of approach, but apparently not. I gathered that the book was about to penetrate the meagre remnants of our culture, enter muddled attics in town and basements exuding a provincial damp, skulk half-read within country mansions crumbling nobly into penury, hover over the close-carpeted areas of a defunct metropolitan privilege, filter even into many a bedroom where mattresses creaked under a

voluptuous want of hope. All these locations, I understood, were subsumed in a text of delectable ordinariness that in a time of stress wished only to be as helpful as it could.

The text contained, as perhaps no book ever had, the span and trajectory of life, the wilderness of it, its lack of grammar, its ever-present absence, its refusal to be pinned down or fenced in, as well as the painful unprogrammed amiability of life, not to mention life's way of creeping out of the silent gaps between the words as abruptly as a genius with blood on his hands, not excluding life's criminal aptitude for giving you the wrong answer with a smile of complacency, plus several other things that laid the mystery wide open only to close it up more firmly than ever; and doing all that, which the book suggested wasn't nearly enough, with a consuming passion.

Sometimes the book struck a sentence as long as the above and seemed to get nowhere. Mostly because readers like myself assumed out of habit that it had nowhere to go.

I was wrong, beloved.

Please read with care, it said. Yes, the author had adopted a cunning technique to exact from me my own creative effort. To stop my being lazy. To get my imagination out of the rut.

The author simply asked me to shape my characters for myself, and people my own world, and fashion a universe in my image. His sentences breathed into me both the desire and the liberty to assume a divine stance.

First, I had to consider this very page a blank, a blank on which my private patterns were forming. By closing my eyes over it, I could see myself at a distance, as a character in a story that belonged only to me.

I closed my eyes. I realised at once that if I took the game a stage further I could see anyone else I fancied, including perhaps the author himself.

Keep my eyes closed, the book said. Picture someone almost forgotten whom I once met—glimpsed—briefly knew—sat beside in school—went once to bed with in the dark—saw showing off across a crowded room: someone anyway from the saharas of my past. Someone a bit like me.

Someone now plump and fiftyish, early promise fast slipping but braving it out. Thinnish plumes of greying windblown hair. A raunchy downbeat gait, as if no longer on the make or increasingly on the beer. A dark raddled glance that projects authority, not to be brooked by waiters, aristocrats, girls, etc. Voice deeply coloured like the best honey. A high brow off which he never stops wiping the illusions like sweat. A fellow who is alive because still debating how to live.

I've certainly seen him, if only in half-dreams, in myself when my eyes are closed, even in the mirror shaving: a human being who might have done anything at a pinch.

But all he did was to write this book—*The Little Book*, to be precise. He uncannily gave away his identity in the first few pages by asking me to imagine him, so of course I leapt to the exaggerated conclusion that he was meant to be me. Probably untrue. But at least he convinced me that he was down there in the unspeakable depths of myself and had been waiting a very long time to come out.

It was just as delicate a shock, my love, as meeting you for the first time.

There seemed no need to choose a name for this author. Here he was in the ample flesh, filling the screen of the inner eye, a friend of mine, doing the nice things I might have done: alone in a fragrant Marseilles eating fish off the grill and wanting a woman more than anything except more cold wine; softly longing for a long walk in soft English country; witnessing a riot amid the pandemonium of a Greek election; scoffing a disproportionate snack of wurst in mid-morning Munich to give him strength to face a gross lunch; snoozing rank afternoons away in the snobbish heat of a Roman palazzo; in Barcelona at night wanting the icy tingle of mineral water down his throat more than anything, except the woman.

He was all over the place. As hard to locate as the woman, as vulgarly loud as the riot, as romantically gentle as the downland walk, as full of disordered dreams as the snooze, as intoxicating in company as the wine, and as self-indulgent as the snack. He was a Mediterranean seaport, a German burg, English acres, an island in Greece. He was all these places at once: a continent of a man—as muddled as Europe—who had apparently vanished, as if not wanting to face the music, despite the fact that he had himself called the tune.

For the historical record, rumours of *The Little Book* began circulating in London well before publication last spring.

One or two drifted into the Sunday newspaper whose literary editor was a busy careerist of roughly my age called Hugh Davies. Having for short periods held down jobs like that on papers, I could imagine him for myself with the scornful ease of familiarity. Indeed I had observed hints of him everywhere in my life. Sketches of him in dark suits belonged to my club, where his kind of well-turned professional offered me tempting terms for life insurance, arranged my divorce, submitted plans for an addition to my house, sneaked into bed with my mistress, told me stories at the bar: a friend to everyone.

And at once I realised what the author meant. Davies was no different from me, of course. Or part of me: a middling middle-class muddle, as cunning as the lawyer and stressed as the architect; any Englishman doing his job with interest, but bored, living his life with vigour, but distressed, giving his family

what they seemed to need, but anxious; prowling in search of something else, something at the luminous back of a dim beyond.

But if his present life said nothing to this Hugh Davies, how could a little anonymous book be expected to say more?

“Who is this nobody?” he said moodily to the office at large.

He was told that the author’s identity was perhaps known to only one person, a girl, a reportedly hot number who ran fact and fiction in the house that was soon to publish *The Little Book*.

Davies arranged to lunch with this dubious paragon, who turned out to have polished eyes as hard and vacant as turquoises. They seemed stonily fixed on him as though to hide either faults or secrets. Obviously, like the restaurant which he used for convenience, she had gone down a lot. Her sexual muscle was probably as limp as the asparagus.

But there was something about her which Davies caught himself not wanting to see and she was contained by this odd indefinable, seemingly fulfilled by it: a purr of inner entertainment which he had no wish to share, in fact he felt like smashing it to pieces. For it looked smug, it calmed her face too much. And of course it had to do with the privacies of *The Little Book*.

“You’ll see,” she said.

“Tell me more.”

“I’m not being coy,” she replied coyly. “But I honestly can’t explain. Just you wait till you read it.”

Her eyes continued to gaze at him with a feral steadiness that was also somehow moral. And unnerving. He spilt a dribble of wine while pouring the second bottle. She had introduced into his stomach a sense of physical dissolution, which made him feel flatly exploited, as after self-abuse. And still she stared at him unblinkingly out of some more luminous world which aroused in him both guilt and desire, each lewdly feeding on the other in a combination that made his knees spongy.

“Unseen powers?” His voice wobbled.

“Could be.”

But she would divulge no clue to the book’s purpose or provenance, let alone the author’s name. “You’ll see,” she said again divinely, teeth closing over a final imported strawberry.

Davies wanted to pain her for being so knowingly superior. Yet they cabbed at speed back to her flat, got entangled in boozy undressing, and were in the thick of making love with the detached application of dogs when into the room came a fat man.

They subsided on the sheet. Davies thought, Christ, husbands, the old story. He experienced a twinge of withdrawal and much incipient hostility.

The fat man’s face inside the door looked amicably anonymous in the gloom until with a delayed yelp she said, “Go away,” whereupon the fellow laughed

without rancour and answered, "Well, old thing, share and share alike, good luck to the sod," knocked a potlet of violets off a dressing-table, swayed briefly to resume his bearings, exited crabwise with a muffled apology, waved a plump hand and vanished.

Who was this character? Since he evidently had her key, might he not also be author of the book that meant so much to her? So he was real after all. At this nudge of suspicion the dogged muddle of desire on the bed lost heart. "Fuck!" thought Davies limply.

By now, in thus creating my own characters and entering their lives, I am following *The Little Book's* precepts with relative ease. I recognise the source of this odalisque with the shy feral smile. She has been coquetting in my backstage thoughts for years: the fantasy girl I never quite met, let alone had.

I still haven't had her, dammit. She lounges unassaulted on the tenebrous couches of the mind, a girl whose prepubic face shyly freshened the rear benches in class, whom I glimpsed on a pavement from an adolescent bus, to whom I was given no introduction at a party, who always quitted my future at just the moment I entered it.

I dress her up. And undress her. Lay her over my knees and kiss her cheeks. Spank her. Worship her. Buy seamy magazines for a haphazard glimpse of those eyes rolling back into her head at my touch. The quite impossible she. As much a part of me as any of my so-called selves.

I call her Davina Hayes and decide to make her the mouthpiece not only of my own incarcerated desires, but of the precise effect of *The Little Book* on the softly chaotic intuitions of all those women in Britain who read it that summer.

Davina. . . .

"I suppose I have to read this damn book," Davies said ruefully, putting on his trousers.

"No," she said with unexpected verve. "No. You don't *read* a book like this. It's not a book. It's a ravening wolf. It chases you through the dark forests. You try to run away from it—you're not fit enough. It tracks you down. You hope it's stopped howling at you, but then suddenly it springs. And you're lost."

"Or found," he said for effect.

She nodded vigorously. Davies bent over the bed to embrace her naked body, if only to convey the elation her words stirred in him, but she eluded his grasp. "Now what does it say about sex being irresponsible and childish?" she said in forbidding tones. "No, that's just the sort of rational thing the book is clever enough not to say. That's why I have the impression it says it."

“Between the lines?”

“Don’t be so obvious. It’s outdated that concept at a stroke.”

“How does it say it then?”

She frowned, as at a dunce. “It says everything original in a way that’s such a whacking platitude that nobody notices it,” she said. “They just feel it. They feel the originality. It goes straight to the gut, the words actually get down there and fight, they give you that kick in the bowels and you rush to your doctor in a tizz—except that it’s only well-being. It’s just you, you coming alive for the first time, and you can’t stand the shock, can you?”

Davies blinked. The fantasy girl was rebelling. It struck him that she must be trying to find substitute language, and failing, for something inexpressible which the book in fact expressed. The words were probably as natural and fleeting as a species of weather, just gusts, currents on a page that blew into you, small shadowy signs that brought out the sun.

And then, as if reading his thoughts, she said, “The book says everything you want it to, then a bit more which is a nice bonus, then a lot more than you can bear, and finally it gives you our old world in a new guise of beauty and bounty, and then that too turns out not to be final either, because, in spite of being short, the book keeps going on and on by apparently using fewer and fewer words, until you find to your horror—and this is the happiest moment of all—that it’s using no words whatever, hasn’t used any, won’t use any, and the whole miracle has been taking place in the purity of your own imagination, which has needed just that release all your life.”

“And you still won’t tell me who wrote it?”

“You did. I did. Any old reader did. I can’t tell you more. Oh, what does it matter?”

He kissed her, on the cheek, formally. Despite being slightly vexed by her runic evasions, Davies had never felt more originally in love with anyone, as if that mattered, or indeed with himself, which seemed to count more: lots of himself in varying versions, a tangle of selves about to untie and live on their own at last. He was conscious of an explorer’s tense delight in having a long way to go before an elysium mirrored out of the ice or desert. All this appeared to lie silent within the confined future of the book.

“I’ll send you a copy this afternoon,” she said, and for the first time, as she openly swung legs off the bed, he saw the innocently impersonal dark folds of her parts. It was as touching as childhood. He wanted abruptly to bury his head in the intricacies of his own lewd creation.

Dearest, I feel unfaithful to you after this incident—which seems to void and cheapen me, as if I hadn’t realised how much I still identified with this Hugh Davies. So may I project that infidelity on to you? Blotting out all notion of

my own misconduct, I think of you crying out in pleasure on that same London bed. I consider your body, inches of which I know better than much of mine, and acidly my brain gloats over the lascivious horror of someone else making love to you.

Can *The Little Book* be drowning my morals when it was supposed only to lifesave my morale? That's impossible to answer because at this point I haven't finished reading it (Davina's promised copy delivered by messenger was now sitting on the literary editor's desk), but oh God the images it prompts: you bending deep to push tights round your ankles, briefly in that posture opening your orifices to a dark face lying in wait for you; then, as you cascade into anonymous arms, your eyes roll back into your head, your jack-knifed knees clasp him high round the waist, you in flood, he churning. As if you too had become a fantasy, I linger over what I cannot bear. How could you permit anyone but me to touch you, my love, with hands or words?

This was the first magnificent weekend of an early summer that was to parch the landscape and change the entire face of the country. As usual on Saturdays, his pages on the paper put to bed, Hugh Davies caught the train down to his mansion among the trees of the south. *The Little Book* was in the briefcase on the rack, a time-bomb or a damp squib.

He arrived home. He loved that house. There was a slant of late coppery sunlight on the boles of chestnuts, which seemed to forecast evanescently a repetitive eternity of children, wives, summers, anxieties. The front door was open as if for ever on the dying light. The family supped early on stew. The children manufactured an ecstasy of private mischief, then in public hysteria refused to go to bed. Then went to bed.

Davies said, "I love you."

"I love you," his wife said.

Which mostly meant that they had both been drinking wine, one they relished from foreign holidays and could now obtain locally—though it did not taste the same, though they did not say so. Years of complicity lay as safe as an abyss between them.

Davies opened a door on to his lawns and stared at the lemony aftermath of sunset defining the hills. Like a ghost, tremulously, an owl started to woo the forthcoming night. He shuddered, feeling for a second on the brink of the other side of the normal, wherever that was. He simultaneously felt the urgency of some task to perform—the book, yes, reading the book—which in some way unrevealed but intimate had to do with this world dropping away from the sunset into dark and silence.

