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A LADY'S SHOE

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INTRODUCTION

Harold Wilson, not the British Prime Minister but a former high school history teacher of the same name, has spent 20 years as a vagrant, a man of the roads, by no means a homeless person since by the grace of Sister Jo he spends the winters in the laundry room in the basement of a monastery near Leiston, Norfolk, yet he is certainly what his generation and he himself would call a tramp, an obstinate loner. He has spent so long on the roads of East Anglia, alone, that he has become a voluntary mute. It is at this point that Harold witnesses a murder, one night, while sleeping in the woods overlooking the cliffs above the North Sea, beside the ruins of mediaeval Dunwich. The murderer sees him; their lives become entangled; Harold becomes his prisoner and, lacking access to script, cannot speak to explain to the killer that he has no intention of betraying him to the police. Harold escapes to look for his vanished companion, one of a series of pet snails (this one is Nebuchadnezzar VIII), mislaid in the woods overlooking the cliffs where the murder took place. Gazing down at the rocks and the sea, Harold confronts a significant clue to the crime, one that might serve to incriminate the killer (with whom Harold has come to identify, and whom he wishes to protect), hanging in a bush halfway down the steep, perilous cliff: a lady's shoe.

IT'S NO USE. I don't love you any more.

How many times have people spoken these words, how many millions of times have they hung in the air? Each time like a knell, an utterance that never loses its power. And yet it's just a set of sounds, resonating in a thousand languages, in the walls of houses without number, and still floating over meadows, rivers, continents. *I don't love you any more.* It's hard to even whisper the words without a tremor. Love is faith, a universal faith; to lapse is blasphemy. It's death in life, when you declare bankruptcy of the soul. Who can say the words lightly? You could pretend to, but can you feel them lightly as you speak? Who can unsay love without a holy shudder?

Even to hear the words passing between two strangers, in a theatre perhaps, on stage, or spoken in first-hand passion and overheard by chance, as I overheard them in a wood, is shocking; opens a childhood wound in the listener. *I don't love you any more.* Hearing it, you feel a pain older than memory, a fear that belongs to the animal-self born suddenly into a world no longer watertight. Why were we expelled into the unsafe? Did the womb not love us any more?

I saw the girl, and the man following, no, the man with her, on the path, on Middlegate Street, I saw his suit, her dark coat only, dark as her hair, his suit in the middle of the night. Not quite the middle; the light was turning grey, it was the owl's regretful hour. A vampire's too, I dare say. I didn't wonder about their presence, the man and the girl, until later. They were like figures from a dream, not mine but the forest's dream, its gallery of recollected visitors. The forest was offering the man and the girl as ghostly sacrifices to hold back the day, the grey light, for a few minutes longer; it was summoning them from

the night. I knew they weren't in my dream. I was wide awake, watching the spangled mooncoins fading as the grey light reached the woodland floor, and counting them before they disappeared. When the newspaper house failed to materialize here in Dunwich Woods, as it had failed to do for a good while, I believe – leaving me feeling like King Henry (King Harold?) searching the forest for the White Hart into which his love had been transformed by Wildwood witches – I had a fallback site, an ancient oak beneath whose roots I had buried a propitiatory coin (a token of passage recommended by no less a conquistador than Rodney Davis), to please the mycelium and to palliate dreams. I even had a landlady, a she-owl whose reproofs (*Ha-aarold! Where have you been?*) are always the same: three hoarse, throat-clearing *whup-whups*, like a rusty performer testing her voice, then the aria, as her squat, muscular shape takes wing, feathers bristling. *Wa-oww...wuh; wuh; wuh wa-aaaaaoooww!*

I watched the two figures approach the miniature aqueduct, now faintly silhouetted as the darkness yielded; I knew just where it stood, the tiny bridge; my night sight was still keen. They came to it as all visitors did, like giants in a toy train landscape, rendering the aqueduct's dimensions absurd. All the light the coming day had summoned was within the arch, light off the distant waves, far below, off the sky and the invisible juncture of sea and sky, framed by the arch. To either side, banks of ivy walled in the long, straight, sunken path, each ivy leaf a watching night-eye picking up the grey as it began to silver the wood, dispelling night-fog. The figures hesitated at the arch, blocking the light. I watched; the ivy choirs watched. He stepped back to let her through, she slipped beneath the aqueduct, and suddenly she was running. *Anna!* It was the first sound, cutting through the bumble-buzz I'd barely been aware

of in my head, a background static I now heard clearly as it stopped as if commanded by a secret word, a new echo for my ears. I heard the word repeated more than once as dawn came, and each time it seemed to extinguish another sackbut in my brain. (Even now, when I hear the kazoo-choir starting to warm up, I hush them with an *Anna!* and it works. Try it yourself, when the bubble-buzz begins to fill your head. Cry *Anna!* It's like an extra-strong mint for the ears.)

