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University of Southampton

Faculty of Humanities

Creative Writing

Any Belgian

Reading the City: Creating a Narrative From Urban Experiences

by

Donald Hiscock

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

Creative Writing

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ANY BELGIAN

READING THE CITY: CREATING A NARRATIVE FROM URBAN
EXPERIENCES

by Donald Hiscock

The critical reflection at the start of this thesis outlines the ideas that have informed the production of my novel *Any Belgian*. The novel explores how cities offer creative possibilities for a writer, particularly in suggesting locations and for influencing the development of character and plot. The critical reflection also surveys the work of writers and critics who have commented on the nature of cities as palimpsests, and as places that serve as an emotional refuge. It also reflects on the creative processes involved in constructing my novel, detailing the decisions made about its form. The use of images in the novel is also discussed and a justification is made for their use as a device to deliberately involve the reader in the construction of meaning. References to cinema and other visual arts are prominent in the novel, and there is a reflection on how they are used as an effective way to express the thoughts of the narrator in his attempts to make sense of a set of multi-layered past experiences. It was also important to undertake fieldwork for research in the writing of the novel. This process is described and related to the writings of critics such as Walter Benjamin and other writers who have recorded their walks in urban locations. The narrative for *Any Belgian* works on several levels and the complexity of its layers are addressed in the conclusion to the thesis. What has been produced is a novel that attempts to raise questions about the possibility of accurately recording urban experiences, especially when a narrator is confronted with the challenge of describing the permanently shifting relationship between recollections and the city locations which give rise to those recollections.

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Academic Thesis: Declaration Of Authorship

I, Donald Hiscock, declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

ANY BELGIAN - READING THE CITY: CREATING A NARRATIVE FROM
URBAN EXPERIENCES

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given.
With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. Either none of this work has been published before submission, or parts of this work have been published as: [please list references below]:

Signed:

Date:

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I would like to thank my supervisor, Rebecca Smith for our many meetings which have resulted in the final version of my thesis. She made many valuable suggestions and wrote excellent comments on work that I submitted to her during the course of the research. She was always prompt in her replies to my emails and offered the best possible combination of praise and criticism. Her encouragement and persistent questioning have undoubtedly resulted in a novel which feels polished and ready for publication.

I would also like to thank my advisor, Professor Peter Middleton, for his comments at an early stage of the critical reflection. His advice helped me to give a clear focus to the work and ensured that I was working to a high academic standard.

I am particularly grateful for the support of my wife, Alison, who has been a critical reader of my work and who has offered constant encouragement. My son, Hugh, has also provided a critical input and has suggested important further reading. It has been a pleasure to undertake fieldwork with him and my other son, Alasdair. Both of them have helped me to critically interpret the cities we found ourselves wandering through.

Synopsis of *Any Belgian*

An unnamed narrator is spending a month alone on a Scottish island at the holiday home of his friend Bill, a magazine editor. He is recovering from the traumatic events of the preceding summer by writing a journal of his experiences since his wife mysteriously left him. He gives a selective account of their past and the possible reasons for her departure.

At the start of the journal the narrator, a travel writer and film biographer, describes getting a train to London and seeing himself and his wife, Ophelia, as they were twenty-three years ago. He is on his way to meet Bill to be commissioned for a travel article on the European film locations of Eric Leers, a director the narrator is preparing a monograph on for the British Film Institute.

The narrator is intrigued by the apparitions of himself and Ophelia but becomes obsessed by them after he experiences further sightings in Paris while researching the Eric Leers article. Later sightings include Ophelia's cousin, Klaus, about whom the narrator reveals a bitter resentment. He is now taken back to 1988 and gives an account of the time he travelled around Europe as a student with Ophelia and the impact Klaus had on their trip.

The narrator reveals how Klaus drew attention to the wide gulf in social backgrounds between himself and Ophelia. Both she and her cousin are descended from European aristocracy and the narrator feels that Klaus deliberately flaunted his superior pedigree and took every opportunity on their trip to undermine him. He is also both fascinated and repelled by Klaus's physical frailty.

The sightings of the three of them continue in Amsterdam. It is here that the narrator feels that glimpses of the past are giving him a clue to his wife's recent disappearance. He remembers how his increasing resentment towards Klaus caused him to assault him. Klaus died shortly afterwards in an unconnected accident while convalescing from the assault. The narrator begins to assume that Ophelia had probably never got over the death of her cousin and that she might possibly hold her husband responsible.

Before he leaves Amsterdam the narrator has a meeting arranged for him with Eric Leers who is filming in the south of the country. When the narrator meets him it transpires that Leers is also troubled by the departure of his wife, a famous actor. The film director wants him to place a specially written article about his own wife in a newspaper in an attempt to win her back. The narrator agrees.

On his way to Berlin the narrator reflects on how he might be able to change what happened in the past and somehow win back Ophelia. He is in the German capital to research a Leers film set before the fall of the Wall. Further sightings of himself, Ophelia and Klaus drive him on to intervene in the past and attempt to avert the moment when he delivered the blow to Klaus that may have resulted in his death.

Eric Leers arrives in Berlin to guide the narrator on his walking tour of the locations of one of his films. However, the apparitions become so vivid that the narrator has to seize his moment to intervene in his past. He is convinced that he is following Ophelia and Klaus and gives chase to a young present-day couple. He reaches them in a U-Bahn carriage but is detained by the police after causing a disturbance.

The narrator ends his journal with the hope that he will be re-united with his wife. He also gives thanks to his friend Bill and his wife for allowing him to unload his thoughts on paper. The reader will be left with the impression that Ophelia will never return but that the narrator has regained his sanity and will be able to carry on.

Critical Reflection

Reading the City: Creating a Narrative From Urban Experiences

“To visit the city is simultaneously to read it.” Geoff Dyer.

Background

The work for this PhD thesis began as an exploration of how far the novel form had outlived its usefulness. This was an idea that had arisen out of my MA in Creative Writing where I began to experiment with mixing reality with fiction. I wanted to take this a stage further by suggesting that a conventional novel was an inadequate medium for creative writing experimentation. I looked at using other forms of presentation such as photography, art installations and web sites, aware that popular forms of storytelling relied heavily on their visual impact. However, I came to realise that what I was trying to do was far too ambitious for a PhD project. My novel about memories evoked by cities was being obscured by an excitement with form instead of a focus on crafting a narrative. I have completed ten drafts of a novel and taken part in many invaluable discussions with my supervisor, Rebecca Smith. The novel, *Any Belgian*, has become an imaginative response to the experience of walking city streets and to the work of other writers who have concerned themselves with city life.

1. An account of the research process

"Work on a good piece of writing proceeds on three levels: a musical one, where it is composed, an architectural one, where it is constructed, and finally a textile one, where it is woven."

Walter Benjamin¹

I like walking. I like walking through cities. I like walking through cities unsure of where I am going to find myself when I turn a corner. Sometimes, in cities where I have never been before, I might look at a map and plot a course from where I happen to be staying to a particular point of interest and then walk towards it without using the map, allowing myself to drift in what I hope is the right direction. Only in Venice have I ever admitted to being lost. In other cities I have managed, often with luck, to arrive roughly in the vicinity of what I had set out to find. There is some pleasure to be had, of course, in arriving at a cathedral or museum or monumental arch but this doesn't usually match the pleasure of the preceding hours spent wandering along streets largely unfrequented by fellow tourists. I like looking at things, entering courtyards, photographing street scenes that I find unusual. I am away from home, out of my routine, eager to observe details and being responsive to differences in typography or street furniture or how goods are displayed in shop windows. I take a camera with me and record things that I see. Sometimes there are surprises, like this person in Berlin in April 2010.

I don't know why this woman was taking a sheep for a walk but she saw me get my camera ready and started to smile. Notice how she as the subject and I as the photographer turned our chance meeting into a



¹ Benjamin, Walter, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, (London: Penguin, 2009) p. 65

typically posed snapshot. I wonder whether I would have a better photograph if I had taken it unnoticed. Would it have been more 'real'? Was the woman used to being photographed while out walking with her sheep? Was this just another tourist's photograph that she was happily posing for? I like to think that the answer to these questions is no, as the part of Berlin we were in is known for its independence and dislike of tourists poking around with their cameras. There was no conversation in the time it took to set up this photograph so I don't know anything about my subjects or why the two men didn't want to look at the camera. I think we might have waved to each other as I walked away. I don't remember. But this is an example of what I mean about the pleasures of wandering through cities. The chance encounters. There is always the potential for a story.

The story I have created for my PhD thesis is set mainly in three European cities: Paris, Amsterdam and Berlin. When I came across the woman and the sheep I was engaged in some fieldwork for my novel, walking through the Kreuzberg area finding and photographing streets where the narrator of the novel travels. I had visited this area before but I wanted to see it again through the eyes of my narrator so that I could write about it convincingly. I had created a story that was taking place on these Berlin streets and I wanted to get the topographical details correct. However, into my story set in these streets another story arrived. A woman walks a sheep through Kreuzberg....



Another pleasure of walking through a city is that one can wander into the site of an extraordinary event. You can arrive at a place that inhabits perhaps many years of history. It might not be visible anymore, might remain hidden under the fabric of the city or indeed be mythical. In an earlier research trip to Paris I came across a story that had already happened, one that is internationally recognized and has had many re-tellings. I walked on to the Pont de l'Alma, and even though the bridge was

named to commemorate a Franco-British defeat of the Russian army during the Crimean War, one end of it has now become the shrine to Princess Diana who died in the tunnel below. A dramatic and very famous story had occurred here. The graffiti was adding to the continuing narrative of her death. A postscript to this is that since the death of Michael Jackson a set of graffiti to his memory has been placed over those to Diana.

In Amsterdam I exchanged the pleasure of urban wandering for the pleasure of city cycling. This was in the name of research, to work out the distance between locations and what can be seen as you ride the routes. In all three cities I was aware of how my story was simply just one of many narratives to be placed over and alongside thousands of other stories. I visited these cities with a narrative already established but by moving through them and having chance encounters I could have come away with many more. I was reminded that cities are layered with many versions of their pasts.

So, to follow Benjamin, what have been the musical, architectural and woven elements that have formed the development of a piece of creative writing and the critical reflection for a PhD thesis?

My novel is narrated by a character who is interested in cities. Firstly, he is a travel writer who specialises in urban locations; secondly, he is working on a book about a film director who specifically uses urban locations in his films; thirdly, his estranged wife is an expert on urban policy. The narrator is alone in a house on a Scottish island (a deliberate removal from the urban world) recovering from the events of a few months earlier when he tried to intervene in episodes from his past life as they were played out in front of him on European city streets. His confused and fragmented mind is conveyed to the reader through his daily journal entries that sometimes fall short of offering clear explanations. To add another mnemonic layer the film director, Eric Leers, responsible for the locations being visited, also offers his reflections on the past in conversations he has with the narrator. His desire to change a past action reflects a similar desire in the narrator.

Walter Benjamin writes that being in a crowded city causes one's experience of city life to be transformed by the confusion of what the mind brings to that experience and how the experience is fragmented the more we try to make sense of it.² It is this confusion and fragmentation of thought that affects the narrator of my novel. He writes:

"Now I can't remember the exact order of everything, even though I can remember things with great clarity. So what does it matter if they come in the wrong order?"