The kitchen clattered faintly behind him, things were draining. An evening home was in danger of passing away into the rot of routine, tomorrow's

unwanted plans, yawns, hints, rather limp hints of a lust long gone; then deep sleep, troubled by a tangle of dreams.

But, no, he walked in from the darkness and plucked out of his briefcase the copy of *The Little Book* and pushed the first page under the lamp.

What incalculable reality was stirring in Davies as he set his imagination to work? By God, he was being asked to invent out of his own mess another person altogether.

For a handful of those first sentences Davies was half aware of himself living uneasily in the ease of the country after a soft week in the hardness of town. Inner muscles were relaxing under the massage, not only of good words exactly positioned, but of the familiarity of his setting dulled into place by alcohol. He was at home, at night, at rest. But he was also somewhere else.

As for me so for him, the experience did not resemble reading at all. The pages echoed back to him, as if entering recesses of his private thought which he had never suspected, all the trifles of everyday which he believed he had enjoyed during that week, but had missed by a mile: the office never quite dull but bloody near it; the grace of falling asleep under the thud of rain; the steady tread of his feet going places for good reasons, over carpets, on pavements gilded by drizzle and lamplight, up flights of stairs; greeting someone known for years, making with a cool drink in the hand all the fond allowances, and that witty spark of anticipation when evenings dawned; buds, decisions, odours of earth, eyes in the street; the primal flush of blossom shortlived against a wall glimpsed out of a taxi window, a wash of blue above narrowing perspectives; a purchase in a shop, soap, book, blade, pen, a commonplace; a girl decisively drinking him in with blue eyes in bed, the buds of her nipples, peace, peace; and a short while later the very ordinariness of the office, never dull but almost. Life, in fact. Instants of blind pleasure. To be relished into a pattern. To be valued into a balance. To be lived.

Yet Davies knew from these pages that he had had the effrontery to live a week's life as though it were not happening at all.

Darling, at this point in my reading, just when my imagination begins to tingle, I sit back for a moment, finding it hard to encompass how much of our own lives the book, without argument, persuades me we have lost during the last week. And only time will tell how much has drained uselessly out of us over the years when we were pursuing aims and ambitions that in no way reflected the people we were or wanted to be. I find this to be stunning news. Nobody ever clarified it before.

Usually my perception of reading was that words just ate neatly into the

surface of the brain. These, with a subversive gluttony, have somehow set their teeth to work on the unconscious. They feed deeply on me, but only to nourish.

I do not know what to think—or whether, as the book seems to prefer, not to think anything.

I close my eyes, as advised, with a view to opening them.

Sitting there at home in the small hours of a country house, Hugh Davies felt to his consternation that he was in touch with others. They were all inside him. It was hard to tell what they were trying to communicate; they felt like districts of himself that were crying out to be realised. For those words on the lighted page had been luminously transmuted, not into thought in the well-mannered fashion of good prose, but straight into emotion. Or was it emotion? Or, if not, what moved and humoured him so much?

He could frame no answers; indeed believed without question that he wasn't meant to. It just seemed vital to feel his way beyond feeling into some other areas as yet uncharted. He recognised aghast that he had changed overnight, in depths of which he had been criminally unaware, but also in several obvious ways that implied a degree of ascetic refinement almost unbelievable in a man so loosely self-indulgent for so long: smoking, eating, drinking, sleeping, fucking, he had liked it all.

Yet the book made him want to avoid sleep, despite a potent longing to dream (or was the book itself a great dream?); it roundly put him off all thoughts of a square meal, turned him against alcohol by causing him to feel his brains were smothering in anaesthetic, made the inhalation of a cigarette taste like choking on sewage: thus the idea of kissing someone, making her body spring to the touch, smacked repulsively of sleep, smoke, meat, shit, drink. All the old compulsive pleasures convulsed in sickness within him as if he had overplayed them or never used them honestly.

Also the book seemed to query the very concept of wives and children by casting doubt on the nature of his love for them. And it forced him to question beauty (the way a landscape or body suggested it), time (the way a clock ticked it), and people (the way they were). And finally it bit pounds of flesh out of his assumptions all round.

But despite being starved, drained of desires, done out of drinks, short on sleep, doubtful of love, denied a future as emptily nice as the past, or because of these things, Hugh Davies knew that the book had made him feel more commandingly alive than ever before. It was thickening the blood in his arteries, scouring the trash out of his brain, throwing light on pitchblack areas of him that were timeless. It had turned off his ego like a switch; and shown him a glimpse of something hitherto undisclosed (what was it?) to the inner eye; was pioneering a vision (what was it?) that would take time to clarify.

For the moment it was enough to believe from the bizarre prose of *The Little Book* that such a vision (where was it?) existed.

For somewhere here was supernature staring at him as softly as a watermark on a page.

At sunset today I began to summon up the tremendous party the publishers were giving to launch *The Little Book*, digging the celebration of a lifetime out of the scraps jostling in my memory. Shut your eyes and enjoy yourself, the book said, and all the high sunsets and dusks of festivity I had accumulated over the years flooded into place, an inner cornucopia of village hops, receptions, garden parties, outings to the seaside, balls: my earlier life of noisy pleasure upped by a few decibels and drinks and doubts, for it was quite evident that this party was to be peopled by my past.

I closed my eyes. I saw the old tipsy images shaking down into a pattern. I saw an eggshell fragility in the beauty of the evening, as in a city on the brink of war. The picture cleared as truly as a feeling.

In an enclave of inner London, the party overspilling the publisher's offices on to shadowed pavements, many guests I seemed to half know were assembling in twilight groups. As yet I could hardly see their faces. Flares burning on poles threw a race of huge reflections across the arcades of the market. Sawn-off barrels were set at intervals, packed high with ice, stuffed with champagne. Hands I had once held gripped the necks of bottles. Tongues I had touched with my tongue wagged in cheeks. Eyes made war.

A party to end parties.

I stared at the figures taking shape in front of me in the uncertain light. Apart from Hugh Davies, who loomed knowingly amid this fuzzy elite, none of them had read *The Little Book*, but they were here to see it in like a New Year, to bellow it in, crowd it out, talk it through, feel it up and drink it to death. Here was D.J. House, an Oxford professor of history, lofty, storkish, gesticulating in the background, honouring the book by grandly abstaining from absence. Over there, securing for the book the elevated imprimatur of the aristocracy, stood the thin shape of Sir Davis Fielden, so remote as to be almost elsewhere, accompanied at a remove by his even more otherworldly wife. Latimer Johns MP, a junior minister, kept to the distinguished rear of the party so that I could hardly make out his features, the dark jowl, balding head, long nose of the cartoons: a caricature who represented me. The saturnine Mr Parry, warehouse foreman to the book's publisher, was sinuously handing round drinks on the fringes. Girls who had been through my life at some point gazed unseeingly. Men I had once envied stared past me into a future that darkened minute by minute.

To think that this cavalcade of ignorance stood in for my past! I couldn't

evade it. Here they all were, nodding at me curtly, waving without affection, passing me on a waft of perfume, looking at me askance out of contexts long soured, reconstituting passions I thought I had forgotten, reviving ambitions I assumed I had grown out of: selfishly pursuing their ends, as if trying to elude me. I had tried both to like them and to be like them, and on both counts failed. They had been the gawky agents of my growing up. Surely I had matured away from their temporary charms and become my chosen self.

But I hadn't. The book's residue in my veins told me that I had clumsily mislaid them along the way. At various points, years ago, they had dropped away from me, and I had missed them, and it hurt, and I had refused or been unable to see that by leaving them behind, by suppressing their very different modes and tempers within me, I was becoming progressively less than myself: even more of a child than ever because I had let them fade out. And in the act of blocking them off, or not pursuing through them what I might have become, or not deliberately killing them to the last vestige, I had somewhere lost my direction.

Yet of course they owed me nothing. They were not people. I had never taken the trouble to create them properly, to give them birth, send them about their business, forget them. They remained stuck in my innards, a neurotic amalgam of expense accounts, wasted afternoons, errors of judgment, crude acts of narcissism, failures of contact, betrayals and bad jokes. No wonder they scarcely seemed to recognise me as I tried to recall who they were.

Nonetheless they had composed my life—such as it was, the book very gently reminded me.

The party fell away, a party to end parties, leaving only the melted ice, bottles cannoning underfoot, butts of cigarettes as bitter as confetti on the pavement, and an unearthly silence down the irregularities of the lamplit street.

I waited. My fantasy girl had gone home. All the rest had gone back into their lives. For me this was the end of something—my life of old dispersing around me—or maybe the beginning of more. I had nowhere to go, except a room, a flat, a small flat, which now seemed to belong to no one. My ego was as dark and quiescent as the night. I felt full, not of food or drink or self, but of a faraway tintinnabulation of happiness, like someone else's feeling not yet felt. I knew I was triumphantly alone in whatever I might do.

I felt I had been emptied out by the ravening wolf of the book. Could it fill me again to overflowing with the qualities that should have topped me up from the start?

The next day, on the verge of summer, *The Little Book* was published. It came out at the start of a long and hot and humid week.

A review or two sluggishly appeared. They displayed a bitterly judicial tact, as though edging clients away from a product that might trouble them. They juggled uninspired guesses as to the identity of the author. By declaring that the book took no time to read they gave people the idea that they had already read it.

The volume looked tempting enough and felt good in the hand. The cover had a black new sheen, as seductive as old silk stockings, as warming as old kitchen stoves, as staunch as old bibles. The title appeared in small white print on the shoeshine black of the jacket.

The book was also tempting in price. It cost roughly the equivalent of a seat in a backward row at the opera or seven ounces of smoked salmon from Harrods or a hundred cigarettes of a low-tar brand or a quarter of a dinner for two at Bianchi's or almost two and a half minutes in bed with a good-class whore: four pounds fifty.

But the weather was very hot. You could only smoke and drink and eat and listen to music and go to bed. And the heat intensified all week. And people melted, cursed, dripped, mopped and dozed their way to other places, their engines boiling as they breathed the stunned air, towards beach parks and park benches, to lakes and laybys, as if trying to escape their bodies that burned and peeled, sweat pouring acidly over the eyes of a fleeing nation, blinding everyone to "a secret of life" (*Observer*), if such it was, "modes of feeling" (*Sunday Times*), if such they were. The book had everything on paper, it seemed; but not much in fact. It slipped through the fingers. And hit the floor.

It would take time.

Meanwhile it was too hot for events of this magnitude. A war would have passed unnoticed until we died of it. No gossip column regarded the author as of sufficient bite to invent stories about him, no television show scooped any other, no minor scandal was fomented in the hollows of public relations. A sluggish, bitter, humid and troubling silence fell on *The Little Book*.

Except among one or two people I thought I knew, who had departed alone from the launching party, with a free copy of the book slipped into pocket or handbag, intending to read it as soon as they came home from the opera or a session with a girl, finished dinner, smoked a cigarette and let the champagne clear from their minds.

For example, I had known Latimer Johns MP at university, a young man hoping for the best. I could still see his features when I shaved in the mirror. They were there in my face, all thin: thin eyes, thinner nose, thinning hair; the bitterness tensing in the sinews of an athletic middle age, blood vessels breaking on each pinched side of the nose, eyes thinly closing against the world, on the only day that whole summer when it rained.

In Smith Square, Westminster, murmurs of service resembling silence susurrated within the house and *The Little Book* lay ready on a table. On a warmer, breakfast waited in several savoury choices. An egg slid on to his plate, velvety coffee poured into his cup. The newspapers, folded in order of priority, were skimmed in sequence.

Distant telephones purred. A skirt swished close to him, a hand placed a typed schedule on the polish of the mahogany. The day was marked comfortably out in stressed half-hours. As usual Johns realised that nothing would be made hard for him except the honed edge of loneliness that hid a knife.

A noiseless car awaited him. A cap saluted. His mind uneasily at rest he made a royal progress up the Mall to the Ministry where his desk was clear. Men came, men talked awhile, men went: the Civil Service swaying through his solitude with a tight smile. A cup of coffee was placed at his elbow. Files were passed from one tray to the next, his brain ticking over, memorising detail. Gaps of time yawned.

Johns was to lunch officially at a Town Hall on the edge of London. A mayor swayed towards him, hand out, chain dangling, smile set. They sat down. At his elbow stood an array of glassware. A soup was placed in front of him by unseen hands. Other foods followed. He picked.

Someone stood, tapping a glass, to introduce Latimer Johns MP, who needed no introduction. Who was he? He found he was on his feet with a smile that felt denuded, facing faces. He looked at his typed papers. He began. He heard his own magnified voice touched with a regret for some ill-specified glory that had not yet occurred. He ended his speech with a sad flourish.

A hand under his elbow led him away. A face under a cap looked at a watch. His home in Smith Square noiselessly approached. A murmur of service filled the house with nothing, his only boy was away at school, his wife was nowhere, a tree unfolding into acid green caught his eye from a window. There was half an hour to spare on the typed schedule.