That first *Anna!* was terrified, of course, and if you say it to yourself (you don't have to shout it, a whisper will do, but it's the urgency with which you speak it that counts), try and imagine that your beloved is dashing away from you down a tiny moonlit woodland path, dead straight, between sinister banks of ivy glinting in the light, she's dashing away from you and straight towards a precipice she can't see yet — you know it's there and she doesn't. *Anna!*

It's no use. I don't love you any more.

Was that when he caught her, did she say it as he caught her and pulled her back from the edge? — pulled her back! When only a few minutes later —

Or did she cry it to the woods as she ran, unable to say it to his face, and letting the words stream back behind her like a scarf? I see it as a mediaeval cartoon, tapestried in the palace of a Dunwich grandee: a young woman running, one leg afloat behind her, arms sprawled, her head turned back, mouth open to release a strip of parchment with a motto on it, an inscribed gonfalon. *I don't love you any more.*

But perhaps my mind has made a heraldry of what was rushed, confused, silent even, *sans paroles*. Indeed, did she actually tell him she didn't love him any more or was it only in her look? In those days I spoke little, myself, even to Jo (like an old married pair, we needed less and less talk to communicate),

and I heard even less, having had decades to train myself to ignore what people said to me, kids especially if I was so ill-advised as to walk through a town, or when emerging from my ruin-refuge in Fram town centre to fly the coop before the astonished citizenry. They were a silent movie to me now. By contrast the unspeaking were alive with borrowed dialogue, in my head I was God's leading dubbing artiste and voice-over specialist, adding words to clouds (very talkative, East Anglian clouds), trees (I had different voices for each species, from growling oak to simpering willow), plants (burdock squawks like a chicken, I discovered) and even people, provided they didn't interrupt. To the ventriloquist that I had gradually become, the world was my dummy. I suppose this makes me a monumentally unreliable reporter, except that I believe I watched harder and saw more than ordinary people did who waited to be told by others what the others thought or had to say. This form of testimony I ignored, in favour of the truth their features spoke. *He's putting words in the witness's mouth, m'lud!* Well, yes. I gave the soul words, regardless of a person's traitorous intentions.

The man — beside her (Anna) now — at the very lip of the cliff, where the path tips into the void and you can hear the sea sucking at the land like a voracious child at an exhausted breast: I see him wrestling with her almost. Is he battling with her to hold her back, to stop her from jumping? Did she run too far too fast, not meaning to leap at all, simply not knowing about the precipice (how many *Danger! Precipice!* signs have Dunwich cliffs eaten, laughing, for breakfast as another chunk of land falls to the sea, taking its sign with it?) and did she try desperately to stop, off balance on the crumbling verge of the abyss, did he catch her in time and are they struggling together, not against each other, is he keeping her from falling? Or is she simply

trying to get away, to run along the cliffs for a better place to jump? Is she just trying to escape him?

His voice now.

And him? Do you love him? You barely know him.

Always a him. Or is that merely what I see in his distorted gaze. A good face, a good strong face (or do I only think that because I fancy he resembles me as I once was, before I put on weight to combat Dollis Hill Grammar, myself as I once was when I still carried Father's noble profile?), but marred by bad skin. I can see its pockmarked surfaces as he struggles with his Anna in the light now, in the clearing where the path ends in nothing. It's plain as day to me at once: he will kill her because of his bad skin, the skin she once pitied and told herself she didn't see. She saw the man within, she insisted. But the bad skin will rise up now and kill her, so that the *him* she *barely knows*, him with his clear skin, will not have her.

There's no going back, her furious, rigid body tells him, and her voice too, perhaps. *No going back*. In that regard she's right. They have found it here, the very place, the place of *no going back*, on Dunwich Cliffs. I picture, in slow-motion, the buildings of great Dunwich rising swiftly out of the sea in time-reverse, amid backward-running eruptions of water as the walls and ceilings reunite to hop back up onto swiftly reconstituted margins of cliff, while the man in the suit (Davy, as I was soon to learn) continues to wrestle tautly with his Anna at the centre of a gilded city rising into the air from the waves below. But there is no going back, I tell grieving Templar spectres wearing bloody red beards in honour of their patroness. Ghouls; fiends. They surround the man and the girl, Davy and Anna, as if to accuse them of being the hour itself that robbed them of their home. With a roar of falling earth and stone, the rising sun restores time and Dunwich falls back down once more into the North

Sea, leaving, on the darkling cliff, a single figure. Davy only. Just the man. No Anna.