My narrator is undertaking a kind of pilgrimage by visiting Paris, Amsterdam and Berlin and enters a liminal state. Rebecca Solnit calls this "a state of being between one's past and future identities and thus outside the established order, in a state of possibility."³ He is looking for a sense of understanding and enlightenment in places that are full of the sense of their own pasts.

When we walk within a city we are constantly reminded of the place's former self in its architecture, for example the Louvre palace in Paris, the Reichstag in Berlin or the former merchant's houses on Amsterdam's canals. These are all buildings that are now used differently but evoke reminders of their former occupants. We are also prompted by often mundane visual cues thrown into our own memories as we navigate through the city. We read the signs, especially if we are actively searching for them to offer us a message about ourselves or others. Jonathan Raban sees cityscapes imbued with ambiguities and contradictions and how those who write about them are compelled to re-interpret the experiences of others:

"Every inhabited landscape is a palimpsest, its original parchment nearly blackened with the cross-hatching of successive generations of authors,

² Gilloch, Graeme, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p.p. 142 -143

³ Solnit, Rebecca, *Wanderlust* (London: Verso, 2001), p.51

claiming the place as their own, and imposing their designs on it, as if their temporary interpretations would stand forever.”⁴

In the case of my reflective narrator, it is not just the streets he has visited in the past that inspire vivid memories, but the same streets used as locations for films that he then wanders as a journalist. He is both reinterpreting the filmed streets and the streets of his own memories. He is, in the way Raban suggests, claiming these urban locations as his own territory because they are clearly alive in memories that are forcing him to make sense of his present situation. He is using the city experience to try to resolve the confusions of his past. The notion of a city being a palimpsest is highly relevant here, in that my narrator is continually scratching away at layers of the past. He is also doing what Raban suggests by adding his own interpretation of a place that has been re-interpreted many times previously.

This idea of cities containing layers is central to my novel, not only for the narrator but for his wife and the film director whose cinematic locations are being traced. His reason for wandering the city's streets is ostensibly for his job as a journalist, but he is also recreating memories of his wife. If he met a sheep on a lead he would imbue the encounter with significance and continue to peel away the layers of his memory as he sought to resolve his confusion.

Hana Wirth-Nesher develops this idea of an urban palimpsest further, suggesting that we have to create what we can't see in a city: "I am identifying the cityscape by what it conceals, by the gaps that face every city dweller. The metropolis is rendered legible, then, by multiple acts of the imagination; it is constantly invented and reinvented.”⁵ It is in these gaps that my narrator has his visions. His narrative style is also reflected in his attempts to connect these memory gaps, almost as if mapping a path through city streets is similar to finding his bearings in the prose he constructs. His choice is determined by mental markers that send him in directions over which he seemingly has no choice. For him, the gaps and layers that a city presents are the raw material of

⁴ Raban, Jonathan, *Summer With Empson*, (London Review of Books, vol 31, no 21, 5 November 2009) p.p. 37-41

⁵ Wirth-Nesher, Hana, *City Codes* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), p.9

his writing. I am trying to represent through the daily writing struggle my narrator faces what Benjamin identifies as the first level of good writing; the act of composition. The gaps and changes of direction in the journal entries are there because my narrator is trying to resolve his confusion about the past through the act of writing. For example, on day three the narrator sums up his struggle to describe his wife after starting a description of her again:

“I get paid by editors to evoke a sense of place. I can convince people that a city or an island has a sense of character. But at the moment I can’t describe someone I love.”

So what about the architectural level of my work?

The research process behind the writing of this novel included an initial concern about form and how a conventional written presentation might not be entirely adequate for my subject matter. David Shields, however, has a useful definition of fiction where he states that etymologically the word *fiction* means to shape or form. “Any verbal account is a fashioning and shaping of events.”⁶ He goes on to say that the word *novel* when it was first used in the sense of fiction “meant the form of writing that was formless, that had no rules, that made up its own rules as it went along.”⁷ It was clear to me that my narrator, being a professional journalist, was used to selecting and shaping material but that in his post-traumatic state he would have to accept that his writing might have to abandon the rules by which he was normally constrained.

I had turned to modernist writers who have set their work in cities, such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, but felt that my narrator would not be experimenting with prose in such a manner. These writers were useful at first for how they created interior monologues but they proved less useful when it came to the voice I wanted my narrator to convey to the reader. However, the way Woolf describes how Peter Walsh and Clarissa Dalloway go “in and out of each

⁶ Shields, David, *Reality Hunger* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2010), p.10

⁷ Ibid, p.13

other's minds without any effort"⁸ is an idea used in my novel when the narrator describes the way he and his wife could communicate sometimes without talking. Rather than exploring the senses and rhythms of city life and the characters within it, he is concerned with addressing the reader directly with real events constructed in a diary format. A deviation from convention, though, is in the way he uses images in his text. He is used to images being embedded in his journalism by sub-editors but from his first diary entry the narrator struggles to find the right words to describe his wife and so inserts a picture of her of his own choosing. This gives him a sense of freedom over what he is writing and an awareness that he is deliberately deviating from and subverting the 'rules' of journalism. Subsequently, it became important for the narrator to rely on images at the times when he felt it appropriate that a visual representation was more helpful than a verbal one. It also gave him the sense that he was making up the rules as he went along.

There are several novelists whose work I have read where characters are in some way affected by their urban environments, for example, Paul Auster, Albert Camus and Ferenc Karinthy. I have focused in particular on writers who are deliberately engaging with cities and are exploring an enhanced visual sense of place. They are consciously describing cities through a lens and allowing characters to wander through them. An example of one of my influences is Jean-Philippe Toussaint's novel *Television*, set in Berlin. Its short narrative is less concerned with plot than with the main character wandering the city as a diversion from writing and how he conveys his experiences in clearly visual terms. On his first visit to a local park where a crowd of people is sunbathing naked by a lake he takes in the scene in the form of a fluid, wide-angled establishing shot:

"Dogs went racing over the lawns, their snouts skimming the ground as they followed some trail or other, sniffing at any interesting recent droppings they might come across, or crushed tin cans, or the exposed sexual organs of some aged person lying supine, who immediately sat up with a cry of disgust....Several others watched this scene in silence, standing or simply half-

⁸ Woolf, Virginia, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Penguin, 1964), p.69

sitting on their rumps, smiling at their immediate neighbours, offering their various comments.”⁹

However, novelists who have described the city's effect on a character in an observational way have rarely used pictures to supplement their prose. To further explore the use of images in my engagement with the city novel I have re-visited the work of W.G. Sebald. His use of photographs embedded in the text is an obvious connection with my work, but it is also his method of interpreting the world his narrators inhabit that has caused me to think about the nature of the descriptive detail in my writing. Sebald can take digressions and describe real places with an architectural eye, creating an extra dimension to the emotions of the narrator. The places the narrative inhabits seem to comment on and at the same time distance us from whoever is telling the story. The reader is within and without the story, but this is a strength that compels us to read on. Reading his work we are challenged and expected to participate in creating the imaginary world of the narrative. Deanne Blackler suggests that Sebald invites a 'disobedient reader'¹⁰ who collaborates with Sebald rather than passively accepts the authority of the text.

The notion of reader disobedience is one that I have become interested in, particularly as my narrator abandons a factual style of conventional journalism in trying to convey his thoughts. He has become a disobedient writer seeking the collaboration of the reader by using photographs and other images in the text. Rather than being illustrative plates in the way that a travel book might use them, I wanted to offer images that could allow the reader to construct their own interpretations of what they were reading. In the same way that Sebald photocopied his pictures several times¹¹ so that they would acquire an historic graininess, my photographs have also been contrived to fake the effect of the past and so impart a sense of authenticity. My images could be seen as marker posts or pictorial parentheses, creating resting points for a reader on their way to their version of the novel's meaning. I wanted my work to stress the reading

⁹ Toussaint, Jean-Philippe, *Television* (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2004), p. 34

¹⁰ Blackler, Deanne, *Reading W.G. Sebald: Adventure and Disobedience* (London: Camden House, 2007)

¹¹ Fisher, Mark, *Sight and Sound*, April 2011, p. 36

of it more than its writing. I am aiming to encourage the reader to share in the confusion that the narrator feels about the events that he is trying to use words and images to convey.

The concept of reader disobedience poses challenges for a writer as it encourages one's audience to depart from the carefully structured narrative pathways established at the start of the novel. In seeking to condone and encourage a reader to break free of the usual constraints of textual interaction poses problems for both creator and consumer. My attempt to establish a narrator who confesses to his readers that he is struggling with obeying the conventions of narrative structure, and indeed openly challenges a conventional reading by replacing words with images, is to experiment with allowing a reader a freedom to interpret the narrative on their terms. However, there is obviously a problem inherent in encouraging such reader freedom. One, in particular, is that the images are open to such varied interpretation that any sense of reader liberation might be replaced by the reader's confusion or distraction. Ultimately, I require any reader to be able to follow the text to its conclusion and imbue the novel with the desired 'readability' that publishers require. On the other hand, I am allowing readers to be exempt from following the familiar narrative devices and opening up a more free-flowing, almost dream-like experience in much the same way as reading a Sebald text invites the reader into a state of reverie while also managing to follow the events described. In essence, what my attempt at reader disobedience allows for is a parallel reading experience whereby a reader is encouraged to experience personal interpretation initiated by the interruption of pictorial elements but also to re-enter the main narrative when they wish. The diary format of each chapter and the frequent repetitions will allow for a reader to miss parts of the story and to re-join it later.

The opening diary entry establishes the narrator's difficulties in recalling experiences and, therefore, starting his narrative. His account is an attempt to reflect the sometimes hesitant way in which we depart in a journey through an unknown city: "This is the beginning of the story. Or the beginning of the beginning. Or the beginning of the end. I have to start somewhere."

The writer struggles to get his bearings, forcing the reader to do the same, in the way that a traveller has to find his way with a map or by using architectural reference points. In trying to describe his wife the narrator is frustrated by his inability to manage words in the way he does prolifically for his employment. I had to establish and make convincing that the fragmentary nature of the text at the start of the novel was deliberate. I was attempting to recreate a writer's failure to write rather than merely covering up my own shortcomings as a writer. The reasons for the use of images in the text is made clear for the reader at the start of the novel. This is not the case in Sebald's work, however, where we are left uncertain at times about how the pictures connect to the narrative.

The visual element is further developed in my work on a cinematic level. The narrator has written about an imaginary film director, Eric Leers, and is mapping out locations for some of the director's most famous films when he is troubled by visions of his former self. I have deliberately established Leers as a director who has drawn inspiration from cities to enable me to add another dimension to my interest in how characters in narratives connect with their urban settings. Also, I wanted the satisfaction of constructing a character that people could assume was real. I wanted to blur the division between reality and fiction. My undergraduate students on the Experiments in Writing course were the subject of an April Fool joke when asked to research the work of Leers for a seminar. However, some of them were let in on the joke and did a very good job of bringing some convincing biographical detail about Leers to the seminar to the confusion of others. Exposing my students to the work of Eric Leers and letting him Tweet to the world are attempts to deliberately confuse my potential readers. One reason for this is to imbue the novel with a sense of playfulness, but it also contributes to the subsequent instabilities of the text. The ludic dimension that Leers adds also directly contributes to the *Any Belgian* project's concern with its ongoing development after publication. The extra-narrative presence of Leers adds yet another layer to the palimpsest.