He sat down and sighed in one of several deep armchairs poised at immoveable intervals like sleepers in a club and, as planned, picked up the little book someone had recommended him to read.

It drizzled on. The leaves in their tight buds opened imperceptibly in the square. Life murmured like rain belowstairs where they were preparing his tea. A footman passed once in and out of the spaces of the room as unnervingly as silence. Johns had paid for it all. It was a heavy charge on him. He turned the pages of the book. In one hand, between his motionless fingers, a pencil lay ready to comment. The margins were blank. The prose opened and closed in front of his eyes, urgently echoing rain. The sounds of life, the rhythms below, grew louder, then faded into silence as a paragraph ended.

It drizzled on. He turned a page.

And now the breeze of the language was taking his breath away, the sluggish

room grew cold to the touch, a hand placed hot tea at his elbow, and the argument moved forward in his mind with the elegance of a dream; whole speeches burst like fireworks in a phrase, then died into the darkness, the tea tasting deep and strong. And in the belly of the afternoon arose from the depths of the book a strong sense that this moment, unlike all other moments, would go on for ever. There was so much more to unearth in its rich seam of silence.

He would have to say that to someone, to his son, to friends, to many people, to the people, to the entire nation. But how? And in what language?

At this point a well-known journalist, to interview him by appointment, was shown in by a servant. Hugh Davies took a seat and opened his notebook; they had been at Oxford together. Johns sighed, held the book with his thumb halfway through and looked at the intruder. Already he seemed to belong to another life, to ignorance, folly and the past. "You have to read this, old boy," Johns found himself saying. "It's about misery."

"I've read it," Davies said. "I think I know what you mean. But what misery's that exactly?"

"The misery of your success," Johns said. "You know, it's not sweet and it's not sufficient, is it? And the misery of happiness—it doesn't live up to what you were taught to expect of it, does it? And the misery of knowing in your guts that what you're doing day after day isn't just trivial, that's a trivial point, but is also killing you. And the overall misery you never understand, let alone conquer, because you can't find any good reason for its being there, which indeed it isn't, except that you're convinced by your anxiety that it is—am I right? And also the real misery—grief, yes, the grief at the passage of time, the egomaniac grief for others dying, yes, but most of all because you're scared that you died years ago without snatching the chance to live, aren't you? And finally the hopeless misery of having to have things you have to look after, such as lawnmowers, drawing-rooms, ambitions, season tickets, watches, conceits, vehicles, egos, suitcases, radios, ornaments, vanities, garden furniture, illusions, weekend cottages, and all the things you're using to prevent your moving an inch except to take out yet another insurance for a future that promises only more of the same—right?" Johns paused. "So you'd better read it again, hadn't you?"

Davies stared. "You're in great form, Minister," he said falsely. "I quite agree."

Johns stood up, cast a scornfully visionary look at the journalist and made an obtrusive exit. Walking downstairs past the murmur of servants, still holding the book, he pulled and pushed at the garden door. It had not been opened since last summer. A lock had rusted, the bolt was stuck. He felt unable to breathe in his own house. The door suddenly gave.

Air.

Outside was a small paved garden. It belonged to him. He had slept above

it for months. He had failed to visit it. He had failed even a London gardenette, walled in old brick, enclosing vicarages of long ago, other centuries, planted with old-fashioned roses that brought his courtship back to him, with damp lichen on the paving and being alone in childhood, herbs tenaciously bunching out of the crevices in the stone, a cherry tree now fast flowering. Left for so many months to its private devices of growth, this garden seemed to mirror in sad green negative the long ignored dilemmas of his heart and brain.

These dilemmas were at once quite clear: dilemma of a politician not quite on course, not growing, getting nowhere; of a family that existed only on the paper of a daily reality that was not real; of a country that had not only stopped but gone into reverse; of a civilisation that was making a public show of dispersal and defeat at exactly the moment of having nothing private to say.

He stood walled by the garden, stock still, discovery passing down his body like temperature rising by degrees, seeing crisply in himself the image of a man walled up in crumbling brick, planted with old-fashioned thoughts that brought nothing back to him, with damp perceptions clinging mossily to the lining of his brain, prejudices tenaciously bunching out of the hollows of himself, aggressions fast flowering: a thin man amid the slim chances of middle age, having had enough of life to last a lifetime, but at the same moment feeling the whole country rising in a quiet revolution behind him, as the voice of the book, his own voice, echoed out over the miserable counties and swept him to power.

My love, you have recognised by now the wonder of it. As I read *The Little Book* I can't help but enter into the persons of these men who are also reading it. I know how they are feeling. I am just as strongly there in Hugh's soft countryside or the metropolitan privilege of Latimer Johns as here in my own place with the text on my knee. You can argue that this is because I have invented them, as per author's instructions. But that's not the only truth, I fear. A further likelihood is that they were there all the time, hidden in the interstices of the past. They just notched back into the present at that party launching the book.

Yes, here was at last supernature staring at me as softly as a watermark on a page: a presence convincing me that I would soon begin to communicate with myself, with these other versions or longlost chances of myself, in a fashion that made both language and touch as crudely ancient a weaponry as the pen or sword. *The Little Book*, while perforce using the desiccated academy of words we all shared, made its real points by what it never dreamed of explicitly saying.

Thus I kept shivering as I read. The excitement made gooseflesh of time and place. On to the blank page of my mind crept the feelings of other people

still very much alive. But there was no backbone of language to support them or paperchain of sense to lead me their way. I was on my own with them. It was almost as if I were undergoing the convulsive pleasure of giving birth, just as you might be in the throes of creating me for yourself, my darling, by the mere fact of reaching the end of this paragraph.

It took me a little time to locate the clue to all this. Who, I wondered, was Hugh Davies? All right, I had known him years ago, but who was he really? Nor would Latimer Johns be anyone I particularly cared to meet these days, but now he was rising out of the voluntary pages to obsess me. And then I saw: they were me, not as I am in any blatant sense, but as I might have been if I had chanced my arm in other walks or allowed this or that influence at various moments of the past to come uppermost. I might indeed have become a literary editor tired of his trade or a junior minister searching for spicier opportunity: shadowy parallels I had been creating for years inside me, a constipation of alternatives. But I might also have grown up to be any of those others I so despised at a party that had sprung to life out of associations. I saw unfulfilled scraps of myself, for instance, in Professor House endlessly repeating history within the grey coign of an Oxford college; in Sir Davies Fielden living a tradition of dubious ease on his estate of masterpieces; in that gloomy foreman Mr Parry packing books for his wages but longing for his native hearth in Wales; and even in Davina Hayes, that fantasy of a woman softly erect inside me.

Indeed even now I felt the danger of being taken over by at least the attitudes of these people, as they started upending their lives by reading the book. But all I wanted was to be a single and simple and growing self. I had a sense that the book was urging me to get rid of them, even as they themselves became different people as a result of digesting it. They too, after all, had an equal right to strive towards new versions. They were human.

I asked myself: was I falling in love with Davina, as with the book that was biting deeper into me, as with the world that was coming stupendously alive? She was naked bedrooms. She was the late-night call that said the lot, the edgy promise of meeting in heart-rending places the world over. She held tight in her womb that child who would be our complicated handclasp with the future, she was across my body for that snooze after the heavy lunch, she was the act of purring to the ends of the earth in train sleepers with the undercurrent of the wheels making nightly love to our ears on the narrow bunk, she was the cross-country walk that made us stumble into pubs in quest of beer, bread, cheese, she splashed me with curves of iridescent spray in that swim off the South Coast, she drove me mad through Wales, she was easing fish off the grill to serve me, she was cold wine sipped in my arms. At last, yes, she was a continent, this feminine creature growing in me, the continent I always expected of a woman but never had, as raunchily anonymous as the author,

as mysterious as the book, as intoxicating as the wine: all things to one man for always.

Beloved, it is a shock to meet at last the woman you want, particularly if you suspect her to be a part of your own being, mined from the deepest layers, spermed in the heart's womb by the suddenly sexual acclaim for life that burrowed in the unseen guts of *The Little Book*. It is also wonderful, and I am beginning to thank you.

I can imagine what I would have been like if my forefathers had failed to break out of their class; sometimes my feet are still in the old clay, my hands mine slate. Indeed I now remembered Mr Parry, packer and handyman at the publishers of *The Little Book*, haunting the shadows of that party, in a whisper pouring drinks for his betters. I had always identified with his lack of luck.

He never read a word until after television and then not often, so had kept the volume by his bed for some days. At work he had overheard gossip about it. As he packed stock and the sales mounted in those summer weeks, he felt a loyal obligation to look it through. He liked a romance.

One night after some warmed-up steak pie, a couple of cups of tea and an hour of the box, Mr Parry placed the book on his knee and opened it with tentative fingers. His glasses blinked over several pages. There seemed somewhere to be a story in them, but it kept fading like underprivileged eyesight: something about a country mansion, stunned by luxury, a slim dark twit of a newspaperman who had fallen in love, a politico trying to change the country with some wordy panacea which he wittily summarised at candlelit dinners attended by lady mucks, an aristocratic villain unfaithful to his wife, bending a rosy-cheeked maidservant across his knee and spanking the hell out of her . . .

Had Mr Parry nodded off? Well, perhaps he had dozed and, while pretending to read, dreamed. He recalled from the story a scintillating atmosphere that somehow excluded him, yet could put his finger on no detail. Several incidents seemed to have slipped past, as if to avoid him. He tried to see how it all hung together, but felt bothered by the effort.

Yet when he looked back over the pages of his life the whole story was distastefully familiar. He had surely lived through this book, suffered with the nit of a hero whoever he was, fallen for the heroine who in fact had flirted into the action only once. Outside his window a bawdy racket lingered in the sadness of the pubs, drunks scattering like memories into the sodium-lit void of the Southwark night. Lorries on the main road were already pounding towards the markets with tomorrow's vegetables and fish. Life went jaggedly on mystifying him. His late wife had been a cut above him: a bit of a lady. He thought he had loved her, but now he was alone. Alone with a book.

Raising his eyes from the text it struck Mr Parry unexpectedly, with the

force of fact, that he had lived quite alone throughout his life, ever since as a boy he left home, that dilapidated hierarchy of work and song on the far edge of Wales. The book had touched his origins. It reminded him, as romances did, that ever since his roots withered he had lacked for something that now seemed the best of life.

The narrative had done its best to catch him, he thought, but wasn't it too late? One page after another was straining to carry him off into the future; here, however, he sat at a standstill, the words twisting a knife so bluntly in his dormant emotions that someone else seemed to be feeling them. And he kept knowing that the next sentence would by a miracle explain not only the plot, but the bitter dream that hit him when he dozed over the book, the reason for packing books all day to earn a living, the nocturnal haste of the lorries and the cries of the drunks, the long obtuse loneliness stretching back over half a century. Mr Parry awaited the moment in the story when all the ranting statesmen, toffs who fancied maids, literary gents saying the wrong thing and women muddling it even worse, took all the threats in their stride, behaved like their own true selves, fell into one another's arms, and changed.

This did not seem to be happening. Wondering what secret the last page would hold, Mr Parry fell asleep in his chair as if waiting up for someone. *The Little Book* dropped off his knee. It lay on the carpet face down until the summer dawn broke.

And then, darling, suddenly, halfway through that early summer, I began to sense the dangers in the book. On various pages that darkened in my mind I detected a hint of evil.

For one thing I felt that the impulses to change my life were running away with me. Desiring only to get rid for ever of the formative, I felt I was being forced back by this little drug—itsself a book and a discipline—to the virginal moment before I learnt any discipline or read a single book. The wily volume sought to be my only good. It had no patience with the cultured half-measures that populated my life. It evoked in me a lust for a clean return to the primitive. It picked on the old adolescent training that still blinkered my vision and it tried to expel the odours of classroom dust, textbooks with torn spines, that world in which educational penumbrae of old men were for ever creating simulacra of young ones in school or college—the remnants of a tried system that for centuries had been making me the mix of the man I was.

In fact the book put me squarely back at the university. My friend Professor D.J. House was now standing on the rostrum, hunched in a vulturial gown. With a disrupted look at his students he opened a slim volume. It was not the oldest poem in English, on which he was billed to lecture, but the newest prose. He had spent all night reading *The Little Book*.

He introduced the text with his usual wittily ambiguous preamble. He read aloud from it just as he might intone the lesson in chapel, except that increasingly he seemed to be disowning these glimpses of a heartbreaking landscape. He appeared to be not very secretly hating the threats alike to social order and personal calm that throbbed in the words. His lip curled.

But his students rallied out of their habitual tedium. They listened, words chopping sideways into their brains, phrases hurting. Beyond the latticed blanks of the windows that let in so little light, fanfares of traffic rolled in echo down the city streets as Professor House held up the book to arcane ridicule. And at last stood down. Tense with scorn he strutted home to a luncheon party in honour of old varsity contemporaries, a junior minister, a noted journalist, an aristocrat on the decline. They were well into their cups by the coffee.