Did I really not see the push, the hand at her back? *No going back?* Go, then! is his answer. I see it clearly, in one version (black and white). For an instant her coat spreads as she falls, becloaked, vampiric. He too has fangs and black blood on his lips as he watches her invisible descent to the rocks and the waves. Yet in the colourful remake in my head, where there is no vampire-contest but only two lost suburban souls suddenly surrounded by a brilliant red and golden-yellow city from the past, patrolled by vengeful Templar Knights, and she falls along with the city, sucked with it into time – in this version they have recognized each other as past-life lovers in ancient Dunwich, star-crossed, he a creature of the Roman church, monied yet ready to give it all up for her, she (native, heath-born, poor) loyal to her heathen roots – and for a second time he loses her to the sea, as land and city tumble back to their watery grave.

But why couldn't I have stayed silent? I who no longer spoke (to strangers, perhaps, if to anyone, but not to this stranger, of all people), I who knew how to keep my mouth closed before the taunts and insults of every teenager in Fram – I at this moment to give out a groan, like a compressed uttering, in a single syllable, of all the words I hadn't spoken in twenty years and more? I couldn't help it. I didn't know I *could* speak. I went, *Ah*.

Ah. Not loud, just *Ah*, but in that *Ah* my whole being, I think. It's not the force, Willie always said, that knocks the other bloke off his feet. You can swing at his chin with a haymaker from hell – I'm the same, you can land one on me from the moon, I might still be standing. But if you land a tap that comes from your soul, that dances to the rhythm of creation (destruction? – same

thing, Harold), you can blow me down with a feather, if you take your timing from the universe. I knew he wanted to say God, but his religion wouldn't let him.

Ah. The sound of somebody expecting something. A visitor. A parcel. A delivery from the stars. *Ah.*

It was enough to make Davy turn and find the hedgehog face that uttered it out of the shadows. How long we looked at each other – long enough to tell each other our entire life story, like two drowning men enmeshed, exchanging a lifetime in memory – is not to be measured in time. Perhaps by clocktime it was no time at all, an instantaneous transfer, wire to wire.

Did he walk steadily away, up the path, beneath the archway and along Middlegate Street, out of the woods? Did the rising sun look away, blinded by cloud, to let him slip away in darkness? Did he run? He left me there, but it made little difference. I'm sure he took me with him, then and forever. He had me (as I had him) by the *Ah*.

WHY DIDN'T I go to the police? I was asked this frequently later, and I don't think a reply ever rose to my lips as I stared at the questioner, thinking that if he or she was stupid enough to ask the question in the first place, he or she would be too stupid to understand any of the answers.

Would I, if I had seen a murder (even supposing I was sure the victim didn't simply fall, or jump) in similar circumstances, when I was my former self, Harold Wilson the schoolmaster – would I have reported it to the police, even then? Perhaps this is a scandalous thought, revealing the kind of person I was (precisely the kind of person who would end up as the person I am now), but I'm not sure that I would; I'm not sure that I don't believe domestic murder to be a private matter, between a person and his or her conscience. I dare say that if everyone felt

this way it would cause havoc in civil life. Or would it? They say domestic killers rarely kill again. (But what about serial wife and husband-killers? — surely there are a good many of these.) Maybe everyone should be allowed to kill one person, someone they know, for free, as it were.

Of course, the reasons why I didn't go to the police in this case have nothing to do with such speculations. I didn't go because I wasn't used to treating the few, uniformly trivial human events I witnessed in my life as a tramp as matters of the faintest importance (to God *or* to me), and even if I had witnessed a fatal car accident, say, I can't imagine bothering even to tell Sister Jo about it. It wouldn't have counted. Even *Ragwort, 17 sticks, Sowthistle 5 (14 florets), car accident 1 (fatal)* would have struck me as more than it deserved. As for reporting something to the police! I who could barely speak any more (that *Ah* was perhaps my first utterance of the year out loud, as I say it was the sum of God knows how many years of buried speech), I who would have hardly been listened to if I *could* speak! I can see myself standing before the station officer on duty, trying to describe the night's events to him, and all that comes out is an *Ah*. I? — I go to the police, who'd send me back to London like a shot, even if the little rat-faced sergeant intervened, the one in Beccles, who knows me. They'd offer me London, Birmingham, Coventry or Manchester, as usual, even if Sister Jo came and pleaded with them. Besides, *I* go to the police to report what, exactly? If my voicebox were suddenly to transcend *Ah* and succeed in describing what I had seen, what *had* I seen?

The sun was up by the time I had been able to bring my stunned self to approach, in dread, the edge of the cliff, and attempt to look over it. I suffer from severe vertigo and always have, and it took most of the morning to get myself, on all fours and sometimes flat on the earth in my terror, to a place where I

could glimpse, through half-shut lids, the drop and the rocks below. Passers-by catching me in my snail-time progress towards land's end must have thought I was a devout if stupendously unkempt Muslim bowing and praying towards Mecca (erroneously, however – due East from Dunwich?).