The real French film director Benoît Jacquot is not very well known to British cinema audiences but he is the type of cinéaste I chose to model Eric Leers on. He has also commented on the connections between written narratives and film narratives: "I came to cinema through reading. Every reader, especially children,

creates their own mental celluloid, imagining the film that accompanies the text.”¹²

The tendency for a reader to create mental film images is both what I am attempting to exploit in the reading of my work and also deliberately alluding to in an attempt to understand the reasons for the vivid sightings the narrator experiences as he reads the cities he travels in. By walking through the city, past places that have significance for his former self, he is engaged in an act of reading. This is a notion that underlies the work of Walter Benjamin and one which I have drawn on in reflections on my creative work so far. These readings of the city are influenced by my narrator’s location and the memories they subconsciously produce. The experience is heightened because the narrator has slowly begun to recover from the loss of his wife. He is in a state of convalescence, out of his home environment and therefore seeing things with fresh eyes. Matthew Beaumont has described such moments in literature through the example of Poe’s story *The Man of the Crowd* (1840), narrated by a man sitting in a London coffee house convalescing from an illness and who finds himself in a happy mood and inquisitive of all he sees inside and outside the building. Beaumont comments: “Because he is temporarily exempt from the routine demands of everyday life in an industrial capitalist city, the individual’s ‘electrified’ senses are preternaturally attuned to experience.”¹³

In his diary entries my narrator refers to himself, his wife and her cousin as ghosts when he sees them on the city streets. They are conjured before his eyes because he is hoping they will appear again after the first sighting in Paris. This moment when he tells us about his Parisian encounters with them is preceded by a description of the environment he is walking through and how he is attuned to the sounds of the city. He is behaving in the manner of Poe’s character by allowing himself to be highly aware of both his visual and auditory readings of the city. Once he works out that they only appear at twilight, and in places previously visited by his wife and himself, he contrives to be at appropriate locations in the cities in order to be receptive to their presence. He

¹² Jacquot, Benoît, *Nouvel Observateur*, 2 April 2009

¹³ Beaumont, Matthew, *Convalescing* in Beaumont, Matthew and Dart, Gregory (eds), *Restless Cities* (London: Verso, 2010) p. 71

needs to be aware of his exact location within the city in order to experience what the urban palimpsest reveals. To succeed at this he has to overcome how a city's past identity is, according to Stephen Barber, "intimately compromised" by the overwhelming evidence of the present day.¹⁴ He has to be able to find another layer of meaning for his present sensory experiences in the city by searching beneath the modern surface and aligning with earlier ones. However, this leads to his arrest at the end of the novel as he attempts to correct an event in the past by intervening in the lives of a present day Berlin couple. It is important, therefore, to remember when reading the novel that the narrator is going through a process of convalescence or, more accurately, emotional recovery, which accounts for his detached tone.

The narrator's use of his own photographs and other found images on the internet are attempts to add layers of meaning to his written narrative. In one sense they act as visual evidence to substantiate what he is recording in his diary entries. In another way they are reinforcing the notion that his strange city experiences have been highly visual, almost cinematic. Walter Benjamin, says Gilloch, suggested that writers should take photographs to depict the urban complex but that film was the most important medium to help us visualise the city.¹⁵ This is what the Eric Leers character is adding to the novel; a visualisation of the urban experience through his fictional characters, re-visualised and mediated through the narrator's memories. The Leers film locations are places upon which the narrator layers his own cinematic versions of his past. Our perception of a place is likely be influenced by seeing it first on film or reading about it in a book. Geoff Dyer suggests that a city like Venice which has been the setting of many literary and film works is difficult to read objectively.

¹⁴ Barber, Stephen, *Fragments of the European City* (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), p. 95

¹⁵ Gilloch, Graeme, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 18

“It is, as academics like to say, a textual as well as an actual city, one comprising all the prior novels and poems that have been set there. To visit the city is simultaneously to read it.”¹⁶

The narrator of my novel has to negotiate the effects of being in ‘textual cities’ like Berlin and also read meanings into places that he has never seen before by making references to similar, previously perceived locations. He has to use the limitations of language to make sense of an intensely visual experience. He is inevitably adding new layers to the city palimpsest, producing a creative paradox for himself.

This visual and cinematic motif is an acceptance that any attempt at using language to make sense of the narrator’s experiences is inadequate. At an early point in the research process I considered taking this limitation of language to adequately record experience a stage further. My initial research question had been “Has the novel outgrown its covers?” I wanted to explore this idea using a variety of visual media alongside the text, even planning to present my work as an art installation. Towards the end of my architectural stage of development I had to abandon this idea as the form of my creative piece was using too many presentational elements and therefore at risk of losing its coherence. Also, the project had become too large and contained too many ideas for the thesis to deal with.

So how are these ideas sewn together?

The visual motif is a central part of the novel, emphasised by my narrator’s frequent references to the pictures on the walls of the house where he is staying in Scotland or the view through the window, itself an obvious frame through which he views the outside world.

It is also significant that the owner of the house, Bill, is sight impaired but has an interest in looking at art and exploring London on foot. It is Bill who has inspired the narrator to develop a sensory reading of cities. From looking at the

¹⁶ Dyer, Geoff, *The Guardian Review*, 11/06/11, p.15

reproductions of paintings someone else has selected to hang on the wall of their holiday home the narrator reads into them significances that parallel the situations he is describing in his daily accounts. In his self-imposed exile in Scotland the narrator is a character undergoing a process of recovery, attuned to visual experiences. He is borrowing the images in the house to help comment on and explain the way he feels. At about half way through the novel he writes:

“That’s why I love this house. There are pictures everywhere. And books. Manfred is about to leap to his death, looking like a red bat, poised at an impossible angle. How can he get back from there?”

To adequately describe his urban experiences he has to rely on pictorial stimuli to support his re-imagining of his recent and earlier past. He is frequently reminded of the cinematography of Eric Leers where characters are often observed looking out of train or bus windows or simply caught in the act of looking as they are filmed moving through and between cities. Dutch film director Eric Leers is established in the narrative as a minor part of French New Wave cinema. His work is admired by both the narrator and his wife and this admiration dates back to when they first met. Leers’ technique of inviting viewers to observe people who are observing the city forms an important influence on how the narrator reads cities, and also adds a layer of nostalgic significance in his struggle to find reasons for the departure of his wife.

Films, therefore, have been part of the research process for the writing of the novel. A seminal work of early nouvelle vague, Francois Truffaut’s *Les quatre cents coups* (1959), has been of particular use in providing a background to the early style of Eric Leers. The films of Eric Rohmer probably come closest to the subject matter and later cinematic style of Leers, sharing simple plots about male - female relationships. However, Krzysztof Kieslowski’s *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991) is an obvious source owing to the plot involving a woman who sees herself on a city tram and then attempts to follow her doppelgänger.

The significance of the visual is very important to how the novel is concerned with layers of experience. This is reinforced by having characters within the narrative that are all, in some way, connected to aspects of visual

representation. The layers within the text are similar to the layers of a city suggested by Benjamin and others. There is sudden, spontaneous recollection as the city is seen through a camera's eye, taking the narrator beneath the surface of the present, revealing a glimpse of the past. There is a sense of travelling through time in order to find solutions to present problems. Being in the city is where the narrator can experience being in two places at the same time. Albert Camus describes this feeling while walking through Amsterdam in *The Fall*:

"I like this crowd of people swarming on the pavements, wedged into a little space of houses and canals, hemmed in by fogs, cold lands, and the sea steaming like wet washing. I like it for it is double. It is here and elsewhere."¹⁷

Benjamin's notion of the city as labyrinth, within the labyrinth of memory which is also within a textual labyrinth, is an extremely important idea that underlies my work and will form the main focus of the next sections of this critical reflection. Like Baudelaire, Benjamin is interested in the act of looking, of reading the city. However, according to Gilloch, "Gaze hastens the demise of its object, accelerates its natural history. It is a way of seeing which involves the ruination of a thing."¹⁸ It is this paradox that my narrator confronts in his city experiences. He is both aware of it when he quotes Leers on a few occasions - "to create is to destroy" (who has obviously absorbed this idea from somewhere else) - and in denial of it. By constructing a narrative to re-create his past he is, at the same time, contributing to the loss of that past.

¹⁷ Camus, Albert, *The Fall* (London: Penguin, 1963), p.11

¹⁸ Gilloch, *ibid*, p.p. 170 -171

2. The starting point

At the beginning of this essay I made a claim for the enjoyment I have of walking through cities; the randomness of such an experience produces surprises and also starts to develop a narrative thread. On a good day I can start to connect these strands together and form links between each sighting, each surprise. It is entirely true to claim that the ideas for my novel, *Any Belgian*, developed from such wanderings. Starting in Southampton where the initial idea formed, successive walks through my home city and then in London and other cities have each added to how the first draft was formed. It was always accepted in my mind that the novel would take place in different cities. It was the experience of seeing my doppelgänger coming out of Southampton Central station that linked the moment firmly to rail travel. It was as if the essence of what I was trying to convey could only be set outside my familiar surroundings, preferably with some added continental European exoticism. This was particularly true when I began to think about matters of plot and story development. To have the idea unfolding in my mind of a man whose marriage has ended suddenly and for whom this sudden separation from his wife is a mystery could have been told in Southampton. However, the likelihood of the narrative becoming one of those maudlin, suburban, English middle class anxiety pieces about broken relationships was one I wanted to avoid.

It's time to admit that as much effort went into trying to remove my work from the conventional forms of the novel than it did in writing out the story. My experience outside the railway station returned to mind even when I was formulating other ideas for stories. In attempts to repeat, or realistically, experience similar sightings that evoked a sense of the past I could not find the words to convey the feeling of how a sensory trigger encountered in a city could cause me to hurriedly grab at a memory before it disappeared. I wandered, therefore, at the liminal edges of consciousness. I was attempting to attain the sort of early evening experience that Virginia Woolf describes when we leave the solitude of our own houses and join in with the urban crowd, acting differently and possessing an "oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye."¹⁹ I

¹⁹ Woolf, Virginia, *Street Haunting*, Pocket Penguins vol 44, (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 1

have taken many photographs to capture this experience, sometimes when I was attuned to the light on buildings, like this vacant lot in Glasgow, or when I was waiting to be surprised by what appeared in front of me in the street as in the case of this photographer's monkey in St Petersburg.



Although the idea of having locations in my novel outside Britain was almost immediately suggested by Southampton Central railway station being the stimulus, it was a few months before those locations were decided upon. Finding the words to put down on paper was difficult but the images in my mind were very clear. The novel took shape in my mind like a film, which to paraphrase Woolf's phrase is

indeed a technological means of conveying the perceptions of an "enormous eye". It seemed easier to construct a narrative about a man who has a sighting of himself from twenty-five years ago in the form of cinematic flashbacks than in prose. It was easier to reflect on the past, to reconstruct memories using images. My wandering of the city at twilight added to the intensity of these filmic sketches.

To give an example, even though by their very nature such images thrown up by urban ramblings are difficult to retain, a thought occurred to me while crossing the open footbridge alongside Southampton station. Seeing the city's shopping mall in front of me and the station platforms below gave me the sense of a camera shot that sweeps slowly over the location. From musing on this shot and what the camera might then cut to I imagined being on a similar bridge but in a place I couldn't remember - and still can't - but I knew that it was somewhere else in Europe and that it was in the past. It was a memory from my



own InterRail years. I decided that my narrative had to involve two young people, rail travel and the problem of making sense of the past. It was my struggle to recall the memory evoked by being on the footbridge in Southampton that made me decide that the narrative should involve a series of set pieces using locations previously experienced by the two main characters.