Meanwhile his students marched off to the bookshops where they dispersed among the stacks, slipping *The Little Book* criminally into canvas bags stamped with flags or slogans. Within minutes they emerged, flicking pages, breaking into quotes, forming gangs under the flowering cherries in a springtide of protest, lecture-halls dropping into the stony past, honeyed walls of colleges vanishing in a hail of catchphrases, until they arrived amid cricket at a crucial moment in the game: a green sward as long and wide as summer dotted at rhythmic intervals by figures crouched in intense white as if waiting for the truth to thud into their hands.

The newcomers flopped down and stared against the sun into the pages of the book. For a while a cryptic silence fell. And then all round the field, in a mutter that rose and fell with the scatter of clapping at the slap of a boundary, conversations began trying to make not sense but capital out of the words. At first these exchanges seemed to be citing a manifesto; in the heat of the moment propaganda yawned. But then the tone slightly changed: the book had to be translated into higher terms, made flesh and rounded out, fulfilled in action. It had to be theirs.

Yet the book had already been twisted out of true by a professor. He had patronised it. He had widened a generation gap by attempting to narrow the text down to sense, by gorging them with chunks as indigestibly out of context as a syllabus. Here were solid grounds for protest. They must march—march to ensure that never again would *The Little Book* be failed—march to expose that teacher as a reactionary—march to purge the renegade. *The Little Book* was all theirs. It set the standards which their youth gave them the right to impose on everyone. They should be ready to kill or die for it.

I then knew, as clearly as if dreaming it, that Professor House was to be murdered. I felt him calling for help inside me. But also I knew he was not real. He was an old unfocussed part of myself. No doubt it was time he died.

The perils of the book struck me anew. In the desperation of my mind's eye I could see the professor walking away from me, miles away, down a

narrow mediaeval street of shadows with the last of the sun glinting off attic windows. He was entering a college that seemed deserted. He came upon the scene of the dress rehearsal. It was an open-air production of *Julius Caesar* against a senate of massed roses on the college lawns. The high walls were hung with drapes of clematis in the dusk. From afar a group of male students, attired in a conspiracy of white robes as luminous as the flowers, loomed towards him over the soundless turf in a half-circle. It was clear that the treachery in that far-off Roman dawn was about to be enacted in this English twilight. For their eyes were poised on hatred, a hatred born somewhere in the bilious maw of *The Little Book*.

The professor uttered one word, saw a mesmerised rush of roses swollen, walls at angles, traditions cracking, felt agonisingly intent upon the unresolved ramifications of his life, when the first blow from the half-moon of conspirators struck him like a farcical explosion of dentistry in his mouth, and then he was on his back, dreading more pain, and a knife, not made of rubber, entered at speed his lower belly, and Caesar's blood spilt and gurgled on to the lawn, the deep purple sky woozing over him as if drunk, and he at last knew himself to be alone, brutishly alone, denied the chance of telling the world, from the elevated podium of his values, in better language, how very crucial this little book was, how it outclassed Beowulf, the Bible, Shakespeare, Milton on the more paradisiacal ground of its choice, how it struck out of a phrase the steel that might make a man, how in particular it destroyed the point of this whole declining garden wrapped in serenity at dusk; and then, the feet of his assailants tumbling past him, he thought he might be dying, soon felt a slack human damp on his waistcoat, breathed once more all the mown smells of order and propriety, and then died.

Nearby, in the silence, a crocket, high on a chapel roofline, toppled. Here and there the empty city cracked faintly, easing itself as if breathing a last deep breath above the soggy foundations of books and lawns that were dropping petals and pages in a flurry. A cornice or two fell into the blank quads, crushing a tangle of bikes; a gargoyle bit grotesquely into well-tended grass. Books stored underground loosened their support of the tons of masonry above them in that long instant before the assembled colleges flopped down at all angles into explosions of stone, overwhelming scholars in their panelled lives, burying the past in the past. Thus in a matter of moments buildings that had stood firm for centuries in that city centre, the heart of a world, had reverted to the chaos of their raw materials. A hundred acres of age-old thought were lying at last in their own ruins, while the dust of which they had always been composed settled over the magnificent defunction in a pall that might be seen for miles or years.

As I breathed out of my nostrils the last of that inner dust I knew that all this activity, subtly urged by *The Little Book*, had been happening in the

unnoticed shallows of myself. Over the years I had created that professor, indeed that city, out of the wrong areas in me, where the nerve to be someone other than myself twitched under the skin. Now I had taken the chance to destroy one at least of the malformed people who were preventing my growth into the only kind of person I might respect: as positively simple as a manifesto, as decent as cricket, as unambiguous as an act of love, primitive like boys let loose in a garden. In the light of *The Little Book*, which had ranged all over the continent—Marseilles, Rome, Greece—for answers, depths, changes, it wasn't asking much to be that one straight person. Anything less than a generous response to the book's generosity was suicide, and this seemed to apply to one and all.

Sweetest, why do I want you so hard, sitting here with the book on my knee? Even as I strain to keep my new privacy pure—ridiculous, isn't it?—my thoughts stray to the silken wobble of the skin of your buttocks under my hands, the breathy sneer of your upper lip as you come. And all this when *The Little Book* is supposedly weaning me away from such adolescent concentration on the salacious and extending into my conscious the unconscious faculty for making more of life on planes as yet untested. It's hard to get out of my familiar skin. Yet in your absence the book pulls me closer to you in ways that make me look forward to the last page superstitiously, as though it will prove to be the precipitous end of a flat world, off which I'll fall. Into your arms, my love?

Almost halfway through reading *The Little Book*, during a passage disturbed by an untypical undertow of sensuality, I remember Sir Davis Fielden whose lofty figure ghosted away from me at that launching party. My own version of this nobleman, as unreal as the real thing, had been forming for years inside me, an ideal of manners, courage and honour dying somewhere in rural vacuum from lack of purpose. Into the vibrant air of the book he now emerged as one of its early readers.

On behalf of this aging character, who in youth had preceded me at college, I laid out an enchanted site in my dream of a midsummer England in some golden age. It was an old dream. I had built him a stately home out of the bricks of my childhood. I had added wings over the centuries. I had spent generations planting massed roses, tall trees, high fantasies, as if one day I would myself retire to the place. Packed to the heavy doors with art, its skies and coverts riddled with game, containing in a syrupy fold of the hills an England whose silence seemed glued to eternity, this house possessed the grandeur of scale which my ambitions were still always seeking. It represented the everlasting

peace in my war with the world, a nook where tradition and rank allowed any quiet excess, even the seduction of maidservants in a gunroom or the making of a masterpiece. Yes, an old dream of mine.

Though I had never known Sir Davis well, I felt him at this moment brooding inside me, dragging me back. All too easily I could guess his barber, his clubs, what he did in the war. I might select on his behalf a few seemly habits that now and then verged on eccentricity, qualities I might ape or at least admire, but I also knew that he was slightly crazed. Never in my life would I attain to such style and wealth.

Sir Davis began to skim *The Little Book* out of courtesy because he had attended the party. A suspicion dawned on an early page that it lacked moral stature. In a cupboard he laid hands on some brown paper to wrap round the binding. He had an awkward sense that his "psychic" wife was reading over his shoulder, but whenever he looked up no one was there, only a maid in black stoking the fire; he was thin-blooded even in summer. He kept stumbling across words which he spelt out under his breath as if mouthing an improper suggestion. At length, troubled, he laid the book aside to consult a gardener about some bedding plants.

Lady Fielden passed through the high overheated room on her way to an afternoon nap and snatched up the book. One of her "promptings" told her that it contained a message.

In the open air Sir Davis was even more perplexed. The book seemed to be fumbling among long-forgotten desires. For years he had wanted nobody. But now, since conning those guilty pages, his life appeared to be passing into the hands of some libidinous destroyer of his calm. While stuttering instructions to the gardener, he imagined he smelt the soft hot wafts of a female body concealed among the rosebeds. Even back in front of the smouldering fire, awaiting his tea, he felt a clumsy fist of desire closing over parts of him accustomed to neglect. Was this deep commotion in his body somehow tricking him into a future he had ceased to contemplate?

The maid brought in tea. In laying the things she almost stifled him with her rosy scent which he had never noticed before. She eased a black hip close to his face as she bent low over her duties. He saw the silken cleft moulded by her skirt. He sank his teeth into buttered toast.

His eye, following the maid's exit, vaguely looked for the book. God, where had he put it? The thing was hot, secret, ignominious. He began to tremble in the suddenly empty room.

Upstairs, in a lingering fashion, Lady Fielden had taken off all her clothes. She wrapped a silken oriental drape round her body and disposed her limbs to rest on the bed. While laying the book open on the pillow at the first page, she briefly considered the acute rapture of sleep; her dreams were seances, their knocks and hushes echoed for hours in her ears. And the book, oh dear: words

to her were projectiles that one aimed at servants or men but otherwise kept quiet.

She eased her legs. These words seemed to be quite different. They were as psychic as she. She strained her eyes but could not quite hear what was being said. It was as though a spectral someone were overhearing her thoughts even before they passed through her mind. She concentrated hard for a second. And at that moment I felt myself becoming her.

I felt myself drawn into her. I want to rid myself—the book was telling me—of this burden of a house. I want little men in green aprons to be hired by the dozen to divest me of these clothes, this excessive home, those aching grounds. It must all be done with hushed propriety, so that I don't notice it happening, all accomplished behind my back because I can't bear to lose it: not yet, not yet.

Yes, I said these words myself, without being aware of her voice. Yes, I had never picked up a message so clearly before; *The Little Book* had fetched it up out of the deafness of years. Yes, suddenly I had eased into being this middle-aged woman lying on her bed in a welter of dimensions or faculties which she had always suspected to exist in her home and person without knowing for sure. I was in her skin. I knew, with the book in my hand, that someone I had thought expendable—an aging woman reclusive in her privilege, married to a numbskull, tucked into boredom by art and breeding—was someone within me I really needed.

Dear Lady Fielden, I feel absurdly in love with you, as at this instant everything unnecessary to your life departs from you in spirit: your need for the plush walls that only hid ghosts, for the canvases that only cut you off from your own perceptions, for the marriage that for years blinded you to matters that matter more. Here you lie in a comfort you now hardly recognise. The paintings are no more than those random images that taunt the brain just before dawn. Nothing real around you is real any more. The roses down there in the garden bloom like a flush in the mind the moment before sleeping, the familiar gardens are the outer landscape of someone else who is dead. But who?

Who indeed? The thought of having lived here daily in slow tedium for half a century abruptly means nothing to you, to us. Those years were only the springboard for what you and I now have the knowledge to leap to: that we are creatures released from our lives into a subtler relation, if only to ourselves, but perhaps to an unimaginable grouping loftier than the society we thought we knew and grew up in. Being sceptical, I experience nothing of my own; I experience just the ecstasy of knowing that Lady Fielden, with recourse only to herself, not to drugs or fantasy or despair or alcohol, has been sprung by *The Little Book* into the destruction of what she knows is destroying her—the paltry assumption that life, as known, is truly life, as is.

She lay in bed wondering with whom she was in touch. This uncanny book

had flushed presences out of the house: not evil ones, but powerful, perhaps in love with her. They seemed to want her to be happy and to be telling her that she had never known happiness. Were these ghosts herself? Quite: it struck her that the spirit of the little book had crept into her and shown her the woman she had missed all these years behind the plush tensions that trod quietly about the house with her, the blind anxieties that woke her to palpitations in the small hours. But what exactly was she being asked to do . . . ?

In another apartment of the doomed house, lined with shotguns and trophies of the hunt, Sir Davis was hard at work. It did not matter what he had secretly always wanted to do. All that counted was that now on that rough couch he was doing it. Whether he stripped the maid down or left her stockings ruckled above the knee or spread her wide or forced his way between tight thighs or splayed her loosely on top of his body or with his fingertips touched her nipples through silk or pumped her on the stone flags or stood her fainting against a showcase or bent her dorsally over the baize of a billiard table or just plain fucked her as we all fuck; the detail did not matter. All that counted was that, his brains swimming with children he never fathered, his dicky heart beating across an ocean of pleasure and coming up with the eldorado, the rhythms tuning the extremities of his body, the impropriety cracking every mystery that had long been closed to him, in a naked gunroom, he managed it. And the resilience of the flesh beneath him took it and responded to the last inch of it and opened up to it and rose in sound and fury to the heights of the room before subsiding with a moan to the floor, as he took her with the ultimate youth of his age and she gushed out to him the blind old intensity of her youth. The best thing in life had happened for the one and only time. Sir Davis buttoned up, coughed and grinned. "That'll be all for the moment," he said.

Darling, forgive me, I rather enjoyed all that. The book was right to tell me to close my eyes: it's an eye-opener. It's very stimulating to find people I have made, out of a part of myself that nagged but never came to much, realising themselves to the point of giving honestly of their best or worst and wanting to share it with me, knowing quite well that it was I (or was it *The Little Book*?) who gave them the permission, no, the freedom, no, the responsibility to act out their own private humanity, however lusciously immoral a form it might take. We're all friends, you see. *The Little Book* brings us together.