I've never discussed my vertigo, or anyone else's, with another person, not even with my family when I was Mr. Wilson, schoolmaster; I think my reticence had to do with the first time I discovered vertigo, a horrible moment in the company of my entirely vertigo-free Father, who had sent me scrambling up a mast to help free a ill-unfurling sail, only for me to find that I was more ill than the sail, and could unfurl even less of myself than it; having reached the spar, I could no more move, in terrified paralysis, than if I was a mummified human being in the ruins of Pompeii. After long, unsuccessful coaxing which ended in equally unprofitable curses and threats, Father had to climb up the now overloaded mast himself, carefully prise my shuddering self off the spar, load me onto his shoulder, and descend, with immense care. The shame I felt that day has never entirely left me, and although I wouldn't willingly seek out high places or even allow myself to be drawn to the front of a balcony, neither would I admit to vertigo, even under interrogation. So I don't know how vertigo takes other people. It takes me in the anus, to be candid. It quite literally sodomizes me. My legs go shaky and my heart beats out of time, but where I really feel it is in the bum. I have no idea what this means. I'm reluctant to relate its location to some other painful incident in my life to which the extremity of vertigo somehow links itself, by a crossed wire in the chambers of innermost terror, because I know of no terror associated with my arsehole, not even a fear (never knowingly experienced) of penetration. Unless all males (and females) secrete this fear, as a species of

atavism (all buggered once?), at this very “extremity”. But why on earth would bumhole-fear, regardless of its origins, be triggered by vertigo, of all things, given that of all parts of the body threatened by a long fall, the anus may be the *least* threatened, indeed the best protected of all places on the surface of the body? What I actually experience is a tightening, not (as is often mentioned in connection with fear) of the scrotum – no, my scrotum is completely blithe in the face of terrifying heights, *nothing to do with me*, it says – but of the anus ring itself, which seems to be trying so hard to close that once shut tight it still goes on spasming in anxiety. Why? Did ancient man, whom I picture doing a fair bit of perilous climbing in search of eggs, find himself leaning down over a cliff (precisely as I was that day at Dunwich), with his bumcheeks exposed to the opportunism of a sex-crazed megalithic bear? It’s hard to see this unlikely event making its way into the collective unconscious, even if it ever happened. Or is it (to dabble in an entirely different kind of hypothesis), as I sometimes suspect, that the fundament is in fact fundamental, that it is the place where the body exhales matter, and marks (as breath cannot) a spot that is its own, its territory? In other words, when the body is threatened by a drop into space that implies a broken, shattered end, the part that alerts its owner to the danger, like an advance warning system, is the part of the body that is most decisively in and *of* the world, other than the sole of the foot, the part that speaks to the world in the world’s own language, faecal matter being such a essential component of planetary tith. *Beware, anus*, is the secret news passed from the eyes to the body, *anus, alert, you may have taken your last shit*. Whatever the explanation of my fear-clenched bottom, I blame my mother, whose stone age ancestors – unlike father’s, on the evidence of

his mast-climbing prowess – clearly expected others to fetch their morning egg for them.

That day on Dunwich cliffs, when I finally reached the edge and endured the fiery shafts of pain abruptly streaking from my anus into my bowels as I looked down, my terrified eyes could see no body on the rocks below. No Anna, nothing. *Anna!* A woman had followed a city into the sea. Or had she? Her body could have been swept out to sea by the tide, perhaps. But had she, rather, in fact simply fled the scene unnoticed by my crazy old eyes, lost in the mottled shadows of the woods?

Except that they, the man and the girl, had been standing in the clearing, not in the mottled shadows. Did I remember the push, or did I dream it? Had I dreamed them both?

It was then that I saw the shoe.

There was plenty of debris on the side of the cliff, sweet papers, fast food cartons and their spilt contents, the stuff that seems to identify the casually barbaric attitude to the world we moderns live in, though perhaps Dunwich itself once left a comparable slew of mediaeval trash, as each slice of the city fell, in turn. I dare say humans have always been slobs. Amid the vertically exhibited litter there was even what looked like a pink child's cardigan, way down the cliff, which certainly no father however poor or devoted, however brave, would have tried to retrieve at the risk of certain death on the rocks below.

But this, this item, was different. It was a black satin pump, of all things, caught in a bush. Black like Anna's outfit. Yet no guarantee that it was hers. I had no recollection of how she had been shod. It was just that this black satin shoe, this shiny slipper, absurdly inappropriate for a walk in the woods, was not only so out of place but so new-looking. Neither bleaching sun nor rain nor falling dirt and dust had yet marred its luminous, glinting surface. I closed my eyes and wished it gone, or turned

into a piece of torn bin liner, a strip of black polythene that merely looked like a shoe at this distance and at this angle. When I opened my eyes the shoe was still there. I wished with all my heart that I hadn't seen it, that it wasn't there. But it was.