I have since realised that railway bridges often form important backdrops in films with urban settings. In fact I always knew that, but Stephen Barber in writing about a famous railway bridge in Prenzlauerberg, Berlin reminds me that such a structure - and indeed - a whole city infrastructure “forms an infinite archive of memories, gestures and voices”²⁰ The sight of an unremarkable structure that would otherwise go unnoticed in our movement around a city can reveal a random memory. However, the conditions have to be right and, probably, there is a subconscious longing for such experiences to occur. Did this humble footbridge in Southampton become my Proustian madeleine moment or have I just foisted upon myself a desire for a glimpse of the past while standing upon it?

I was also convinced at this time that the novel in its current form had outgrown its covers and that I what I was searching for was a narrative that could exploit other forms of representation. It seemed that images should replace words and

²⁰ Barber, Stephen, *The Walls of Berlin*, (Washington: Solar Books, 2010), p.29

that I should perhaps make a film. This would have been, therefore, creative writing without the writing. But if I was in search of “memories, gestures and voices” then using words to convey them seemed very difficult. But before I could go any further with questions of narrative form I had to get the basics right; these being character and plot. This was not in the sense of how the story was being told and what eventually would happen but the difficulty in dealing with what Genette has described as the “heterodiegetic” element that deals with a story line different from the first narrative.²¹ My main narrative is straightforward: a man spends thirty-one days reflecting on what has happened to him over the preceding months. The creative challenge, though, derives from this structure in that the narrator engages in a series of analeptic narratives involving new characters who need to have their histories established. In not wanting to make these histories always coherent in an attempt to replicate the recovery process that the narrator was going through, I had to make decisions about how much information to include on each character and when to include to it. To put it another way, I was consciously leaving out information.

In constructing the drafts of the novel the main characters who are referred to in the narrator’s daily journal entries exist outside the final work. Some characters have a substantial written history that exists in note form in assorted formats but which do not form part of the finished novel. In the creation of *Any Belgian* I had to continually face the question of how rounded each of these characters should become and, therefore, how conventional the novel would look. The decision I took was to allow each character to develop on the page according to the intensity of the narrator’s thoughts about them. I was consciously allowing the narrator to be the authorial guide to convey his sense of confusion and the problems he has with recollecting events from his past. There have been many questions raised at supervision meetings during the early stages of the novel’s construction about how much information on characters to include. Each time, the outcome of these discussions has been to confirm the intention to accept gaps in character development. Such lacunae are ways of responding to the gaps found in urban settings in that they mark changes in the narrative and also represent the missing parts of the narrator’s memory. There are many good

²¹ Genette, Gérard, *Narrative Discourse*, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 50

novels where the author writes economically and conveys a sense of character without really spending much time on their description. I mentioned some of these novelists earlier but Cees Noteboom is relevant at this point. His short novel *The Following Story* (1996) has similarities to my own work in that its narrator finds himself in a strange city and then attempts to recollect his past. This was the primary reason for me reading this novel but its compact narrative and its gaps are its strength. It was this kind of short novel that allows the reader to imagine rather than be told about characters and events that I wanted to produce. Having made the decision that a text and not a film - or even an art installation - was the way I wanted to proceed then brevity of the printed word seemed important if the images I wanted to convey were to be shared with the recipient. In other words, I wanted the gaps in the narrative to be filled in by the reader. This is what Barthes expresses as 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but its destination'.²² I don't wish to impose too much information on the more important partner in the creation of my project, the reader.

While being preoccupied with my work taking a form other than within printed covers I became focused on the work of artists such as Sophie Calle who uses photography to tell her stories. Her work is difficult to categorise, like that of W.G. Sebald who also embeds photographs in his text. Is Calle a writer, a conceptual artist or a photographer? Similarly, is Sebald a writer of fiction, memoir, travelogue or a combination thereof? However we might classify them, both these producers of printed text are writing about their own experiences even if these are disguised. They are also doing it by focusing on particular details of these experiences. Calle appears to sum up the style I had been searching for at the start of my project in an interview in Foam magazine: "Putting the accent on the details also gives more space for the viewer to make the story his own, to continue it, to identify with it."²³ Conceptual art and artists who use text-based narrative methods have influenced my own narrative style. In particular, using images in my text has become an important part of how my novel is structured. However, whereas Calle is clearly writing about her own

²² Barthes, Roland, *Image, Music, Text*, (London, Fontana Press, 1977), p. 148

²³ Guerrin, Michael, (int) *Sophie Calle: A Sense of Mystery*, Foam magazine, number 30, Spring 2012, p. 15

experiences and using photographs as a record of them I am creating a fictional world. Even though what I have written about is based on my own travels to the locations described in the novel, I am not writing autobiographically. I am hiding myself behind the story and creating a narrator who is definitely not me. I deliberately made him younger and, unless unconsciously, he bears no relation to how I perceive myself. This distancing from my narrator has always been part of the creative process, even though I am obviously describing places that I have visited. At this final stage of my work I can begin to work out that my reluctance to fully round out each character is also part of my desire to avoid revealing anything about myself or anyone I know. The gaps in the narrative are conveniently providing a barrier between me and the reader. The text belongs to the reader and not the writer. Both the narrator and the reader are left in the labyrinth of interpretation.

3. Who is Eric Leers?

The most difficult character in the novel to create has been Eric Leers. From the moment I realised that the novel should involve rail travel connecting three European cities it was also inevitable that references to film should be part of this creation. After all, I had been inspired to visit many of them because I had seen them interpreted in films. The idea that a narrator will be spending time exploring cities in search of his former self seemed like a good initial idea. However, the fact that he should be also in search of film locations used by his cinematic idol Eric Leers seemed even better. This extra layer has, I feel, given the novel not only greater narrative depth but relates clearly to the idea that cities create narratives. Leers is noted for how he arrives in a city and in the spirit of the Situationist International embarks on a *dérive*.²⁴ Like the Situationists he walks, relating to the city's past and its narratives through chance encounters. Leers is only doing what I have always liked doing before I realised there was a word to describe wandering through a city and engaging with its form and structures: psychogeography.

Leers has therefore interpreted Paris, Amsterdam and Berlin for the narrator before he even experiences them for himself. He has created a cinematic version of each city which replaces any historical and cultural context. Paris and Berlin were deliberately chosen for their associations with filmmaking, but all three cities also offered a sense of division and clearly delineated boundaries proscribed either by their geography or politically, as in the case of Berlin. This is also why the meeting between the narrator and Eric Leers takes place in another interestingly divided place, Baarle-Hertog. It's through the narrator's professional interest in Leers - he has been commissioned to write a film monograph on the director's work - that he visits the three cities. The fact that they are also significant places in his past travels with his wife adds another layer of meaning. He will re-explore a city through the imagining of Leers and also through his memories of his own past. This device adds more layers and is also a deliberate positioning of multiple levels of interpretation of each city and

²⁴ Wark, McKenzie, *The Beach Beneath The Street*, (London, Verso, 2011), p. 28

the memories they evoke. It is palimpsest, labyrinth and randomness - the essential narrative elements a city offers an explorer of its streets.

Eric Leers is therefore offering the novel a reference to how cities shape our experiences and also how those experiences can be conveyed powerfully through a visual medium. His presence in the novel should remind the reader that the narrator is trying to come to terms with his memories by assembling fragments as scenes from his life. He makes frequent references to film language, is distracted by images in the house where he is narrating and sometimes writes out his memories as a screenplay. The scenes that he describes are constructed as a series of frames, often starting or ending with a reference to the act of looking or by the necessity to be writing. The narrator is selecting images from his memory and attempting to get them onto his laptop screen before they fade or are changed by the process of editing. By making Leers a member of the French nouvelle vague it privileges those readers who are aware of the characteristic style that has been ascribed to this loosely associated movement of filmmakers, who, at the very simplest level, were noted for a distinctive use of the camera that draws attention to the fact that we are watching a film. Indeed, the narrator of *Any Belgian* explains Leers' style for the reader in case they are unfamiliar with the work of Truffaut, Rivette, Godard and others. In terms of my novel's narrative structure, the references that draw attention to the act of writing are also references to how the French New Wave auteurs were often being self-referential in their films.

To say that Eric Leers, then, has been difficult to create is a statement that should be re-positioned. In many ways he has been the easiest to create because he just emerged in my mind. The decision that the novel required such a character was quickly followed by his arrival in the text. It was also immediately clear to me that Leers had to sound like he was a real character and for the reader to accept him as such. While many writers have placed characters sharing their own name in their fictions, or at least, have done little to disguise the fact the experiences they are describing are autobiographical, I wanted Leers just to be Leers, a film director that a reader might think they have heard about or might be unprepared not to admit they didn't know. Leers is the

device that invites a reader to do three things: either believe in his existence, pretend that that they do or simply be aware that he is made up but still go along with the conceit. However, it is a fourth possibility, that a reader might be frustrated at the lack of information about him and therefore cease to take any pleasure in the novel as a whole, that has caused difficulty throughout the creative process. It is a possibility that I am now satisfied is of little concern for how the novel might be judged. Leers, as I have stated, started to exist in my imagination at the time the novel began taking shape and he has become a 'real' character in my mind. He has a filmography, has kept up a Twitter account for a short time and has been referred to in my undergraduate seminars. Leers has emerged in an attempt to blur the real with the imaginary, and by having a character with an uncertain provenance the novel provides what might be called a 'pretend reality' alongside which the obviously fictional elements are played out.

What I am referring to as 'pretend reality' differs from what simply might be called fiction in the sense that Leers is supposed to have a life beyond the text and is being presented to the reader as a real person. The attempt to make Eric Leers believable requires a pretence that the author of most narratives need not concern himself with, in that a reader will enter into and accept the conventions of being in a fictional world once they start reading from page one. The reader of *Any Belgian* should be placed either in a position of uncertainty over whether Leers exists or they accept his reality. Those readers who see through the conceit will, it is assumed, then enter into an acceptance of his pretend reality. However the character of Leers is interpreted by a reader he should still serve to underline the uncertainties and questions over reality that concern the narrator as he tries to make sense of his past experiences. The use of Eric Leers in the novel, and how the reader is invited to believe in his existence, encourages a reflection on the border areas between what is definitely real and what might be real. This positioning of the reader then reflects the experiences of the narrator throughout his diary entries.

The fact that Leers has also endured a similar emotional loss to that of the narrator reinforces the notion of doubles in the novel. In imagining scenes from

films that contain Leers' wife, Monique Brelinck, the narrator is also re-creating images of his own wife, and therefore underlining how urban experiences offer us the possibility of returning to the past. The filmed city allows for another layer of experience beyond or through which we can superimpose our own memories. The Leers element of the novel is important because it offers this extra layer for the narrator to pull back in his attempt to make sense of what has happened to his marriage. It was the films of Leers that took him to those cities at the start of his relationship with Ophelia and it is a retrospective of Leers' films that take him back, but this time alone. In a sense, there is an uncertainty over what those happy memories of his past are based on; a now blurred and distorted vision of an idealised past founded on a shared intimacy in the pleasure of watching Leers' films or the experiences of being in the cities where the films were made.