But, Christ, what fantasies are you having, my love, about similar projections of self from the dubious opportunities of your own past? Don't tell me. Let's get on with my version of the story. I know you'll come back to me in the end with yours, and it won't be so very different.

For the historical record, our literary editor Hugh Davies, his own life at a bewildered standstill, was now keeping an eye on the office teleprinters. At first a few isolated incidents, tapped out between rising prices and falling stocks, struck him as possibly connected with *The Little Book*, but were they coincidental? If not, what did they mean?

A market gardener in Suffolk, overloaded with alimony and several children, was feeling the pinch; common vegetables had dropped in price to an all-time low. Were people eating less? Somewhere on the South Coast a fisherman, just managing to keep up with the interest on his boat, was complaining that the demand for flatfish had fallen away to nothing. Were people losing their appetites? In Birmingham, amid an unexplained rash of absenteeism, orders for new cars were sliding to the lower reaches of the graph; a high-level salesman, with heavy debts on house and furniture, was retired to the suburbs where the pubs were strangely empty. Were people travelling to fewer places? Between Itchen Abbas and Winchester more rented sets than usual were returned to the television dealers—were people no longer viewing?—while the buffet on the trains north to Leeds were soberly vacant of their normal gang of rollicking businessmen on expenses. Less drinking? West of Bath a good restaurant bankrupted abruptly, farmers on a tight margin cancelled such luxuries as newspapers and weekly joints of meat while planning a protest, a pastor in Wales left home after an average domestic quarrel and vanished. Were people really being pushed to the edge of their resources?

All coincidence? Hardly. The book did not believe in coincidences. And Davies, himself eating less, drinking little, preferring to stay in one place to maintain the healthy stillness that had now invaded him, thought he had noticed, during those first hot months of the book's life, that the British people were becoming obliquely aware of it, if only as a phenomenon. Or was this an illusion of that torrid summer, when reality rotted as fast as perishables in the markets for those striking their own inner bargain with the book? Worse still, was this state of affairs perhaps some self-aggrandising fantasy of the author, whoever he was?

But now more serious cases began to spill out on the tape. There was no doubt here: only the book could be the culprit. A political rally in the West had broken up in disorder when Latimer Johns MP tried to address his constituents about the guts of the book. He had been shouted down. When a prep-school master read extracts to his class, the book had chased dozens of boys through the dark forests on a cross-country tide of excitement which the authorities took to be rebellion. They had been beaten. A minor canon in Winchester had tried to run away from the book's implications, but it had tracked him down to the hills where he lay weeping on the cropped turf, miles from whatever imaginary hermitage he was seeking. He had been suspended. The book had howled so deafeningly in the ears of one of Birmingham's major

industrialists that after resigning from the board he was found under a full moon trying to drown himself in a dry ditch. He had been certified. Leaving the book face down on the beach, a Dover hotelier had experienced its originality to the extent of swimming out into the Channel and not reaching France. He had been washed up. The book had gone straight to the heart of a Suffolk housewife engaged in average domestic quarrel to the point of killing her husband with a garden spade. She had been arrested. And the ravening wolf of the words had fought an Army officer stationed near Leeds into such a conviction of the propriety of violence that he went berserk in the Mess. He had been found in pieces under a train.

On this showing Davies gathered that Britain as a whole could not stand the shock of the book. But what was the alternative? For too long the guts of the old country had been shouted down in common with the parliamentarian, beaten into the last ditch with the schoolboys, living as suspended a life as the cleric; her lunacy as certifiable as the chairman of the board, her hopes washed up like the hotel manager, her development as arrested as the housewife: a country which along with the colonel had gone to pieces. Wasn't it high time for someone to come forward with bell, book or candle—it happened to be a book—in an effort to improve matters for such a mass of people in such a mess of a land?

As Davies well knew from his own reading, all these personal disasters tapped out impersonally by the machine were echoes, perhaps projections, of his heated experience that warm night when the book had kept him up to all hours. His spine shivered over the tap of the tape. What would happen to him or anyone? All over England people like him—he felt them, he felt the book spiralling in them—were so awake as to wish to avoid sleep, while longing for the long dream which the book embodied, were not visiting restaurants because the anticipation of grilled sole overhanging the plate amid mounds of potatoes and peas swelled them into debilitating luxury, were skirting the pubs where the beer would swamp their brains and the whisky knife their livers, had stopped wanting to go anywhere in cars because here and now seemed calm and healthy, were refusing to watch visual lies on the box all evening or see them over breakfast in papers, could no longer live with a marriage or a self that only just passed muster, and of course in the few extreme cases went crackers: drowned, howled, died, killed, despaired, vanished. Evidently it had only required a few such people, reacting in catatonic variety to the book or the rumour of the book, to make the fabric of society appear to crack slightly. And it was cracking.

A church in Southwark had emptied down to a few behatted crones too senile to read; that clergyman too had let the book overnight dissolve his few remaining postures of faith. Pubs voided. Those great glittering wombs of tedium in the towns, strung like faulty punctuation along the life sentences

of street after street, were equally losing their weekend business. Delicious restaurants in Soho noted a sinister absence of reservations; waiters flicked napkins at flies. Down the street the theatre's make-believe fell into dramatic recession, no glazed queues drew up outside the cinemas, nightclubs lunged into the void of the moon. All day and night cities were dropping into a sabbath sadness: dawn Billingsgate stinking with unsold fish, carcasses decomposing frigidly along the reeking aisles of Smithfield, fruit and vegetables rotting down in the markets. Newspapers pounding out of Fleet Street fell on deaf ears; eyes were blind to the hilltop aerials webbing the country with news, lies, tunes, ads. Enough people to rock the economy, a tiny percentage of Britain, had nicely decided to hole up and subsist on little, to buy nothing, to wait and see, rather than succumb again to the exaggerated needs and pleasures that swotted days out like flies.

Clearly Davies recognised these as the outward signs of his inner responses. Could it be that everyone agreed with him at last? Reading the book had persuaded him that none of the dovetail answers fitted the angular questions he had been mutely asking all his life; now others knew it too. With him they had been melted by the heat of the book into deciding to bypass the obvious daily solutions—sweet things like drink, fun, food, sex, talk, good buys—while waiting, looking out of the corner of the eye, for others, at the same time being unsure of what they might be, indeed wondering if they existed, but being prepared to take the risk. Any risk.

And then from the reports filtering into his office Davies noticed that with an odd propriety *The Little Book* itself was being rejected. On London streets, tossed aside like yesterday's newspaper, flicked by the wind, sodden or sunned, copies of the work were being dropped by unseen hands into the over-exposure of that summer, as if the text itself, too hot to handle, had encouraged the reader to ditch it as soon as he was through. Outside a Southwark church the gutters flapped in the thunderous wind with broken-backed copies, their pages strummed in the alley breeze between theatres on Shaftesbury Avenue where no queues waited, they fluttered among the pigeons outside Soho restaurants that had closed for lack of business. Somehow, to Davies, the physical fate of the book provided, with irony, the answer. Once read, the book demanded that it be jettisoned for something better which the book had itself posited; once lived, life insisted that it be risked, or nothing different could happen. It occurred to Davies with dread that this could portend only one thing: both the new book and the old life must be regarded only as garbage, as equally not good enough, until he had lightly tossed them aside in favour of still more.

At the weekend, if he dared, he would read *The Little Book* again, unless indeed his own copy were lost, blown to pieces in the storms, or burnt out by the sun.

So at this late point in that hot summer, my love, I realised that *The Little Book* meant what it said. It was letting me make it up as I went along, rather as in the old days before reading it I had let life make me up. Now I was casting my own images. I was formulating my own patterns. I was putting together a world that I could not only see whole for myself, but also communicate to someone else by looking at or thinking of that person, present or absent, in silence. That person being you.

So none of it had to be written down: that hurt it. It required no statement: that would only confine it. And though I believed intensely that I was, as the book demanded, fashioning my own images into a pattern, I also knew—encouraged by Hugh's research, his newspaper had its uses—that much of my private creation was reflected back to me by the passionately similar activities of that other person, in this case my love, my audience, you. Ours was an aristocracy of an exchange, high classic romance, steely, formal, sure. We were 'making' love.

I had come resoundingly out of the book's clutches at half-time, feeling that in my fashion I had loved things and people all my life, but never enough—or, no, not even not enough: rather that a ravening wolf of a definition of love had sprung from the tender depths of *The Little Book*. The old kind made us hate, despise, be jealous, feed on the soft silly fruit of ancient ego, brood on our wrongs, and kick. But this definition said: I *like* things again, as in a golden age, I smack my lips over whole afternoons or the detail of blossom against a wall or the complexity of falling simply asleep under the thud of rain. This definition said: I time my own pulse to the beat of nature, also to whatever insistent beat lies beyond nature. It said: I am so at one with the privileged fact of liking being alive that now at last I can love. And all around me, sharpening this appreciation of taking life daily with the elation of an infidelity, of being on the point of shameful exposure with every beat of the pulse, I embraced at last the possibility of you and me and everyone else changing under my very nose into human beings.

So far, as we know, very few people had read *The Little Book*. It did not matter. They sensed its presence. Thanks less to the media than to the currents generated by the climate that summer, inklings of the book had touched many individuals with an anticipation as pervasive as next year's holiday, a cool drink in the hand, Sunday morning in bed, peace, peace, a raise in salary, commonplaces, the birth of a child, a lilac spring, a night out on the town, hope, waking with the sun in your eyes, and the office never dull but almost.

Everywhere in the backs of people's minds *The Little Book* thus waited to leap into being. It stole like aroma into the atmosphere of the country. It raised people's spirits while their backs were turned. The remote idea of it woke them up to a shifting mood as the beginnings of autumn swept in from the west.

Leaves fell in swirls round my head. Electric storms lit upon various areas as if to purge them. Contrary winds excited the dark forests and drove into the streets and cut clean through the valleys. Rains came to enliven the talk in lounges, slash on windows, warm the growing intensity between the sheets, dash against the stone of houses as though to batter their insides into sense. Even the excesses of the weather touched off a sense of freedom: a freedom to accept that vulpine definition of love, to feel it in your bones, to realise that as yet bones were not all you had, my beauty, to know that you could afford to risk anything to get beyond those bones.

I was aware that Mr Parry's view of the book was somewhat simpler: he took it that everything was wrong except people. That saturnine version of my working-class self, dragging my feet, was now staring bitterly at his own pinched flat. The council had herded him into it. He looked and felt undignified to be putting up with such accommodation. He considered his wages, paid out of *The Little Book's* profits. He thought of all the local men he knew receiving a similar sum weekly, with deductions, to keep up the needless appearances denounced by the book. The book made the common lot look dead common.

By now Mr Parry had begun talking, in pubs, on street corners; he had requested the local library to stock the book. He found himself launched upon a condemnation of the harsh scene in which he and his neighbours, by bad education and worse government, had been tricked into living. He saw vividly that nothing in society worked for the common benefit. Nor was the library service much use; nobody could be sure of a copy without paying, stealing or waiting. "They don't want us to know," said Mr Parry.

Passers-by, old pub mates, factory girls, machine minders, clerks, dustmen, all paused when he spoke. In the urban heat Mr Parry became the angry focus of the book, crusading in the parking lot, revolutionising the worn turf of the public gardens. These small groups dispersed with humour at the approach of a blue helmet, but night after night, in the dust of summer, in his spare time, Mr Parry kept it up. The district was not just a bloody disgrace; it was a graveyard of the underdog. The cracked phrases rang out in the metallic air. Windows shot up to reveal bloated figures gaping, easing their sweaty collars, white or blue. Shouts rebounded off the long platitudinous walls of factories. "It's this book," cried Mr Parry.

Yet no formal principles, no thin sneer of updated socialism, snaked among the undercurrents of Mr Parry's tirades. Here was compassion. It was as if everyone commanded his furious pity, even foremen, priests, petty bosses, aristocrats, developers, ministers of the crown, the whole pack of them. They were merely human, dying on their feet while balancing their books, making money in order to have too little life left to spend it. "Let's laugh them out of their folly," Mr Parry seriously boomed.

Mr Parry was quite proud of having no idea how positively to improve anyone's miserable fate. The book had struck him as gentle enough to indicate room for improvement, but never so arrogant as to propose a wholesale solution. This did not perturb him. His formula was to call for volunteers, for whatever on reflection the cause might turn out to be. At first only school kids gathered below his flat, waiting for this interesting nutcase to come home from packing books. Then the unsteady outflow of afternoon pubs shiftlessly joined the kids, then a few snappy housewives, then astride their motorbikes some toughs who had run across a phrase and wanted vacantly to know more. A mood of truancy was in the air, men were knocking off work early. But all Mr Parry did was to send them away to picket for an hour this or that institution in the square miles of muddled industry, craft, commerce, religion, hospital and home, where they all lived, in his view illiterately, beyond the reach of the book. "Keep the devils up to the mark," he said.