MY LIFE HAD been so strange and simple for so long, monastic, really, in its isolation from human commerce, harsh in its way but with the luxury of working all day at my own pace and in my own way, that it never occurred to me, I don't think, that the shocking events of a single night in Dunwich woods might have brought it all to an end, that my studies would never be the same again. And certainly it wasn't until later, when I found myself in close proximity to a murderer, that I realized I might be in danger, myself. My first reaction to the night's events, even after I had crept on my belly to the cliff's edge and seen what might have been Anna's shoe (but more to the point, no Anna on the rocks below), was to try and put it all out of mind and continue with business as usual. I'd had violent dreams before (of which, shoe or no shoe, this might still have been one), mostly involving people from the remote past – my remote past, I mean, not the mediaeval past, like the Templar ghouls in my visions that night – who were completely absent from my daytime thoughts, and had been for countless years. Now they seemed to have been trapped in some nocturnal prison in my soul, a fate to which they reacted with furious resentment, breaking out of jail and chasing me angrily around the countryside. In my dreams I often had to find the newspaper house in order to hide, and only when I found it was I safe, lying low under a windowless sill while voices hunted me outside.

So there seemed no reason why I couldn't treat the scene I'd witnessed, dreamlike in nature, as a dream, and go about my business. I can remember an impulse, nonetheless, to head for

the Priory and Sister Jo, not so much to hide as to have somewhere to sit and digest the night's experience, to preserve it for inspection; in the laundry room there was nothing to distract the mind amid the mounds of sheets and pillow-cases and the steady, soothing tummy-rumbles of the washing-machine. A womb if ever there was one.

Or perhaps I *did* want to hide, perhaps even in my addled brain I understood enough to know that whether or not I tried to forget about the fellow in the suit it wouldn't alter the fact that he was out there somewhere, that he might be out there looking for *me*. Searching nearby villages; driving the lanes. If he were to find me sumac or lettuce, sooner or later, what was to stop him coming after me, pushing me through a hedge and putting an end to me, old sack of clothes that I was, and who would care? They mightn't find me for God knows how long; I pictured my slack body dragged to the newspaper house, left there to rot until nothing but my overcoat remained (and Neb the VIIIth mummified in his tin, entombed like me). But these terrors came later. I don't believe I summoned them up at the time. I didn't dare, perhaps. And some part of me had ruled these roads for so long I fancied myself inviolate. It was my kingdom. When, from time to time, I wanted company, I pictured Willie and the gang passing through, or even Rodney Davis with W.H., the supertramp, in tow — I'd spend a day or two showing them around my estates, in imagination, and they were always humble, grateful and impressed (after all, I found them accommodation in Blythburgh and Fressingfield and right in the centre of Fram). So why would I, who had weathered so much on these roads, feel threatened by anyone or anything? I needed time, that was all, to hold the night's events in mind without erasing them, because all it would take to lose them from sight would be a counting-trigger, a little parade of velvet-

shank mushrooms, perhaps, marching along a log of fallen, rotting elm – good grub, the velvet shank, and a favorite of Neb’s – in a flash I’d count the 17 of them and I’d be gone, away in a hack as Willie’s pal Casey would say, out with my tallywhacker (not *that* kind of tallywhacker – the one of which Willie always used to say *that’s my tallywhacker but I don’t use it as a rule* – just the wad of paper and the pencil Sister Jo always provided for my tallying, I call it my tallywhacker but I think I got confused between the words *tally* and *weed-whacker*) and I’d record and record until night fell. Dunwich Cliffs would sink, dispelled by more urgent matter. It was shocking how bad dreams vanished when I began to count; so vivid and terrible when I woke, give me a patch of ragwort and after a dozen full-floretted sticks I couldn’t even remember what the dream had been about.

Yet something told me, and perhaps it was self-preservation even after all these heedless years, that I needed to keep before me Anna’s image, the image of a woman falling off the edge of the earth, rather than bury it under umbellifers like an ancient corpse, to become part of my dream-prison population, banished for a time and only returning to haunt my nights, impatient at last, in the distant future.

It was confusing; I was used to knowing what I wanted to do. The king is confused today! Baffled courtiers whispered it, while trees soughed in the wind, beneath stormy skies. I set out in the general direction of Beccles and the Priory, I think, not hurrying (when had I last hurried, even in the rain?), not hurrying in case somehow I drew attention to myself, and accepting this sudden vast disturbance into my belly (into my spirit). It was too dreadful to face squarely, but I must have sensed that Anna was not the only victim of the night. It had been many years since the last earthquake to disrupt my

existence, but when one came, I knew from experience, it left little intact. I was an earthquake child. *Anna!* That had been the first warning. Like the old lost city of which only the path and the neighbouring abbey walls remained, the greater part of my life had fallen with her into the sea.

[...]