The cinematic quality of walking the city is one that the artist Janet Cardiff has explored in her audio works where the listener is invited to follow a route around a specific place guided by a fictional representation of the journey the artist has taken earlier. In one of her pieces, *Missing Voice*, Cardiff responds to living in London and being aware of its history. It also reflects what she calls a sense of paranoia that a person from a small town can feel as they adjust to a large city. She is attempting to share with the listener the scenarios she creates in her mind when she sees someone pass her: "I think it is a desire to dramatise my life, make it real by making it cinematic."²⁵

In *Any Belgian* the use of the cinematic experience is also a way to make the narrator's experience real. Stephen Barber takes this idea further in his book *The Walls of Berlin*²⁶ where he suggests that the city while being filmed is also watching itself, that it is conscious of its own changing landscape. The narrator of my novel is experiencing something similar in that he is conscious of his own changed relationship with his wife through the cinematic sightings he witnesses, filtered through Eric Leers' filmed interpretations of the locations in which he has the sightings of his past. Using the language of film, and sometimes even

²⁵ Cardiff, Janet, www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/missing_voice.html

²⁶ Barber, Stephen, *The Walls of Berlin*, (Washington: Solar Books, 2010), p. 165

allowing the prose of his journal entries to use the form of a screenplay, the narrator is able to find an appropriate form for the expression of his experiences.

The use of Eric Leers as a character is fundamental to the way the novel is underpinned by the narrative possibilities of urban experiences. His method of working is through an improvisational response to city locations and the narrator's interest in him allows the novel to exploit the notion of city narratives being created through personal encounters. Both characters are in crisis and are, to an extent, using the other to help them cope with their situations. It takes us back to the idea that writing about urban experiences can provide support for emotional recovery.

4. Ophelia's crisis

The narrator's wife takes her name from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In this play Ophelia is subject to the protection of her father and brother and ignored by her boyfriend, the eponymous prince. What interests me is that the crisis that leads to her eventual death goes unnoticed by the men around her. We receive few details of the build up to her 'mad' scene and she remains a lightly developed character. There are some parallels here with *Any Belgian* in that the narrator's wife is suffering a crisis but instead of declining into insanity she leaves. It is obvious that she is troubled and there are several references to her fascination with death, but it is not suggested that she is planning to take her own life. It is the shock of his wife leaving that produces the images of her as she was when younger, probably because this was a time when the possibility of their future together was not in doubt. She is also, of course, given the name Ophelia by her parents for whom there may be reasons about which we can only speculate. She comes from a wealthy background so her name also contains exotic associations for the narrator who admits in his journal entries that he fell in love with Ophelia's other worldliness just as much as with her as an individual.

However, it is her professional life as an urban geographer that is significant as she is interested in cities for academic reasons, even though she uses her time in Berlin with her husband to reflect on their marriage and comes to the decision that she must leave. She, therefore, is placed in the novel to develop and substantiate the narrator's sense of loss as she is the sole reason for the predicament in which he finds himself at its start, but she is also there to further emphasise the idea of characters who are in search of something after experiencing a personal crisis. Her husband then embarks on a quest, in the Sebaldian mould, even if he is not sure what it is he is initially trying to achieve. Susan Sontag notes that Sebald's narrators often travel on a quest as a result of a crisis in their lives, 'even if the nature of that quest is not immediately apparent'²⁷

The narrator at one point suggests that what links him and his wife is their shared interest in cities. Even though we obviously gain no idea of what Ophelia is thinking in the journal entry that describes the weekend in Berlin, it is clear to the reader that she is using her time in the city to find answers to her crisis. She has carried out fieldwork and published on the social uses of the urban landscape. She is informed by writings about cities and the buildings that define them. She inhabits an academic world that seeks evidence drawn from the past and present but also serves to facilitate those responsible for planning cities of the future. Both the narrator and his wife fail to communicate their thoughts while together in Berlin, but it can be supposed that Ophelia is using her time in the city to plan her eventual departure from her husband. The settings chosen by the narrator in his journal entries that cover his memories of this shared weekend in the German capital are linked to art, particularly images of suffering in the Cranach paintings and in Beuys' works that deal with healing. In two recollections the narrator unconsciously pays homage to Hitchcock's *Vertigo* by having Ophelia sit for a long time in front a work of art as she seeks some information, something that will provide an answer to her crisis. For the reader of *Any Belgian* I hope the film reference is clear, and it connects with the cinematic motifs discussed above.

²⁷ Sontag, Susan, *A Mind in Mourning*, in *Where the Stress Falls - essays*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), p. 43

Ophelia remains an enigma and is not developed as a character because she is obviously not fully understood even by her husband. He loves her but in the sense that she has provided him with an education and a chance to enter a world completely different from his own upbringing. She is a representative of a different social world. He has fallen in love with Ophelia's association with the exotic but has made an unfortunate mistake in challenging another representative of this world, her cousin Klaus. In his journal entries he reaches the conclusion that his beating of Klaus was the cause of Ophelia's unhappiness. We are not sure why she has allowed the marriage to last so long or even why she married the narrator in the first place. Throughout the novel she is constantly idealised, such that the memory of her that the narrator conjures up preserves her in the form in which their relationship was at its strongest. She is fixed in youth and the middle-aged narrator struggles to come to terms with the gap between this ideal past and the reality of the present.

5. And the other characters?

Klaus is Ophelia's cousin and represents the exotic, the unattainable and the mystery of another world that the narrator will never understand. He serves to illustrate the class difference between the narrator and the family he has married into, with Ophelia being a fascinating link between these worlds. The reader's view of him is always prejudiced by the narrator's feelings about him and as the novel progresses Klaus is depicted in increasingly derogatory terms. It is sufficient that he remains more of a fanciful construct than a real character, because he constantly appears in the narrator's thoughts as a kind of exotic beast, his demeanour exaggerated and his differences always made prominent. He is more like a character from a fable with charming powers over those around him. He is the narrator's enemy; a foil for the anger that he feels while writing his journal. The Klaus described for us is not really what a real Klaus

would be like. His clothes, mannerisms and physical deficiencies are remarked upon by the narrator in a similar way that a bully might pick upon a weaker person. The Klaus that existed twenty-five years earlier is unlikely to be the same as the one described in *Any Belgian*. He has been the controlling character behind the narrator's first experience of European travel. Both Klaus and Ophelia offer the narrator an exotic attraction which underlines his own tendency to exoticise at times, in particular the displacement he operates from himself as he writes his journal. Perhaps in his recollections of his younger self he is also attracted to an exotic view of his past.

If Klaus is symbolic of an aristocrat from an old European regime then Bill, the narrator's closest friend, represents the successful emergence from working class to meritocratic status. Klaus is fixed in the otherworldliness of Ophelia and is, therefore, difficult for the narrator to clearly define, leading to exaggeration. Bill, however, comes from a similar background to the narrator and serves to show how the benefits of education have had their material rewards. It is a world to which the narrator can connect. Both men have married wives with successful professional careers; Bill's wife, Corrie, is a doctor. It is some of her books that the narrator reads and educates himself from by making precise anatomical references in his descriptions of Ophelia. It is in this couple's second home full of books and paintings that the narrator is exiled for the duration of his journal. He describes how Corrie has advised him and suggested that his recovery should involve writing a record of his confused feelings. It is important that he has been removed from both his home in Southampton and the places where he travelled during the summer. His exile in Scotland is not urban but neither is it entirely solitary. He is gaining a physical distance from the events of his personal crisis and is using this change of location to help him in the process of healing. Corrie's presence in the novel confers a mark of medical authority and a recognition that the narrator has become ill as a result of his urban experiences. By placing him on a largely rural island the narrator is removed from the familiar and, therefore, able to reflect at a distance from the events that have brought him to a state of mental decline. Corrie is also a shortened form of Cordelia, another Shakespearian tragic female victim of men's failings.

Bill also enjoys walking through London and has encouraged the narrator to share in his *dérives*. He is a character, therefore, who is taking pleasure from exploring city streets and one who has had an influence on the way the narrator explores his urban surroundings. Bill acts as a mentor, one who instructs his friend in the pleasures of creating narratives from chance encounters while walking through cities. In one journal entry the narrator describes how Bill creates a series of links to places visited in central London that are themed around locations associated with Lenin. The fact that Bill is visually impaired serves to emphasise the other senses at work while wandering through cities. It also acts as a contrast to the highly visual needs required by Eric Leers in his search for narratives while wandering city streets.

Sophie simply takes her name from the artist Sophie Calle who, as mentioned earlier, was an early influence in the construction of the novel. She is a character who is there to make an important plot link and the person who introduces the narrator to his hero, Eric Leers. There is no connection with Calle apart from sharing a first name.

6. Fieldwork

A very important part of the process of creating *Any Belgian* has been fieldwork conducted in the cities mentioned in the novel. This has been conducted on three levels: firstly to survey the areas described so that references to locations are accurate; secondly to take photographs of locations to be used in the novel or as references when writing later drafts; and thirdly to use the locations to inspire changes when re-drafting the novel. Each aspect of the fieldwork has

been a key element in how the novel has been constructed and has been central to my research into how narratives are created from urban experiences.

Paris, Amsterdam and Berlin have been surveyed twice but at widely different times during the creative process. For example, the preliminary work on Amsterdam was carried out before the novel took its present form so the work done at that time can not be considered to be as important as the second visit when revisions to locations were made. Berlin and Paris have been visited with the novel clearly in mind and, again, alterations to locations resulted.

Southampton, of course, and London have been visited on numerous occasions as part of the research process but mostly to simply engage with the city in the way that the narrator describes in Sebald's novel *Austerlitz*: "... ideas infallibly come to me in places which have more of the past about them than the present."²⁸ By walking in my home city and deliberately engaging with its past by seeking out, for example, the locations of former cinemas in Shirley High Street or having my eye taken by some worn tarmac on a suburban street revealing a tram track, I have gained ideas for the development *Any Belgian*. These glimpses of Southampton's past serve as triggers for unrelated episodes in my novel.

Undertaking fieldwork in preparation for writing a novel is common practice for writers, particularly for reasons of establishing accuracy in describing places. What has interested me, though, is the experience of confronting the areas described in *Any Belgian* and allowing myself to be re-directed from original thoughts about the location chosen. It seems appropriate to call it a 'confrontation' as it feels like my thoughts are being challenged by the surroundings themselves. What might result is a kind of mediation process as what is commonly known as 'a sense of place' challenges my pre-conceived ideas about a location. Yes, the checking of details is carried out and photographs are taken but it's what happens on the ground and in the mind at a particular moment that makes fieldwork so important. These moments are difficult to quantify because so much depends on what it is I am trying to ascertain. For example, simply checking that a metro station is where I thought

²⁸ Sebald, W.G., *Austerlitz*, (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 359

it was in relation to a particular street is easy but the view back to the building from the top of the metro steps can give rise to new ideas about a particular scene in the novel. It's the perspective that being on the ground offers that means that a reliance on Google Street View, however excellent, is never going to be adequate. Putting oneself in the mind of a character while in the exact location will open up fresh possibilities for what might happen next in the narrative. For example, walking an area in Paris that I imagined would contain an apartment block in a suitable upmarket neighbourhood for Klaus the sighting of a florist's shop gave me the idea that the motif of flowers would become significant in the memories of the narrator. In fact, at the climax of the novel when Klaus is seen carrying lilies it serves as proof for the narrator that he has entered his past at precisely the right moment for him to then intervene and attempt to alter the course of subsequent events. Only being 'in the field' could cause such a shift in narrative development.