Mr Parry was touched by a feeling for these local dregs of humanity as if never before had he bestowed a thought on his fellow creatures. Their presence in his mind kept him awake at night, just as the book had. Or was he dreaming? All he told them in broad daylight was to be quiet and orderly and by saying nothing render other people uneasy with their lives. But was this right? Might not firearms be more persuasive?

Obediently they picketed the cathedral. They picketed the high-rise branch of a ministry in the bleak complex of hard building which the developers had imposed in their midst. They picketed the police. They stood outside public bars, evangelists of silence. In the city they picketed the offices of shipping lines, brokers, insurance companies, as the lunchtime crowds hastened past their mute insanity. Yet Mr Parry, when alone, was not at all sure that any of this was really happening. Was he imagining things? Perhaps he was drugged by the heatstroke of those dozing pages that had caught him off-guard. Perhaps *The Little Book* had turned his mind.

And then one hot night Mr Parry was suddenly aware in bed—was this a dream or not?—that a national figure of weight called Latimer Johns MP, if asked, would address an open-air rally on his personal experience of this disconcerting book and how voters must politically react to it. As far as he could recollect, Mr Parry had never heard of the man—who sounded posh; he had the force of a character in the book. And then suddenly Mr Parry did remember him, a statesman painfully trying to change the country, but only in theory, only at candlelit suppers of the countrified effete, only in romances. Now, perhaps because of the confidence the book had recently nourished in him, Mr Parry had only to imagine that great meeting to know that it would take place: to see his underdogs by the dozen sweating on benches, bloated figures gaping at the truth, the effluent of the pubs pouring down the gangways, kids banked in their hundreds against the sky, as Latimer Johns MP

rose on his makeshift platform, a pocket bulging with the brief literature of the hour, and began to utter the very thoughts that lay inexpressibly in Mr Parry's mind.

"I am here, ladies and gentlemen," he said, "to make my first political speech: to tell the truth. All I have said to you on earlier occasions has not been in itself untrue, but merely set within the limits of an untrue system. I do not represent you. I cannot. So I'm not seeking your vote, indeed I suggest that for a while you refrain from voting at all. I'm also proposing that you now withdraw from all customary activity. Yes, leave your jobs. Be idle. Walk, fish, climb, swim, garden, doze—spend your time as if you were millionaires of it. You will see why. The brilliant source of what I'm telling you is here in my pocket."

Johns inched out *The Little Book*, a tight squeeze. "Not the Bible, my friends," he said. "That would no more fit into my pocket than into my life. Nor is it a keep-fit guide or do-it-yourself manual, though it's both. Nor a utopia, because it's not crammed with bad ideas clad in good words. Nor a manifesto, because it doesn't force you in dull language to whip up a belief in the incredible. Nor is it fiction, because it's one of the few facts of our time. This is *The Little Book*."

"The book isn't trying to destroy society. Who wants to? It's not there. The moment this book entrusts you with the open spaces of your imagination, institutions turn into grubby facades concealing the fact that we have no society. Look at this England: a hotchpotch of luxury cells, prisons which you think release you, torture chambers where you can't hear your own screams, designed expressly for the inconvenience and pain of human beings, cruelly planned to vaunt the glories of a culture that has run out of heart."

"O what supreme and self-destructive vulgarity encloses us, my friends. I know. I was elected by you. Vulgar people like yourselves lack the capacity to call on the best. They throw up their rubbish to govern them. But who are the best? An elite, you say? No—it turns out, since so many different sorts, and classes if you like, now have the chance of reading this simple book, that the best is no elite, no dangerous caucus of philosophers, no gang of trigger-happy intellectuals, no breakaway group of artists sitting in the yellowing grass of their fantasy—but people, just people. Potentially the whole nation, you and me, everyone."

"So down your defences, and then read the book. Change one or two of your habits overnight, and then read the book. Don a pair of shorts, run briskly down Great Dover Street, eating your words with one hand and humble pie with the other, drinking it all in, finding what's left of fresh country air almost choking you with its high-octane integrity, until you end up inside out at some beauty-spot high on the downs overlooking the sea, where fewer thoughts and more feeling occur than anywhere since childhood, and then read the book."

Or simply lock yourself in a bathroom and read it. Or go to bed, sleep tight, and wake up having read it. It doesn't matter where or how. This book is a fundamental silence which is going to last a very long time. You cannot fail it.

At that moment Mr Parry woke up. Sad leaves battled his window in a lurid autumn dawn. He had fallen asleep in his chair. And again dropped the book.

Once more the weekend was magnificent. The long hot summer had desiccated the entire face of the country. After a week of harsh skies, his pages put to bed, Hugh Davies caught the train home. *The Little Book* was in his mind; he had to write a definitive account of it for next week's paper, but had no idea how.

He strolled for a while about the house, softened into depths of plum shadow by the outdoor excess of the sun. All was in place; yet nothing was. It occurred to him with a thrill that he had not come home at all, but strayed into a domain that now belonged to no one. In some other life he had made the choices that sombrely surrounded him with objects of no worth.

Thinking of his piece, trying to feel it grow, he found his wife in a hayloft over the barn. She was unlike her overfamiliar self. With the children's oils—they were already away at school—she was painting a picture of herself reflected in a handbag mirror. The pathos struck him: art of all things, a species of make-up. She said, "You left that little book behind for me to read. Did you write it?" Her hand touched in an eyelash. She did not seem real. It was as though he had always imagined her.

"I want to share it with you," he said.

"No. It's meant for me. And I don't want to share with you."

"The book?"

"The book—marriage—life—everything else. What's the difference?"

Davies wished he had said that.

"What are you doing about it?"

"Reading the book," she said. "And painting. I can't paint. On the other hand I can because I am. For once I'm looking at myself not as others see me, but as I do. I've taken a cottage by the sea. Does that sound romantic? Not at all. I'm going to clean it out. I'll drag it all into the fresh air and throw away what I don't want, and then rub down all the walls and let the salty winds blow in through every door and window, and get rid of the accumulations of dust in every corner I'd forgotten was there. It's the only thing I've got of my own, so I'll start looking after it properly instead of letting it go to seed. And for once I'm not complaining—what I really don't need is anyone else to help me. Also, for as long as it takes to do it to my satisfaction, I'm going to paint myself—like this."

Davies wished he had found the courage.

"This is the choice I've made and it's total," she said. "I want those sands on the edge of something, and that air with gulls screaming over the hungry distances of it, and one small quivering place in the picture I'm trying to paint: this cottage that came to me pat when I put down the book, where I can manage just fine on a cup, a bed, a plate, a knife and fork. Fish, vegetables, sleep, coffee, once a day. And things like paper and paints, to construct myself as I see me. Only yesterday I found myself breathing—drawing air in and out of my body as if I had a right to it—but enjoying it now, like a deep sigh or saying yes or laughing. Air. It had cut grass in it, a fantastic aroma of the past, and the scents of other people being near me though I've never met them, and birdsong I so often take for granted, and exhalations I never usually feel from the churchyard by our garden, and the invisible levels of flowers drifting like bees, and emotions on the air like herbs warmed by the south, and the whole of this blind access of past pleasures somehow coming out of the future.

"So at last I'm breathing air, and that's only the start. I want to see myself, not only in a mirror, not only in the pages of a book, not in you, not in the house you chose for us, not in the shared life you've been leading on our behalf, no, in no way but what my hands and heart make of something I can't manage—the medium, these paints, this brush—in relation to the indescribably complex me which this simple little book has somehow described. I may fail, but I'd rather have failure on my terms than success on anyone else's. That's my definition of breathing."

Hugh again wished he had said it. The barn skylight revealed a duskily clear sky passing into the overlit stars of a summer night. All was clear except the square of portrait, incomplete, childish, which gave Hugh a fleeting sense that the picture she was really painting, in words or on canvas, was of him: a projection; her only way, after so paralysed a time of living with someone else, of getting close to herself.

"I don't know how you responded to the book," she said. "Isn't it always different? It hurts so much to be oneself. But somehow it makes other people come closer. Have you noticed that you don't have to talk to anyone to explain anything? I'd have said all this better if I'd kept quiet—like the way the book stops flaunting language just when you want it to be most eloquent? But of course the damn book may be just a fashion that'll be out by the end of the summer—the whole country can't just die and go to pieces, can it, for the rest of us to be together and alive? But I do hope we don't just adapt to the book and come back from the gulls and the cottage we cleaned out and the miles of sands—because there wouldn't be anything left to do or be, would there?"

Davies wished he had thought of it. They entered the house. In the dusk low lights lapped Davies from one familiar room to the next. He smelt cut grass in the library, mingling in the kitchen with a musty scent of churches,

faded pages, sentiment, woodsmoke. What could he say or write about these ultimate minutes of home? All this civilization he had shored up here for himself was now open to question. The book's pulse indicated that he had to free his flesh of the touch of possessions. His wife was already outside the body he had tried to clothe for her with the furniture that stuffed the rooms, the attics of collusive souvenirs, acres of pile, mountains of upholstery, fabrics that had long ago stifled the passion of times when they had owned nothing but the clothes they stood up in. It seemed to him very obvious what he would say in his piece for the newspaper. It would be better than *The Little Book*.

So that weekend, to the best of his ability, he wrote as follows: "The author of this book has pulled off a remarkable feat. He has written a brief volume that is not only specific in criticism of contemporary manners, but also refuses to provoke controversy. The reader, of whatever class, colour or creed, cannot but agree with every point because he is granted the magic sense that he is personally creating every point for himself. The truth within the reader is what concerns these pages, and our amiable author has so framed his book as to accommodate the individuality of each and every one of us, by leaving his pages as blank as prehistory yet somehow as full as a literature.

"Culture as we know it, that sedative jade, he makes us write off in less than a phrase. That dismissed, he passes to a host of other matters that preoccupy or ruin our lives: marriage, politics, sex, dreams, wars, jobs, to name only a few. By failing to come into the open and softly describe his own marriage, he makes us reflect hard upon our own. By pausing on the doorstep of politics with such devastatingly curt analysis, he makes us realise how little we have missed by not taking politics seriously. Yet, with a brilliance hitherto unexampled in expository writing, we are *told* precisely nothing. We are paid the compliment of having to project on the page for ourselves the society we inhabit and of providing a remedy that suits the individual reader, even as it creates, out of his inner resources, a society loose and vital enough to contain us all.

"No reader will leave this book feeling disappointed. Concussed perhaps; for it is indeed his own naked experience into which the pages rush him headlong. In the course of the action several characters, finely sketched in the margins, argue over their differing remembrances of the book's heart, message, narrative. Each tops the other in suggesting there is more to a particular passage—paragraph, sentence, even comma—than either has the capacity yet to perceive. In these affable confrontations they enlarge everyone concerned.

"To strike a personal note, I am convinced that the precepts in the book are right. But can I follow them? All right, I've managed to suppress my training, I've been treading all over my balloon of an ego. I've created the book myself—all that's fine. But what next? All those alarming notions about

wavelengths lying in wait for me, underswells of the spirit about to break surface—well, they exist all right. It was my idea anyway; I put it into the book, the way the book asked me to. But now I'm too scared to handle it, this dragnet under dreams, trawling illogic out of the deeper waters. I'm revolted by the idea of changing almost more than I actually want to revolt or change.

"Yet I also want my book to crack the barriers I know exist. It's up to me, to the loose thinker, to the man in the street who is just bravely turning a corner, who yesterday dropped his watch down a drain, who in Leeds while thinking of Marseilles believes that he's really in France, it's up to me to smash the remaining barrier that divides me from myself.

"And it's so close. It's as close as tomorrow's Sunday dinner in Birmingham provided I don't go to sleep after it, as clean as a swim off the South Coast as long as I don't drown, as eruptive as a domestic quarrel that doesn't end in our killing each other, as fast and smooth as that Inter-City to the North if the signals work, as calm as digging a Suffolk garden assuming I go deep enough into the earth, and much more totally satisfying than making slow love in any or all of these places.

"Breaking the barrier is what the fuck narrowly misses, what swings over the points just in time, what turns up treasure out of the familiar soil, what digests the Midland dinner into renewed energy, what turns the swim into a split-second dream of the whole of life, and what converts the quarrel into a sudden understanding that will last. Yet I sit here at a desk day after day, the weather swinging in the sky, sun swimming down the walls, good sense ceasing to be my smooth companion of yore, the treasures of the western mind dreaming no longer on the inner eye, and I try to break that barrier. It's there to be broken and is breakable. If I could break it I would have my fingertips on all our tomorrows, that's all."

After writing his piece that weekend Hugh Davies sensed that he had let *The Little Book* down. He had been unfair to the work by saying too little and dishonest to himself by writing at all. While his livelihood depended on publishing reams of comment that seemed to matter, this book by saying little had said everything, which wiped out the institution he worked for: a newspaper juggling too many stark daily facts into too few slight interpretations.