I MUST HAVE stayed lying there half the morning, weeping and debating and just addressing anything that came into my mind except the prospect of moving forwards. I could see the shoe, the satin pump. It was still there, winking at me. *Man Falls To Death*. Tramp falls to death. Of course, *Woman Falls To Death* was maybe even now on the typesetter's machine at the *Evening News*, if the *Evening News* still existed. If they had found her. Of course if they had found her elsewhere, down the coast, why would they think *Falls to her Death*? Would bumps and bruises argue it, or could they simply be the effects of surf knocking her poor body against the rocks of the shore. *Woman Drowns*. *Woman Falls to Death, Drowns*. Never mind tramp falls to death, that was why I was here, a woman had already fallen. Pushed. Now it was all down to me. My hamstrings were rigid with terror and my anus was a spear some heathen warrior had driven into my guts, but I was going to do it. I had to do it.

If I couldn't speak to tell Mr Pockmark Death that I was no threat to him, that he could forget about me and go about his business as I could go about mine, without worrying, that we could be friends and he didn't have to think about killing me – how would I reassure him if I couldn't *tell* him this until my voicebox started working again? I'd have to mime it. *Show* him. Friendly clown – see? – stupid wads of paper, making notes about my weeds... that hadn't worked, it must have looked as

if I was an amateur tramp-detective on his trail. Offering him his sardines and finding I'd presented him with a (possibly dead) snail instead – that can't have been much reassurance either. But to present to him the one fatally lingering piece of evidence against him, to *give* it to him free and gratis, to bring it to *him* instead of to the police – wouldn't he open wide his grey-suited arms and hug the stinky old bear that I was to his bosom? His saviour!

Yes; well, it was time for the saviour (it's all right, Dr Ronnie, I do remember that it's the graveyard of the chapel of *Our Saviour* that my mother's buried in) to act like one. One last glance at the sea below, I couldn't resist it, before I started my descent, one glance, like a last draught of life, at a world of little winking silvered shrouds, a vast cemetery of waves, their greedy mouths flapping open to receive me, waiting to be fed. Enough, it was time to begin, but not like this, head first. I had to manoeuvre myself through 180 degrees so that my legs were over the edge. If I aimed them correctly, perhaps I'd not have to look below me again, just lower myself down the pebbly scree until I came to the bush, pocket the slipper and crawl back up. Going down would surely be the hardest part.

Turning myself slowly round like a crab, pivoting on my belly, I wound up in position at last, panting, bent double at the waist with my legs in space, my boots clawing at the cliff face and my head and torso still horizontal on what felt like the last spit of land on the planet. Behind and beneath me, as my anus never ceased to remind my innards, the thundering, hissing sea spread from horizon to horizon, surrounding me. What a loathsome substance water was! It hated breath; no wonder we humans had fled it. But I knew I mustn't visualize what lay below, I had to concentrate on moving, limb by limb. Grasping a tussock of grass in each hand and clutching it as if each one

held a fellow-human head beneath it, I began to lower myself down, in terror. What if in fact the descent wasn't the hardest part, what if I couldn't climb back up again? Would anyone see me, frozen in terror, crucified against the cliff? I recalled from the National Geographic a tribe of Pacific islanders who placed their dead in alcoves scooped out of a sheer cliff face, like saints gazing down upon the tribe as family flesh was plucked away piece by piece, and birds, insects and weather finally produced another sentry skeleton. I could picture myself forever pinned to the cliff, like a bug flung against a wall.

I seemed to be barely able to persuade my booted toes to scrape the pebbly earth for purchase. Could I do this without looking down to find a foothold? No, I had to look. Close to my ragged boots I could see bulges of tawny earth and sand, and here and there some helpful-looking roots projected from the pebble-dash cliff wall. The roots looked as startled as the furnishings of a building half-demolished or broken in half by a bomb. Below them, impossibly far, I could see the bush-skeleton with the shoe — if it *was* a shoe, pray God, its slim shape arching up at me, inviting me to let my gaze down lower, all the way to the rocks and the terrible obscenity of the sea. What was I doing? It was like climbing out of a fifteenth story window. Madness.

Pulling my head back up to ground level, I looked at the woods, a last lingering look at the woods and the path and the little brick-built bridge across it like a feature in a toy-train landscape.

The little clearing, beckoning like a hearthrug. Instead I'm shuffling my trunk away from it, forcing my foot to find and meet a root and steady me on it. Gripping my grass-tussocks for dear life. You can do this, Harold.

The other foot gropes for certainty, finding bumps and tumps, but dare I trust them? Are they mere pimples, hairy demi-moles

on the cliff-face, or real footholds? How do climbers ever know? It's a kind of magic, it seems to me as if I lever myself out into mid-air, you *will* yourself to stay in place, pressed close to the earth as if the kinship alone, land-human to land, will be a kind of glue. Below me, the sea's perpetual cosseting of sound has turned to spray-hiss, out it oozes with a pebble-screech, it sounds like a fairy-tale giant crushing walnuts in his fist, then back in with the hiss of spray — *ss-ss-ss* as if the giant's trying not to split his sides with laughter.