Paris is also an interesting city in which to conduct field research, as being on its streets it is difficult not to be reminded of its notable flâneurs and situationists such as Baudelaire and Debord. These are people who have taken to the streets of the French capital simply to take pleasure from the urban experiences aimless wandering offers. They are the solitary walkers who have allowed the city to alter their perceptions of reality, to discover past layers of history and, as was particularly the case for Walter Benjamin, to become intoxicated by urban meanderings.²⁹ In Benjamin's *Arcades Project* he goes so far as to state that flânerie transforms Paris into an interior, such that the city becomes a series of connected rooms. With this claim in mind, my own wanderings through Paris after I had written a few drafts of the novel began to be influenced by the notion of the city streets being somehow part of the interiority of the minds of the characters. I had taken Benjamin's idea forward to allow me to experiment with how the city's streets can transform themselves into mental landscapes. This is, after all, a common experience of walking through any city with a preoccupied mind. It is easy to be both outside physically making our way through the streets but at the same time following a series of thoughts playing inside our heads. It

²⁹ Benjamin, Walter, *The Arcades Project*, translated Eliand, Howard and McLaughlin, Kevin (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press, 1999), p. 417

is not difficult to arrive at our destination without being aware of the turnings we have made because we were too concerned with which way our interior narratives were taking us. Benjamin uses the word 'labyrinth'³⁰ to describe how a flâneur might lose himself within the city but not necessarily in the sense in which I have described the feeling of interiority. Although he alludes to a deliberate act of losing oneself in the city, his notion is broadly similar to what I am describing. In fact, the idea that we enter a labyrinth is appropriate as it suggests a series of deviations, which is exactly what happens to the narrator in *Any Belgian*. It was also what happened when I made my journeys along the streets that I had chosen as the setting for my characters to wander. The act of being on those streets, subject to the sensations around me and with the influences of the writers on urban wandering, led inevitably to changes of creative direction. Through an attempt to enter into the state of intoxication that Benjamin ascribes to being a flâneur or the dizziness that W.G. Sebald's characters feel when walking through urban spaces, I have allowed the labyrinthine routes of cities such as Paris and Amsterdam to prevail upon me with a sense of reverie, perhaps entering a state of heightened awareness accentuated by the release of serotonin produced after the physical demands of walking for several hours. Like Sebald, and also Benjamin, I am exploring the fragments of time and memory contained in the spaces I walk through.³¹

However, I am also entering into a deliberate discourse with the city locations used in my novel as I am consciously aware of how writers like Benjamin and Sebald have explored such locations as part of an attempt to make sense of the layers of the past. This knowingness then affects my fieldwork because it is difficult not to go looking for the same kind of things that other writers have found. Instead of merely mapping the streets and photographing places as part of the need to be accurate in my geography I am subject to another layer of thought that then feeds back into any subsequent draft of the novel. I end up walking the streets as Benjamin or Sebald and not as myself or Eric Leers. Another complication - or exciting creative possibility - is that my narrator is also

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 429

³¹ Leone, Massimo, *Textual Wanderings: A Vertiginous Reading of W.G. Sebald* in Long, J.J. and Whitehead, Anne (eds), *W.G. Sebald - A Critical Companion*, (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p.100

treading the streets through the eyes of Leers, so that my research calls for the switching of roles. For example, when exploring an area near the Montparnasse cemetery in Paris I was getting a feel for the street where the narrator sees a glimpse of his past self but I was also in the same place as a film location where Leers' Yvette would have walked and, therefore, seeing this location in terms of the fictional film director in the novel. This sense of displacement was further heightened in Amsterdam where Eric Leers has a home, so that while researching locations in the novel it became difficult not to also find the street where Eric Leers might live. The mixing of the real and the imaginary became part of the fieldwork conducted in all the city locations and entered the preparation for every draft of the novel. In a work that sets out to convince the reader that it is based on real events and characters, then this overlaying of real city experiences with the demands of creative construction is entirely appropriate. It might have been better to write the final drafts in each location or to have written them while walking. This is an idea that I did consider, but the fact that the narrator is reflecting in a kind of Wordsworthian tranquility a few months after his city encounters meant that writing in Southampton while pretending to be on the Isle of Bute was more appropriate. This isn't a novel about the immediacy of an experience but more about recollections of experiences filtered through several time periods.

Most of the above discussion about the importance of fieldwork has considered the second reason for its use, that is to inspire changes between drafts by being present on the ground. There is little need to reflect on the primary reason to check for accuracy as this is obvious, but the use of photography is an aspect of my fieldwork that needs some elaboration. It is very much part of the narrative structure of *Any Belgian* and the inclusion of images within its text requires a bit more explanation. To take photographs in the field to establish accuracy is important, but to be present in the novel's locations and to see them through the camera lens as the narrator will have seen them is to reach the central idea of the novel. This will be explained in the next section.

7. Images and words

There is a section of Susan Sontag's essay *In Plato's Cave* where she claims that "A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence."³²

Photographs incite reverie and when the image is of someone unattainable the desirability of that person is enhanced by their distance. Sontag is describing the talismanic uses of photographic imagery that imply a sense of magic in an attempt to contact another reality. By setting my narrator in front of a daily log fire, making whisky available to him and surrounding him with books and images, I have deliberately provided him with the environment within which a magical transformation can take place. He has a collection of photographs of his estranged wife with him in digital form and inserts these in his early journal entries, but he also uses images of objects and places as his narrative develops. It was during the penultimate drafting stage that I realised why these insertions are important to him; they are part of his conjuring up of a version of reality that he needs to establish in order to move through his month-long recuperation and reach a position of recovery. Words are not adequate expressions of his thoughts, so he needs to use images to support them. They provide evidence, in his mind, of reality. By selecting them and arranging them in his text he is therefore in control of these snapshots of reality. He has made decisions about what to select and also where to crop them. It has to be remembered that the narrator is a journalist and takes photographs professionally to accompany his travel articles, so he is aware of the relationship between image and text and the importance of page layout. One reason for his relatively short journal entries on some days is because he has probably spent a long time choosing and editing photographs. He has the time to linger over the images he locates for his narrative and also for his discovery of the images on display in the house where he is writing. The photographs in the text are markers of time for the narrator who uses them to position his thoughts in a precise moment in the past, but they also denote for the reader that time has passed and that no writing has been done. In other words, the inclusion of a photograph in the text suggests that a gap has appeared in the narrative and, unless we are guided in our response to the photographic image

³² Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 16

that has filled this gap, we are excluded from the thoughts that might have been invoked during the selection of that image. For the reader, the image might appear as a random insertion but for the narrator it contains a significant relevance from which we are excluded.

Of course, photographs allow us to see things in much more detail than with our own eyes. We take pictures of places that we visit instead of stopping to look at the place carefully and committing it to memory. Recollections of a place or a person at a particular time are released when we look back at their photographic capture. Sontag, echoing Emile Zola, suggests that photographs have changed the idea of reality, in that something is only real once it has been photographed.³³ The narrator of *Any Belgian* has been taking photographs of the Leers film locations in much the same way that I have been photographing the same locations. I have provided his journalistic records that enable him to have an accurate representation of a specific place but also given the narrator a set of images from which to reflect back on the events of his summer that led to his breakdown. He uses these photographs as part of his recovery so that they transcend their intended working purpose and become a visual stimulus for his memories. They are the places where his sightings occurred but they do not represent those figures from his past. In supplying these images from his mind and transposing them onto the recent shots taken on location he uses the magic of photography to conjure up a version of the past to allow him to find the words to describe it. Instead of trying to fix upon the past and somehow make it real he is using an image as a replacement for some former experience. The act of looking and scanning a photograph reveals something about the past. It is a process that might be different each time the 'spell' is repeated. It has been a deliberate act in the re-drafting stages to emphasise this inexact process of producing a memory out of an image. When the narrator feels that he is writing a ghost story he is describing the difficulty of capturing memories in words. He can't be sure if he really did see himself and his wife when they were younger. To label these sightings as apparitions is denying the fact that he is probably delusional. However, he has the photographic evidence of the places where his

³³ *Ibid*, p. 87

ghosts appeared, so it becomes easier for him to work from these images in order to make sense of his experiences.

What the narrator has compiled after his research trip to Paris, Amsterdam and Berlin is largely a series of shots of empty streets or buildings that have a personal significance and not ones that might be used to illustrate a newspaper travel article. They are not the sort of images that are useful in attracting a reader to the piece. They are relevant in that they are taken in the exact Eric Leers film locations but their significance has meaning only for the narrator. Increasingly they become shots that suggest emptiness, particularly as the sightings increase. Earlier images were taken to capture a sense of a film's location, by constructing the shot to reflect how an auteur like Leers would frame a scene (for example, the shot taken at Odeon metro station). These are later replaced by street scenes that would appear to anyone else merely arbitrary or lacking any artistic quality. They become forensic and are images that are being used as attempts to capture evidence of moments from the past. French photographer Eugene Atget's photographs of Parisian streets were described as like crime scenes. Taking up this view, Walter Benjamin suggests that everywhere in a city is a crime scene and that the photographer's job is to reveal guilt.³⁴ This is an interesting idea because my narrator, particularly in Berlin, starts to turn the streets into scenes of a 'crime' committed in his past and also as places connected with a sense of present day guilt. Perhaps what the narrator has arrived at by the end of his account is an admission of his guilt that he has been the cause of his wife's disappearance. In creative terms it seems appropriate that the reader is offered the possibility of realising this through the use of images within the text rather than the narrator spelling it out. It allows the novel to supply another level of meaning and one where the reader can take a more active part in understanding the narrator's state of mind.

³⁴ Benjamin, Walter, *Little History of Photography in Selected Writings Volume 2, 1927 - 1934*, trans Livingstone, eds Jennings, Eiland and Smith, (London: Belknap Press, 1999), p. 529

8. Conclusion

Writing *Any Belgian* has involved an engagement with cities on several levels. It is a novel set in cities but written while the narrator is in exile from his familiar urban surroundings. It is a novel where its two main characters have a professional interest in cities and whose shared past is influenced by what happened in one city in particular. It features a character who makes films set in cities and takes his stories directly from his interaction with those cities. It explores the healing potential of cities but also the need to escape from the city in order to find a space in which to undergo a process of emotional recovery. The novel has also involved my own close involvement with cities in order to research and gain inspiration for its construction. *Any Belgian* continues to be affected by my continuing engagement with city streets and is always in a state of flux as new ideas emerge. However, what I present for my PhD has to be a representative sample of this process of evolution and change.

Just as cities constantly change their appearance, as has been discussed earlier, so my novel will always be subject to change each time I return to it. For example, by going back to any one of the cities mentioned in the novel will inevitably bring about a reassessment of the creative possibilities that I could develop further. This feeling of incompleteness is, of course, inevitable with any creative project. However, when I am tackling both a narrator's transience of memory and the complex layers of meaning associated with urban wandering it seems harder to ever call a halt to the creative process. This is why the narrator says in his final journal entry that he doubts what he has written is really an accurate record of what he has experienced, and that when he comes to re-tell the story it will be a different narrative. What if he suddenly remembers seeing the woman with the sheep?