All that week at the office he felt his guilt deepen. He was not congratulated on his piece; nor did anyone raise an objection. It passed through the machinery, just as his whole lifetime of hasty commentary had. He now saw that he had been elevated by *The Little Book* only to be cast down by it; on its terms his paper-chase of articles, and this one most of all, constituted a simple insult to the complexity of life.

When the first proofs came up he contemplated fleeing abroad: Marseilles

lay under the stupefying sun, Rome basked in ignorance, he could go to ground in Greece. When a day later he stared at his signed article on the page, darker solutions latched on to the tenebrous edges of his mind: sleep, long sleep, laced by dreams, deepened by drugs, if only to sidestep the responsibility of failing to grow up and grow. For he knew profoundly that it was too late for him, and that this knowledge was, and would remain, the full extent of his growth. Thereafter he would choose weakness.

He went home that weekend to find his wife absent, the house empty stupid in the sun. Among the silences he tried to concentrate his mind on matters he knew to be important, but could not; his brains stewed in heat, in remorse. It was as if he had recently come within an inch of touching his own emotions—and missed them—while tomorrow his too literal article in the thin columns of the newspaper would break upon the world and, by praising *The Little Book*, somehow close down the subject for ever, wrap it in newsprint, consign it to the gutter.

But that hot afternoon, in her larger home miles across the hills, Lady Fielden must have been thinking of him. From nowhere came into her mind the notion of setting her past on fire. Heat haze shimmering amid the deep reds of the roses suggested flames licking at the crucible of the white-hot sky. Into Hugh's mind, on the other hand, swam the idea of acting at all costs upon the dictates of the book, however crudely. He thought of the huge bonfires that celebrated triumphs or heralded any human event of note; then began moving inflammable furniture into the garden, piling chairs under the dead elms, inlaid tables, cushions and heaps of paper, paintings and footstools, creating beneath the stark dry twigs a pyre of a study, a muddled boudoir, just as Lady Fielden was looking back at her ancestral home from the parched lawns and wondering briefly why she was flushed by such an intense desire to say goodbye to it for ever.

The message seemed to come from afar: she must release the forces that were as hopelessly embedded in those longstanding saloons as they were in her heart. She had no idea how to persuade Sir Davis that she was right other than by simply ignoring him. But her husband had been elsewhere for years. At that moment she could almost see him in the heat of the gunroom, bent over the consuming flesh of the maidservant. With a pang of decision chilling her body she moved towards the house.

Simultaneously Hugh thought that he had worked out the logic of his conduct, but the arguments were far behind him. As he sweated and heaved over the furniture it struck him that he had never performed so comely an act. Even the risk of discovery, as in snatched sex, contributed deeply to the pleasure, while fifty miles away, through woods tenanted by centuries of

summer shadow, skeined by birds as invisibly quick as ghosts, far beyond meadows that undulated a language of their own across the haze, Lady Fielden, guided by similar desires beyond her immediate knowing, trusting them, stepped indoors, into the apartments hung with her sombre traditions and long-dead portraits, and in the dead silence struck a match which flared like an intuition, and put it to the edge of the first page of *The Little Book* lying on an inlaid table in its brown-paper disguise. It blazed, caught some dried flowers which puffed smoke out of their vase, spread to a tapestry which vanished in flame like a renaissance suddenly dying, and licked into the beams of the ceiling which smouldered a moment, then took fire.

Hugh had struck a match; it hovered invisible in the acrid sunlight. At that moment Lady Fielden, frozen by an abrupt knowledge of the potent forces she was smoking out of the place, her husband sniffing destruction in the close air as he worked heatedly towards a climax two rooms away among the guns, Lady Fielden, who intended to survive, indeed recognised this as her only means of survival, began walking away from her girlhood home. Smoke cut off the sun behind her, the day darkened into ghosts filtering among rosebushes, and this eclipse suddenly faced her with the old shadows of her mind, as if she were at last walking through the gardens of her own nature, as bees swirled in anger away from the smoke and faint sounds of the life remaining in the house choked away behind her, and among the high beeches, swords of sunlight slung from the waste of the sky towards the rich earth, she found her mind enveloped at last in the outlines of herself, alive and safe.

But Hugh died that afternoon. In his sweat he had poured petrol on the files of newspaper clippings that underpinned the topple of furniture under the bare elms. Then with a shaking hand he had tossed matches at his fly-blown years of journalism squashed beneath the possessions of the house: none of it seemed his any longer. And then one match, as he reached forward to flick it, caught. And a sudden silent hardly visible shaft of rainbow heat hazed in a rush upward, a quick roar of heat that dried his sweat just as it tore into his hair and swathed across his body almost like comfort, so surprising it was, until he looked down and saw that his clothes were licking him, and already he could smell the white-hot tar of his skin burning still invisibly against the sun, and he roared across the lawn, salt in his mouth, eyes blind with the flame from his shirt, and plunged over the long sands, gulls screaming in his ears over hot distances, the air quivering, past the cottage and into the sea. His life briefly passed him by. And he burnt to death in the cold waters that with his last breath he imagined on the edges of his mind.

Was it an accident? The book did not believe in accidents; people had too deliberate a way of unconsciously chasing their destinies. Who could argue? The book was itself an unconscious, one that had the growling persistence of a wolf; no one could escape by denying it. Anyway, by good fortune, that

particular element in me had died in the flames: that weakness in refusing to admit emotion, in taking things so far but without the proper audacity to push them closer to the edge, in clinging to a career while spitting at it, in giving in to women only to take them, in avoiding any commitment except to the gross inflammatory indulgences of the self. I had been very fond of Hugh, a closer friend for many years than I had supposed, but it looked as though the book knew better than I how much I needed him out of the way. Nothing was an accident.

But where had Lady Fielden gone?

At this stage, as *The Little Book* moved towards the end, I was beginning to feel not pleasantly haunted by one of its pressures. Perhaps because I was trying to avoid its more cryptic implications, the volume seemed to be pushing me irresistibly back towards my roots. A retrograde influence, I thought; even a bit vindictive. I wanted to stand my ground, not drift west into an idealised Wales, where in any event I had never personally lived.

I had an inkling that Mr Parry was in the grip of the same problem; it felt powerfully as though *The Little Book* were trying to get rid of us. I stood firm against this feeling in the belief that the book would relent within a few pages and reward me with more for my patience. Mr Parry, however, had been disappointed by his one-man campaign to alert Southwark to notions of change. First, nobody in his district could afford the book, and when he distributed free copies, stolen from the warehouse, nobody wanted it; in that proud area gifts were worthless. True, after the open-air meeting addressed by Johns, a few sharp characters had kicked in their jobs for the hell of it and were now lolling at home amid beer-cans financed by public assistance. But Mr Parry considered this protest vain, if not immoral. The only way to unhinge the iron clasp of social welfare was to run away—"spend your time like a millionaire of it"—and in the pubs Mr Parry still said so.

A few had taken his advice. A filing-clerk raced off on a tipsy hop-picking jaunt with the last of the gypsies in Kent under the beetling brow of the local police. Some factory-hand survived a while by scrumping apples from Hampshire orchards until forced to drag his diarrhoea to a hospital where he was at once back on welfare again. A street-sweeper whose ideal of freedom was to sneak food from farmhouses and sleep on other people's property soon found himself being entertained at state expense. In two or three further cases odd jobs as handyman or labourer were refused because the suspicious employer's right was to demand an insurance card. The fact was that in Mr Parry's neighbourhood nobody could move a little without risking too much; so the very existence of society rendered its reform impossible. And the even more awkward fact emerged that hereabouts no one actually wanted to leave home. Extending

their range meant reducing their confidence. Accidents were always happening, but miracles never. Not only for safety's sake they wished to live and die as close as possible to their place of birth. They liked it.

Mr Parry despaired. Should he set an example? There seemed no choice. Sleepily he looked at the book again—why did it exercise such a reluctant pull on the attention?—and decided that all along he had been misunderstanding its politics, if any. In presenting him with a romance of a settled society, country estates, candlelight, rosebeds and dimly concealed vice—all the ideals of anyone's wishful thinking, now dead for ever—the book was simply telling him to go home. If honest, he felt the same blind compulsion as anyone else. They had all learnt from the book what it probably meant without reading it. By trying to extend its point he had caused a lot of trouble for nothing. It was time to get out. At least at the last he had discovered how to be true to himself.

Until that moment Mr Parry had never realised how much he wanted to go home. Packing books, upsetting the established order, talking too much: that wasn't his nature. He wanted to be alone for a long time in a place he understood in his bones. Though Welsh by origin, he had never visited Wales since childhood. The place had adhered to his mind like a picture postcard of someone else's happiness. It was a place where streams trickled through rocks from mountains that thunderously fingered the clouds; a place where lanes wound steeply down between candelabras of dog rose and old man's beard, when green views opened up like breathless pain under the diaphragm. It was almost race memory: a place that ached of tea-times, tingling with the rush of a childhood he had never had, gathering moss, counting sheep in gulleys that sloped down to the serene progress of rivers expanding into yellow estuaries, beyond which the seas of the outside world hammered the shore. It was somewhere that had held his mind in place for years, a murmur of stones that sermonised and valleys that opened their mouths wide to sing hymns and slate chapels that stood like truth by the wayside. And he had never been there as a man.

One Friday afternoon Mr Parry packed his last parcel; irony demanded that it contain a dozen copies of *The Little Book* addressed to Latimer Johns MP. In a gesture he thought futile but necessary, he did not collect his cards, but merely left the office without a word. After several days of westward travel on foot—the emptying roads were dusty now in the deepening orange suns of early autumn—he came upon a valley which he thought he recognised from long ago, but had never knowingly seen. Its profound slopes appeared to be suspended from the secrets of another time. The aftermath of sunset defined the hills; like a ghost an owl hooted in the depths of yellowing trees, making him shudder with another touch of retrocognition as he walked through high white grasses to the gates of a house, wondering where to kip down for the

night. Beyond the gates he made out the smudged black outlines of a mansion, and it took him a few moments, sounds of a river gurgling in his ears, to realise that this house was a blackened shell, oddments of furniture hanging in the twilight from upper rooms only recently swept by fire. He walked closer, feeling some urgency that was intimately bound up with this ruined silence dropping away from the sunset into darkness.

A tall man emerged thinly from the shadows. Mr Parry, asking for shelter, thought he recognised him. Was it by any chance Latimer Johns MP? Without quite seeing each other's eyes in the dusk, the two men, a gulf of class between them, appeared to strike an understanding at once. The owner too was sleeping rough in a hayloft. Not long ago his wife had left him. His only son had gone abroad to try his fortune. They talked for a while by the flicker of an isolated candle, asking no questions, but with a clean sense of precognition built into what each of them volunteered about the condition of their lives: a future shimmered in the flame lunging in huge shadows over the hay. Mr Parry noticed that his host's pillow appeared to be an unopened parcel of books. He dozed off and awoke in the dawn with a sense of homecoming.

There was much reconstruction to be attempted. The place needed a new roof. It had been an old house, but the owner wanted to plan the interior differently; it had always been inconvenient. They stood on the lawns littered with the singed detritus of centuries, discussing how the place would look when finished, and Mr Parry knew that he was a part of the process. Scaffolding would be delivered, loads of brick, cement, sand, planks of superior wood to strut the skeleton of the edifice, which would rise again out of the same roseblown gardens, where the same hidden roots would pulse into next spring. And Mr Parry would be curved over the trout stream in the first light or tapping a brick with a trowel or splayed on the framework of a roof as tiles slotted into place or munching bread as the reek of old smoke gave place to fresh sawn wood or digging ashes of former panelling into the earth to enrich it. And at that point Mr Parry passed out of sight of *The Little Book*, needing it no more, and at the same time out of my mind, which no longer needed to imagine him. If all he wanted was to find his father, someone he could trust and work for and revere, good luck to him. He had escaped what he mistook for the challenges by returning to what he thought were his roots. It was a happy death, and I suspected that he had never felt more alive. A vast peace descended on Wales, roots, homes, fathers, politicians, and all they stood for.

Dearest, I am coming closer to you, I mean to myself, with every phrase. Are you listening to me?

I was finding it hard to follow Lady Fielden wherever she had vanished after setting fire to her husband's copy of the book. She flicked in and out of my thoughts with the quick force of a caricature: wandering across Hampshire meadows in a cranky search for herbs, intoning a ritual on the crazy heights of the downland, holding hands in the psychic gloom and awaiting voices. I thought of her often in these conventional images of the occult, but she also cropped up in dreams, just before waking, inhabiting old parts of my life—Marseilles, Rome, a Greek island—where I would never have imagined her presence. She slipped into my mind out of alleyways as I walked the London streets sorting out my own final way of measuring up to the book's demands. Her assurance abruptly filled me as my lonely eye faltered over a mortifying vista of petrol stations, tenements, blank roads. It was as if she were busy elsewhere—rather like the book—but keeping me occasionally in mind.