It's anything but funny if you're living it, not watching it. I have to trust my pebble-tumps, let go my tussocks and seize hold of new ones, my entire body pressed passionately against the cliff as if trying to copulate with it. Yet I feel less like a man performing an act of love than a sailor strapped to the foc'sle and awaiting the lash. Between the sounds of the sea, I can hear distant music somewhere, wafted on the wind in seasick little lunges of sound. A radio in someone's house, perhaps, along the beach. Perfect. I'm being serenaded.

If only I could stop moving, stay like this, more a part of the cliff than a man, not a visiting parasite upon it but an old inhabitant, a dinosaur at long emerging from inside the earth, exposed by the elements.

There *are* inhabitants, I'm reminded by occasional screeches above and behind me. Three feet away, within reach of my hand, I can see a bird's nest, empty. Empty, God willing, since I can already feel, in imagination, the sea-bird mother's fierce beak stabbing at my head. At least the bird trusted this section of cliff wall would stand, not crumble suddenly into the sea. Surely birds know these things. If I could stay like this forever, upright, it wouldn't be too bad, the wind is bracing and I feel a strange exhilaration now that I've taken the dare and launched myself on my crazy deed. If only I didn't have to take another

step down, lose my good strong tussocks and commit myself to life as a fly.

Easy does it. Where there's one foothold there must be a chance of another. A gust of merry music, accordion it sounds like, reaches me again. I picture boatloads of tourists watching me from the sea, come out from Dunwich's dockside pub, *Trip Round The Bay* with Today's Special, *Man Descending Cliff*. More likely there's someone with a radio down on the rocks below, setting up for a spot of fishing. For some reason Neb flashes into my mind. Oh for a little of his adhesiveness now!

Face hard into the soil of the cliff as though it will help me stay aloft, I reach down with my foot and find what feels like a loop of root, a stirrup almost. Putting weight on it, I let myself edge downwards, my nose and lips against the cliff-face like a drunk or the victim of a knockout punch sliding down a wall. Stop. Kiss the cliff once more. For a dizzy moment it's possible to imagine that I'm not suspended, vertical, over a void, but lying flat on horizontal ground, and it's only my buzzing, deluded head telling me I'm standing upright.

Whether minutes pass or hours is impossible to say, though my limbs feel numb and stiff already. Mustn't stay too long in one place, I keep telling myself that, but the message seems to get lost on the way to my hands and feet. I'm like a dinosaur trying to instruct its tail. *Come in, hands, come in, feet, are you there? Over.* I can feel memory coming to fetch me, descending on me like cawing, vengeful gulls as I cling to my handholds, suspended over my own death. Images that I haven't disturbed for years. My family, young as in a bygone life, smiling, remote as heaven. Luring me with despair. *Give up, let go,* they seem to be saying, *Why so murderous?* But they're not, they're welcoming, they're close. *Let go and join us. You've been battling for so long. You can give in now.*

A strange sound saves me by alarming me, making me grip on tighter. A giant vulture? No, it's the caroming dawn-melody of a distant aeroplane. I can't think when I last looked up to attend to an aeroplane in the sky. And now that I'd like to take a look I can't.

Perhaps it was the thought of looking up that did it, because all I knew was that abruptly I was sliding and falling, too scared to make a sound, grabbing at sand that gouges out, futile, under my nails — it even enters my mind that as I'm falling I could still make a grab for the shoe when I pass it, but I can't see a thing and suddenly it's as if someone has seized me by my coat and wrenched me brutally upside down, I am a great auk's prey and any moment he'll be wheeling off over the sea with me. A distant clattering comes from the rocks below, my Nato's gone, I feel tears start into my eyes in rage and shame — absurd to be embarrassed by your clumsiness, of all things, as you tumble to your death, *my dear I felt so foolish*, and then I realize I'm no longer falling but just hanging in a bush with twigs poking into my face. Everything else still falling, sand and dirt, and all the contents of my haversack voiding its guts into the sea.

As my pounding heart settles I want to yell for help — but how absurd — who to? Can't hear the music any more, the accordion's gone, and the town must be a mile away, no-one to hear me. *Help! I'm an idiot on a cliff. I didn't mean to be here.*

I daren't pull myself upright until I can work out what's holding me here, a thread perhaps and if I break it I'm a goner. No idea why I'm not falling already. Somehow the bush --

The bush! The right bush? Craning my neck from side to side I can't see a shoe or anything that looks remotely like a shoe. Most of what I can see is coat half draped over my face, I wriggle it free using my teeth and now all I can see is trouser, knee above me, sticks of dry branch poking through, and a boot, my own,

but no shoe, no slippery little black pump. Where's it gone? Wriggling some more I grab a branch and pull myself some of the way up, panting, chest folded flat against my thigh and face against my knee. I scan the branches left and right, above, can't see below but I flail with my left hand.