What if I suddenly remember seeing this man holding this sign in Amsterdam?

The struggle to record the past is always a struggle to remember things in the right order and then to doubt whether they actually happened at all. New memories, new doubts create new narrative possibilities. It is this uncertainty that I have been working with and why I am presenting a novel in its current,

perhaps temporary, form. In a few weeks or months it is likely to have changed again, so what you have been reading about here no longer exists in this form. It is why I spent the first year of the PhD process convinced that what I wanted to produce was not a novel but probably a series of artefacts that could be continually updated. Maybe I should return to the idea I began with, that the novel has outgrown its covers and allow *Any Belgian* to become a website that keeps changing. After all, I have noted in my reflective commentary that writing about cities is problematic, especially when combining it with images. How can we pin down any precise meaning when writing about urban experiences that are always changing rapidly? How can we produce on paper all the levels of interpretation that are going on in front of us as we walk the streets and also as we sit down later and try to describe what we saw when we walked those streets? After all, cities and the memories they inspire are merely palimpsests.



So, who is this man above and what was he doing? What's the story?

Any Belgian

by

Donald Hiscock

By way of introduction

Before the advent of internet booking, when you bought a rail ticket from London to a destination in Belgium the ticket had the phrase *Any Belgian Station* printed on it. This meant, and it still does, that you can go to any station in Belgium for the same price. But in my mind it has become shortened to *Any Belgian*. It's a phrase that I can't seem to get out of my head. I began to repeat it to myself not long after I was woken up from that very deep sleep in my hotel room in Berlin. In the six weeks since then it has been helping me to reflect on what has happened. I don't know why this phrase has helped to unlock so much, but sometimes the strangest things rise to the surface of your mind when you least expect them.

Any Belgian. But not just any Belgian, there's Monique Brelinck, the film actor I admired at the the time I first met Ophelia. Monique is the most famous Belgian person that I am connected with. One day I might meet her.

To continue: A man sees a younger version of himself coming out of a railway station and so the journey begins. The journey comes to an end, as all journeys to a physical destination must, but the story doesn't reach a resolution.

The following are journal entries written as an attempt to make sense of what happened after seeing myself as I was twenty-five years ago.

I have a few people who have helped me to complete these journal entries. I need to thank old friends Bill and Corrie for lending me their house and my new friend Eric for just appearing when he did.

When I woke up the ticket was still there. This is the story.

1 October

I'll have to start somewhere Bill, so it had just as well be at Southampton Central railway station. It was to be a strange day, the first of many.

I approached the station from the street, glanced at my watch, avoided the accelerating and decelerating of taxis, entered the crowded foyer and then turned my attention to finding exactly which pocket of my jacket I had put my ticket into. It was then that I saw myself walking off the platform through the barriers and going over to a woman standing by the electronic destination board.

I was smiling and when I reached the woman, more like a girl, I held out my arms, pulled off my hat and hugged the young woman before kissing her on the lips as if I had been parted from her for a long time and was very pleased to see her again. It was more than just a kiss because she had her tongue in my mouth. It was definitely tongues. It was definitely me.

Except I was younger. And so was my wife, Ophelia. I didn't recognise her for a moment because she had long blonde hair, so different from the way it is now. We were both younger. We were in the past, embracing without a flinch of self-consciousness, embracing right in front of me as I was dashing for the train to London.

What might have caused me nothing more than a sense of welcome nostalgia that evening as I rushed for the train did precisely the opposite. I felt shaken, as if something had caused me to be scared. I had that tingling sensation, the one where you are aware of activity beginning to take place in your hair follicles. My heart fluttered, I think, and I had to catch my breath. A bolt of energy had struck me and the evening world for a second or two flashed before me so that all colour vanished. My ears were buzzing, my mouth was dry as sandpaper.

The sensation might have been different If Ophelia hadn't left me a week earlier. I might not have been seeing ghosts of ourselves.

"It's not going to work anymore," she had told me before she left.

So I'm at the station, my wife has recently left me and then I see her and me, only we're as we were twenty- five years previously. A strange sighting, but not the last.

This is the beginning of the story. Or the beginning of the beginning. Or the beginning of the end. I have to start somewhere.

It was definitely me, only much younger. It was a bit of a shock, seeing myself with long hair like that. Once the electrical jolt had passed through me and the world picked up where it left off, full volume, full colour, full definition, I remember standing quite still and staring at them. It was a warm evening and the station's forecourt was covered in low sunlight. They weren't far in front of me but I couldn't move. I felt, briefly, like I was about to faint.

And that was the first time I saw them, or us. That was the first time, before it became clear what it all meant. That was when it started and before I realised what it was I had to do.

When I realised what I had to do.

Later, when I was on the train to London, I worked out that I must have seen us as we were in 1988. It was the year before we got married. It took me until Clapham Junction to work this out. I had tried, by Winchester, to dismiss it as just an hallucination on account of being tired and racing to meet deadlines. I had been sleeping badly since Ophelia had left me and I was fending off the shock of it by working hard, staying up late listening to music and trying to write the accompanying essay to the catalogue of the films of Eric Leers.

What do you want next Bill, the reasons for Ophelia leaving, the job or more on what I saw that day, because that's how it all led up to where we are now? What shall I write next Bill?

I feel I ought to start with a reference to Eric Leers because what happened reminds me of one of his films. He had been on my mind a lot and was clearly on my mind the day I saw myself coming out of the station with my wife. Eric

Leers will be eighty at the start of next year. I am writing about him in readiness for the retrospective of his films at the BFI. Eric is one of the great European film directors, sadly overlooked in this country. I'll come back to him later.

However, you probably need to know first about the situation between me and Ophelia.

So here it goes: We got married, didn't have kids, worked hard at developing our careers and then parted. We got to our twenty-second wedding anniversary and then she ended it.

Here's a picture that might help sum it all up:



Our jobs had been keeping us apart for years. We hardly saw each other some weeks. We had a phone relationship. I was away and she was away.

Sometimes we even met up in hotels in European cities, or once in Chicago when she was at a conference and I was working on a piece for a magazine. Sometimes we would coincide on our travels, go to dinner in a strange place and then go back to a strange bed. I miss the fact that I won't be seeing her again like this. It was, I suppose, a bit like it all started, the way we were travelling a lot, moving from place to place. We have always been on the move.

However, long before it was too late I forgot to tell her that I loved her.

That's about it really. I'll put another log on the fire.

2 October

All that I wrote yesterday sounds pathetic. It's because I can't describe it properly. That Hopper painting will do until I find another image that better conveys a sense of emptiness. Consider it a temporary image or motif. It fills up the page until I can find the right words. I'm at the beginning. It's not easy. Of course, I'm also at the end.

So it's a well known story. Lovers part. At least we don't have children's lives to mess up. There is no end of articles and novels and films about marriages breaking up. What can I say that's new? Eric Leers, who will be eighty next year, has covered the subject in several of his films. What can I add that hasn't already been said?

It's day two. I'm here on my own for a whole month. I'm writing it all down as part of the recovery. You have asked me to do it this way Bill, just like it's another commission, so I need to get on and deliver the copy. I have a strange feeling you're here with me Bill, but that's probably just to do with the fact that you have left such an imprint on this house. I'm all alone, but I can smell that pipe of yours.

Do ghosts have to be dead?

This beginning, as I anticipated, is not easy. I might be messing it up already. I'll try to get things across a bit more smoothly, more descriptively. I've just read back what I've written so far and I'm not happy with it, not with any of it, except perhaps the first paragraph. I'll try again, but don't worry. I'm not simply going to repeat myself. I'm going to elaborate. Words, after all, are what I'm supposed to be good at. I get paid to evoke a sense of place, to be witty about the practicalities of foreign and domestic travel.

It feels like I'm about to write a ghost story. It must be something to do with me staring at the log fire I've just managed to get going. It just feels like the right kind of conditions for a ghost story. Me alone in this isolated house on the Isle of

Bute in Scotland, hundreds of miles from home. It's October. I'm thinking that someone else is here in the house with me. I get shivers.

I'll begin again.

Approaching the Central railway station, glancing at my watch, avoiding the accelerating and decelerating of taxis, I was amazed to see myself walking off the platform, through the barrier and going over to a woman standing in front of the large electronic destination board. Low, orange sunlight filled the station entrance.

So this is where I'll begin, with a piece on what went wrong. Like most of the features I've ever written, and it's certainly true of all the travel articles, I shall begin with a dramatic event to hook the reader. Editors like it and I assume readers do too. So to start with an ending, it went something like this....

Ophelia and I woke up one morning, not too long ago, at about the same time. I listened to the birds singing and the intermittent hydraulic brake noises of lorries on the main road as they made their way from the docks. She was awake too and, I suppose, listening to the same noise. I remember feeling very tense and my mind was going over the conversation we had started the night before on the way back from the cinema. We had watched a restored version of Eric Leers' 1964 film *St Denis Stories*, his first full-length film. The sound quality had always been poor but the new version was a significant improvement. I assume Ophelia must have also been going over the conversation about the fickleness of relationships in films and novels because she sat up suddenly, looked at nothing at the end of the bed, screwed up her nose, let out a gasp of air, like one of the lorries, and said:

"This really isn't going to work."

It was the sudden firmness and determination in her voice that took me by surprise. It was that resolute 'really' that I heard very clearly and the way she extended it after emphasising the harshness of the 'r' sound at the start. Sometimes it comes down to one word that can make all the difference to what

someone means. Ophelia's use of the word 'really' early one Sunday morning signified a great change in our relationship. It was more than a change, it was the end.

"This REALLY isn't going to work," she said, looking at nothing at the end of the bed.

"What isn't?"

"You know what I mean," she had said. And then I waited for her to say 'us'. But this didn't come until later. It came after I felt like I was inside the film we had been to see the night before. I felt like I was taking my turn in reading a script. She looked ahead at nothing. I looked at her. (INTERIOR. MORNING. Shot of me looking at her. Close up on her face. Shot from where there was nothing at the end of the bed looking at both of us, framing me looking at her and her looking straight ahead. Shot reverse shot from her point of view looking at nothing).

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"You know what's the matter."

I didn't like the script. I remember feeling a sense of panic as I knew where the conversation was going. We had come close to a similar conversation before. I panicked because it was leading towards her saying the word 'us'.

"Why don't we go away somewhere?" I suggested.

"It's not going to work anymore."

"Let's have some time to talk it through and put things right."

"This is what we're doing now," she said, turning to me. (Two shot of us looking at each other. Ambient sound).

“Does it have to be now?”

I wish I had said something else, not followed the script at this point. It was such a crap script, but I stuck with it. If only I had thrown in an ad lib. I should have extemporised, or said nothing. What I did say after that was an attempt to be funny. It was completely the wrong thing to say at that moment. I won't even repeat it. We'll skip this bit. Fast forward to the end.

Everything that I've written above wasn't what we said. It's just a rough approximation of how the conversation went. Trying to write it down changes it. It was was much worse than what I've managed to write. Or maybe it was better than what I've written.

Putting words down like this changes everything. It's not quite how I am imagining it. It looks like this:

A bedroom in early summer. After a long discussion a woman ends it all with the word 'us'. The scene changes to somewhere else, some other time. The first ending had just happened. One conversation that sounded like it had come out of a film I had seen the night before and it had meant the end.