At what level did this vague elsewhere of hers exist? I became convinced that she had broken into that timeless open country that lay in folds like downland just under the clouded surfaces of the brain. It was evident that she had defeated time, perhaps space too. I could not dislodge her from my still centre. It seemed she had the power of converting the raw material of daily existence into something chewed, digested and experienced at deeper levels, and of making that experience so conscious that it compelled me to relive on juvenated terms, alone, the whole pattern of my life.

I knew, for example, that in deep Suffolk, where the dead Professor House had cultivated his boyhood garden, the grey hint of a ghost had been observed against a wall of old-fashioned roses, amid the sudden intensifying of a scent that entered the body like happiness; the present owners had a copy of *The Little Book* on the coffee table. I knew also, with a thrill, that my old political self, Latimer Johns, looking for ancient burials on the dry chalk hills above Winchester, his pockets bulging with books, instantaneously saw all history spread at his feet, drifting like dreams in a faint breeze that roused in him an ecstasy of understanding, brief and total, that he would never forget.

Could I have imagined it? I thought not. I was aware too that my former writing persona burnt to death, Hugh Davies, walking homeward in the ultimate dark, felt under his feet the current of hidden streams, deep in the ground, throwing his mind into a complex of fast-running patterns, his memory of the book poised like a rod over the body of the earth to divine its secrets. Where did that knowledge arise? I could not tell. But they were all people who I knew I was or might have been, and this vanished Lady Fielden, from long ago, from places miles apart, was putting them into my spirit, easing them spectrally in, as if I needed them still but in some novel form of her own making.

But most of all—this struck me like a swipe of love—I knew that on the verge of suicide the fantasy woman of the book, its publisher, Davina Hayes,

had drifted in her despair towards the grim lemony dawn greying the blind cliffs of the South Coast; and, inches before death, watched incredulously the tides of happiness roll into the shore as the primary sun rose in an appalling silence of red, blue, yellow so vulgar that it would make anyone want to live for ever. And she stepped back from the brink at precisely the stunned moment when despair gave way to delight. And I asked: why was Lady Fielden from afar telling me all this? Surely I could have imagined it for myself. I wanted no one else's emotions at second hand—yet these I utterly shared. The dead or dying people, now alive as never before, entered me as if they had been there all along, but half-dead.

Davina: I knew that she had renounced, as a result of the book's dainty persuasions, her former life of chic ease on the garrulous fringes of London society. She had moved, interpreting the book to extremes, to a single room as sparsely appointed as a cell, with no accumulation of sad papers evoking memories best forgotten; I had suspected that apathy, yoga, yogurt and such fashionables, plus an inability to accept the loneliness of the book, might have turned her into a vegetable recluse of small dignity and less interest: her looks gone, her sex shrunk to nothing, her youth virtually at an end. I had mistaken the point, however; that devilish book was always falling asleep in the hand and confusedly dreaming. And hitting the floor.

On one of the hottest days, when I was vainly trying to draw together the many threads of *The Little Book*, the knowledge overwhelmed me that she had broken through the barrier. It happened in a second on that beach at dawn.

So I had to rethink her from the beginning. Let us imagine that she was the first to read the book when out of the blue the typescript landed on her desk. Alone in the world she read it. As that old world fell quietly about her ears, she had taken a grip on herself, fixed a contract with whoever the author was (only she knew), copy-edited those neat hard pages, despatched them to a printer, waited weeks for the proofs—all the time, perhaps without daring to read it again, going through the long digestive process that such work required to be sprung into a spontaneous act of her own imagination, to become the depths of herself. She had been given more time than anyone to combust into solid experience the tinder-dry events of the book, and that had happened only at the last moment, when the book's fiery manner of consuming all preconceptions, whole pasts, most of the present, conceivably the future, had driven her to the seaside edge of madness down there on the littoral.

And she had pushed through to it alone, with no help from me or anyone else. As dawn broke over that beach she was soused head to toe in a flood of intense beauty. She felt as intimately as a blush a soaring lift in her levels of thought. Smell, hearing, sight, all were focussing at a high pitch, light blinding her off the wrinkled sea as if it were a distillation of happiness, the scents of salt and woodland on the air choking her with joy, sounds of sea and seagull

borne into her by the breeze in a murmur of ultimate sense like words at last used with a divine skill in an unending sentence of pleasure. Without thinking, there on the sands on the point of death, she had encompassed the entire book in a second. She had risen into the masterpiece of a person for whom hitherto she had been only the hasty sketch. Skies ceased to be a blueprint: they were blue.

At that moment I knew that this act of bringing us together—my old fantasy, my real self—was all Lady Fielden's doing. I felt my mind clear like a sky of all its troubles, and I knew at last where she was. She was no longer posturing with her psychic gifts in Leeds or up against the wall of a Suffolk garden or half drowning in the Channel or ghosting through the environs of Winchester. She had stopped wandering up and down the country, weaving her heightened perceptions in and out of other people as inadequately prepared for them as I had once been. She had found a home. We had coincided at last. She was inside me. The book, digested into energy, had become my sight, my hearing, my touch. Her work was done. And at that point, as I sat poised in excitement wanting to discuss it with her, wanting to extend it, Lady Fielden disappeared for ever into the chasm of the invisible, spontaneous, consuming future of England which I had secretly always wanted to exist. As a person she died out of time. But here she was inside me at last.

Yet I knew sharply that one of the many persons I might have been—yes, this woman, fairly brainless, guided by her feelings but forced often to deny them, traditional in upbringing but girlishly eager to explore—had not been destroyed by *The Little Book*, but had been disclosed to me, very privately, as a result of my reading it. I may have resisted her for years, but here she was—liberation. To find her there, in all innocence, yet the one part of me that had great draughts of future in it to drink; to feel her there, making me feel, the one side of my character which in fear I had suppressed; to know because of her that my chances of ecstasy ran high, and of making discoveries, and of advancing a step or two, and of falling enough in love with myself to enlarge my capacity to love others, and of inducing other people in a similar spirit to read *The Little Book*: all this was as achingly vivid as that summer wall against which a ghost perfumed the air, as solemnly breezy as that moment of historical revelation in the hills, as quick as my own childhood, and like simplicity. Lady Fielden was vigorously laid to rest in me. I could ask no more than this last-minute resurrection of a self I might never have gained.

Her better half, alas, had come to grief. The story went that Sir Davis had been consumed by the flames of a belated passion. That was one way of putting it. In fact, in the naked gunroom, his heart had given out. Perhaps, some thought, his heart had never been there in the first place; and at that moment, poignantly, with a slim rush of guilt, I felt the burden of all the times I had stripped her down, whoever she was, spread her wide, splayed her loosely on

top of my body, stood her against furniture and/or just plain fucked her: and in some uneasily moral sense, not quite liking it, I was glad that this old codger had died, while free of him I looked forward in all innocence to falling in love, perhaps for the first time ever. It was a pity, though, about that maidservant in the nice black stockings. She too could have grown into a heroine or an ideal, if *The Little Book* hadn't wanted her to be a martyr.

I spring awake in my small flat. All my limbs, organs and levels appear to be sound. A dream tongues the back of my mind; I pin it down, a fast-vanishing lizard of memory. Half-dreamily, scarcely heard, a quartet is playing somewhere as though inside me. Grass grows in tufts out of the aging blackened brick wall a few inches from my window, topped by a cat licking a paw. From the high roses in the backyard stem associations. For a split second, images flowing in and out of my mind with the fluency of honey, I relive the dream, an amalgam of past and future, later to be recreated with the firm delicacy of shaping a pot on the wheel: it will shift through me all day, taking many forms.

I feel unduly well. The container of my body is as sound as a fresh-baked pot, but it needs breakfast. The anticipation makes my mouth water, activating in delectable memory my inner album of snaps, sketches, fantasies, each occasion ringing in clear focus. A frying-pan sizzles, my eyes on Roman hills unfolding in a chiaroscuro of sudden angled drizzle and shafts of windy sunlight. Coffee bubbles in the pot to a view of misty Greek mountains ethereally masked in snow. Eggs boil for just the five minutes necessary to gaze at the seas off Marseilles as if they were timeless. I breathe deeply, in and out, rising on my toes, several times, taking in the odours of the breakfast that contains so much past life revived and such inviting pointers to the future.

But my life is also here and now in the thick of the present. So is the newspaper which I race through in awe of the passions of a world that seems to exist only to print daily accounts of its folly. I tackle a sausage, spread more toast with honey, swill coffee, and push aside the paper's distorted yesterday—for here is today, humming in every vein, pulsing in contrary patterns through the mind, and I sit for a long moment, my time being immeasurable, just relishing the health and poise of my feelings, the aqueous basement light that encloses me, crockery on the dresser and events in the future equally awaiting my use: a plump man of fiftyish enjoying the exercise of an undivided spirit.

Since the summer every morning has begun in such pleasure, the night's seesaw of dreams creating the day's pitch and balance, no longer do I question my way into anxiety: that's long past. I know, yet always with a kick of surprise, that this day will satisfy me as a self-elaborating whole—a lifetime: budding at dawn, flowering all over London across the vernal immensity of the morning; fruiting into the afternoon's high summer; dropping its leaves

into the luxury of the evening's second wind, when once again I shall eat my fill, drink a little, talk long, listen to the silence of a few stars and some music—and at bedtime finalise that sense, which by a daily miracle I now achieve, that the amiability of life is now painless and programmed and will lay the mystery wide open to me, as if life has conceded that by reading *The Little Book* I may be forgiven all my sins.

I had read *The Little Book* without thinking in one incalculable hour. I knew that I had spent my half-century of doubt and muddle preparing for those sixty minutes of easy effort. I had been sick. I had wanted something to help me out of the vat of loneliness which, fermenting in my bones since youth, had turned to the vinegar of middle age. I wanted something to help me out of a world in which only I existed; to help me to help anyone else who felt as I did; to help me to sail into my future as if I had never been dragged back by a past; to help me to live my past all over again as if indeed it were a future; to help me to bridge or fill the gaps that yawned suddenly in the emotions of the present; to help me spit out the aloes of a bad day and taste the sunset of a good one. And that single hour of sentences, strung on the nerves in a rhythm as burning as lamps, had done it. The words worked.

They pricked, they gaped, they clenched their vowels. They opened their syllables in a shriek. With a comma justly placed they controlled that shriek; they began laughing. They contained their laughter within strict margins. They twisted a line of vocables into an ironic smile, showing no teeth. They almost burst into a paragraph of tears, then bit it back: compassion flooded through them invisibly like a blush under the skin of the language, and then they snapped, ultimately cushioning into existence the gentlest unstated declaration of all, that they had missed life by a hairsbreadth, despite doing all they had done with a consuming passion.

How, then, has it come about that I am so wonderfully alive? The fact is that *The Little Book*, though short, is continuous. I am making it all the time; I am making it up daily. That is why each day is an act of creation; each day rewrites with slight variations the entire hour of *The Little Book*. So I am the permanent beneficiary of the satisfaction of carrying out what the anonymous author first asked of me: not just to read his book in an hour, but to impose my own problems on his pages, treating them as glassy blanks in which my own prose might be mirrored, my heart subsumed.

The book sits on my breakfast table now and goes about with me in a pocket. I check it into restaurants, give it rides on the tops of buses, escort it to parties where I introduce it to my friends, and bring it back at night to lie on the bedside table. I have really no idea of what it still contains. We have conducted an exchange: the book's interior is slowly being transferred to me and I am giving it everything that is in me to give: generosity of response, a pride in myself, an act of love, an expanding awareness of the span and trajectory of

life—all of which, in fact, the book told me I possessed in the first place, but had hidden behind the ghosts of other people in me.

I stand up. The act is pleasurable. I feel my feet. I am glad breakfast is over: other possibilities are already springing from the cages they built during the night. I will go out, never mind where, guided by a sense that nothing is wrong if it happens; nothing is an accident or a coincidence. I will see through life, as she assumes her subterfuges around me. I will haunt museums for what is worth saving of their past. I shall walk into travel agencies to ask questions about the world and how to get there. I shall sip deep vintages in cellars and breathe among the treetops of the parks. I shall will the city to live, to live as she might, to live as she must if she wants to survive, to live to spiritual excess in a fashion no fading civilisation has ever managed, but which is now—*The Little Book* being more than ready to take on anybody who needs it—a threshold, a future for the apparently dead, an afterlife for the asking.

I recall as I walk that the dream I had this morning was of a little book that did everything I wanted it to. I wanted it to quieten the world so that it could listen to itself, to shut off the musak in hotel lifts and silence the engines of cars, to bring the city to a halt in a last screech of brakes, to topple tall buildings and blank out words in people's brains, to make the river smell again and give the sky a sense of touch, to bring back a rush of taste into a crust of bread, to make fire bright and water sweet and air pure. The dream nudged this magic idea of a book that could do all that and more, and I woke up to find *The Little Book* on my bedside table, as fresh as if in sleep I had just written it.

Dearest, I set out wanting to write the unwritable bible for you, but why didn't you tell me you were sending me a little book in the post? You could not have devised for me a more beautiful gift: it makes me feel I have known you all my life. And you invented me far better than I could do it. I love you.