Dare I let my head back, to look down? Hanging down, upside down on a cliff like some strange circus act. It's still a place of terror, a mast-high crow's nest of woody thorns, and I don't want to look down. Dad! Where are you when I need you, you spar-walker of old? Flail with my right hand; find nothing. Perhaps it's the wrong bush and the shoe is somewhere else. But I can't see any others, and my heart sinks. No shoe, I dreamt it, mistook a twist of branch and leaf, a glinting shard of flint, and came all this way to hang in space for nothing. Or might I have dislodged it in my fall? In a last effort, defying panic, I relinquish all claims on the cliff, on life itself, and let my trunk fall back until the back of my head touches vertical earth and I'm staring straight down — *ta-tahhh! The ringmaster invites applause — no safety net! — the band strikes up! —* with nothing now, no part of me between the top of my head and the rocky beach below.

And there it is. On a little sandy spill billowing out from the foot of the cliff, like a study in contrasting textures, like a shoe in an arty advertisement. It's there, awaiting the first passerby. Why didn't I think of knocking it loose myself by throwing stones from above?

Too late now. And I'm done for, I realize at last. I'm hanging by my legs from a bush forty feet above the ground, no way to pull myself upright. *What are you doing there, old fellow?* How startled they'd be, if anyone could see me! A sad old trapeze artist, perhaps, escaped from hospital to try and recreate a youthful exploit. You'd never think anyone would be crazy

enough to have climbed down the cliff – in search of a satin pump that now wasn't even on the cliff at all, but lay couched below, waiting demurely for a passing princess. *Cinderella Tramp In Death Fall*. But would anyone understand that I'd been trying to rescue the slipper?

When will I fall? Soon? Ever? Not until the next section of cliff falls away into the sea? That could be years away, centuries perhaps. I'll be rescued when someone sees me, of course – but how, how will they see me? – from the sea? – how visible am I in this bush from half a mile or less even, say a quarter of a mile away? In my dirty tweedy overcoat I'll surely soon blend in with the cliff and shrink and dwindle and turn at last into a nameless, archetypal ancestor, Pacific Island-style, my bones protruding from my sleeves like the bush-sticks around me. But no, surely someone will see me, they'll lasso my corpse to lift me to the clifftop, or abseil down to haul me in, hugged (*Ugh the stink! Hurry!*) to my rescuer. I think I'd rather be buried with another chunk of Dunwich as we tumble to the sea, joining the Templars in their watery, bubbling worship. *Vivat Regina! Vivat Vagina!* Perhaps that was the music I heard earlier, mocking and applauding me.

My only hope, and I can see it right there beneath me like the tiny water-butt far below that some carny madman might try to dive into from a springboard, *drum roll please, maestro*, my only hope is the spill of sandy earth I've caused myself by my frantic burrowings and scratchings and my tumbling fall. The orange sand-spill with the black pump on it. If I somehow landed there, I might have a softish touchdown. Tears spring into my eyes, and my terrified heart beats harder at this frightful burst of hope, because how can I possibly engineer my fall? How aim?

Shouldn't I rather wait, in hope that somebody might see me, although if I'm honest who or why anyone would be likely to

come clambering over these sharp unfriendly rocks I can't imagine, why fish here amid the angry spray and barnacled discomfort? Yet perhaps someone might come out looking for Dunwich relics; or come by sea, equipped with binoculars; or, like me, drawn in horrible fascination to the cliff's edge, mightn't someone (Pockmark! Come to haunt his evil deed, come to save me!) follow the lost little path to the clearing with its *Danger* sign long gone and hanging somewhere about my ears, perhaps, and mightn't he peep over? *My God there's someone down there.* By that time I'd have passed out for sure, the blood was already pounding in my head like a separate, internal roar of surf, closer now as the watery surf soon would be, my overcoat slowly sliding back down my body to cover my face, my leaden exhausted arms too heavy to prevent it. Dear overcoat, it had become my shroud, and as its sweet familiar smell came down to cover my face I tried to reconcile myself to a death as grotesque as my life had been, for longer than I could remember. To every madness its end.

But I was still alive. Couldn't I do something, detach myself, flail? I seem to have lost all ability to affect my fate, and in the end it was the bush that made the decision, and suddenly sighingly released me as a sea-bird does, reluctantly conceding that its prey is too heavy for its claws. Not worth the struggle. I could feel branches starting to move, scraping, breaking, I began to fall and I squawked loudly, I think, in fear, into my coat, imagining my head cracking like eggshell at any instant. And then only darkness.