“Do you realise this is just like the film?” I said. But she never replied. “Was it the film that made you say this?” But she never replied. And those fucking birds twittered like they didn't give a fucking damn about what was happening inside my fucking bedroom.

Fuck, Shit. Fuck, Shit. Why? Why? Why? Why? Yes, yes, yes, yes, no, no, no, no. Affirmative and negative going on in an endless loop, just like that sound in that museum in Berlin where I thought I had lost Ophelia. I found her listening to these words coming from a speaker. Ja, Ja, Ja, Ja, Nee, Nee, Nee, Nee. It wasn't very long before this scene in the bedroom that I'm trying to describe. Had she gone to stare at the work of Joseph Beuys and listen to his nagging voice to get some kind of inspiration? A very annoying sound. That man's German voice. Those birds.

What happened in Berlin is important.

3 October

This might help. Here is a photograph of my wife:



I find it difficult to describe her. It's the same with all those you know really well. Where do you begin? How do you begin? It's because you stop looking closely at those you love. At first you are fascinated by their looks. You want to hold an image of them in your mind, to take to sleep with you, to create at any point in the day. You crave an image of their features. But then after a while, you stop doing this and when asked to describe them you can't remember all the details. Maybe that's why she said it's not going to work. Maybe she left because I had stopped looking at her.

Where do you begin? I have begun to write things many times without giving it a second thought. I can describe with the best of them. Concise, to the point, I can paint a picture with words. I can convince people that a city or an island has a sense of character. But at the moment I can't describe someone I have loved for over twenty-six years.

Where do I start? How would, let's see (I'm looking up at the bookshelves, moving along to the classics section, and will have to stand up because I can't read the spines from here, too dark), how would one of the classic authors approach this task? What have we got here?

The first one I came to, I've opened it near the start and here's a good example:

"Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters..." And it goes on: "She was usually spoken of as being remarkably clever..."

The opening of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. It doesn't describe her features in detail, it makes an interesting comment on her beauty. So, is she beautiful or not? And then Eliot goes on to her cleverness. We don't get much at all about what she looks like. We have to put that together for ourselves as readers. All I know is that she is a plain dresser. But is she beautiful?



I'm sitting here thinking of a way of making Ophelia sound beautiful. Where do I start? Do I simply compare her features to other things, make allusions, create

images? I can state that she is also clever. Does she actually look clever though? I took this photograph of her about twenty-seven years ago.

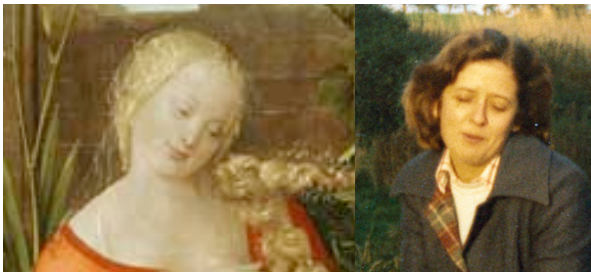
I've just realised that she looks like a Madonna.

Now have a look at this:



This is by Durer. Forget the baby for a moment and look at her face, her expression, for there were no babies in our marriage. It does look a bit like the photo I took of Ophelia. It's even got a fairly similar background. My photo is real. It's Ophelia as she was in the past. Durer's is a creation, a great painting, but a verisimilitude. Her gown makes her look like a sea creature.

Now compare and contrast these two:



See what I mean? Both are looking down wistfully. Similar, only one is a virgin and the other isn't. Mine is real, the other isn't. Take the baby away and Durer's subject has a sexual allure. She appears to be coyly avoiding the gaze of her lover or lost in thought, unaware that she is being watched. This is probably how I got the photo of Ophelia, the fact that she was unaware that I was taking it.

So, how do I continue with my description of Ophelia? Here goes:

She has a nice face, nice hair and a pleasant smile. She has gained more weight over the years but then so have I. Ophelia looks good for her age. I don't know whether the same can be said of me. She has blue-green eyes and small ears. She has a mole on the back of her neck and a very faint scar over one of her eyebrows as a result of falling off her scooter when she was a child. She is tall and is inclined to stoop because she is conscious of her height. Her feet are large.

Too many negatives. I can't do this. This is the most difficult thing I have ever tried to write. It has also taken me such a long time. It's taken me the whole day to get this far. I'll try again tomorrow.

4 October

Interior. Evening. I have succeeded in getting the fire going. I have been reading short extracts from the books on the shelves in this house for hours, dipping in and out of them, glimpsing a paragraph here and there, getting a taste of Woolf, of Forster, of Musil. I recall how you Bill use a magnifying glass when reading your books. I have watched it grow darker throughout the afternoon. Now the light has faded. Time to get back to work.

There are many things to perplex a man as he grows increasingly accustomed to the middle phase of his time upon earth. One thing that is particularly perplexing is the ending of a long-standing relationship and another is seeing yourself as you were in the past in a manner so real that you begin to question your grip upon reality.

My wife Ophelia and I had spent twenty-three years happily married living in our house in Southampton. I had reached a stage in my journalistic career where I had been both successful and extremely lucky to remain in well paid work throughout our marriage. As for Ophelia, her career had been a series of rapid transformations from one job to another before she settled on her academic post at a university in London from where she went out into the world informing those eager to know about the study of urban policy and all things related to cities and their populations. She is a people person. She studies people and knows many people through the work that she has done over the years. My wife is a doctor, but in the philosophical sense, one who has achieved the highest academic honours that can be attained. I, on the other hand, am a travel hack, one who writes about holiday destinations for anyone who will pay

me, and for many who never did. Cities are what my wife and I have in common. And films.

I have also managed to turn out a few books, mostly travel-related but also about film, particularly the works of that nearly forgotten member of the *nouvelle vague*, Eric Leers. Now widely accepted as the Dutch connection in the French New Wave, Leers was almost totally disregarded after his career went into decline in the late 1960s and for most of the 1970s. Ironically, it was Hollywood and television that saved him. He continues to turn out films every few years to varying degrees of critical acclaim. I like to take some credit for helping to rescue the reputation of the auteur Eric Leers, and I shall return to this later.

I will do this once I have said more about my life and times with Ophelia Fernbach. My wife has kept her maiden name. It is impressively distinctive. Dr Fernbach.

We met at university in 1986 when we were both on the organising committee of the film society. She was studying Politics and I was getting by in English Literature and the summer of the end of our second year became a nervous but exciting period of courtship that involved much travel across the country, hours of walking on beaches, exchanging regular letters, meeting as often as we could and sharing moments of easy-going reverie under what seemed like endless blue skies. In 1986 the skies were blue and endless.

I remember meeting Ophelia's parents for the first time and being immediately drawn to their friendliness and laid back attitude to life. Both of them gave the impression of being just older than we were but Ophelia warned me that their youthful bonhomie belied surprisingly curmudgeonly and irritable streaks. I saw only the good side of David and Rachel Fernbach that summer and grew fond of their generosity of spirit and their tolerance of my presence in their house. It was much later, as I recall, that any hint of irritation from them manifested itself. Ophelia looked a lot like her father and shared the same laugh. He took an interest in what I was studying and liked to talk about books. He was the first adult who had talked to me for long periods on apparently equal terms in a posh voice. Ophelia's mother would take my hand to show me things in her garden. I

had never felt such cold but beautiful hands. We sat at the dinner table together for long periods and I felt like I had crossed over into a different world from that of my own parents. We ate cheese after the meal and drank wine. Always talking. Nothing was ever eaten in silence.

That summer of 1986 was when I was the happiest I could ever remember because I had fallen in love with a beautiful girl called Ophelia and she, it appeared, had fallen in love with me. But, I've mentioned that it was a nervous time and that is because I couldn't quite believe my luck and expected that at any moment Ophelia might tire of me and she would be gone. But it took twenty-seven years. If only I had known that then, it would have taken some of my anxiety away.

Ophelia, despite perhaps always being aware of a time limit on our relationship, was to be my salvation. Thinking back, she helped me to mend my rather lazy ways. Being in love with her made me pull my socks up. Ophelia, the academic high flyer, led me to places I had never been to before, like the library.

It was during our walks along the beach near Ophelia's home in Somerset that we planned the trip to Europe after our finals. It was probably the sight of large, smoothed grey rocks streaked with hemispherical lines of white and the talk of places that Ophelia had already visited that made me realise that there must be more to see beyond England. She spoke of places that sounded exotic. Listening to her travel tales caused me to crave being outside the boring country of my birth and to seek the allure of foreign climes. Even descriptions of the ordinary were just as beguiling as the picturesque when described by Ophelia. The shores of northern France, the new-build suburbs of the Rhineland or the canal systems of the low countries. These were places that Ophelia had visited and was happy to tell me about as we touched fingers in rock pools on a beach in Somerset in July 1986.

To be in love in 1986 was about conversations where we planned for the future, held hands under water, picked pebble-sized versions of grey boulders and later painted our names on them and swapped them as keepsakes.



I took my pebble, my lucky charm, with me when we set out for France by train in the early summer of 1988, after we had finished our final exams and before we had graduated. This is roughly our itinerary:

First we took the train to Paris. Then we moved on to Brussels, then Amsterdam, then Cologne, then Berlin, then Munich, then Stuttgart, then Strasbourg, then Luxembourg and back to Paris before returning to London. This was the itinerary. I wish I had access to the journal Ophelia kept throughout the trip. I could have consulted it, to check that things did come in the right order. It might get a bit confusing later on in this journal when I try to piece things together, when it all gets mixed up with places Eric Leers went and places that we went. It would have been useful to have that journal with me on the trip to research the film locations the month before last. It might have saved some time, some problems. It might have prevented me from what I ended up doing in Berlin.

We planned the railway trip many months in advance. I think we both knew we would end up married. Neither of us mentioned it but it was like we were planning a kind of pre-honeymoon. The following year, 1989, we got married. Ophelia suggested it, inspired by the engagement of some friends of ours. A marquee in the Fernbachs' garden. My big slim fairytale wedding. My parents were dead impressed. All those people from all over Europe. Posh people and canapés, a mash up of languages, laughter. A thunderstorm. Someone went into labour. A distant cousin of Ophelia's got drunk and challenged the photographer to a duel. Paper boats holding candles floated on the lake. Bill sang an aria from Don Giovanni and Cordelia juggled spoons. A dance took place in a barn. There was a cymbalon player and alpen horns. One of the dogs

appeared with a rat in its mouth. A woman's hair caught fire. My first taste of caviar. A good time was had by all.

But back in that summer of 1986 I spent a lot of time in Somerset. I remember watching the World Cup and the infamous Maradona 'hand of God' incident. I mention football, mostly because that win by Argentina over England was a major event, but also because football is one of the things that Leers refers to in his films, either people watching it or as in *Reunion* (1974) in which an amateur footballer is a major character. 1986 was also the year that Eric Leers returned from his ill-conceived flirtation with Hollywood and produced a short documentary about the Wapping print dispute. I didn't see this film until a few years later, though, as that summer was more about beaches, countryside and being in love than with political film-making.

I remember being in love that summer with the differences between Ophelia and me. I loved her voice, her knees, her collection of snow globes, her way of walking, the shadows she left on pavements. I have since loved the thoughts she has placed in my mind, the whispers inside deserted country churches, the echoes, the resonances, the nuances, the looks, her looks, her books, the books, the way she cooks, the mystery, the differences, the religion of it all.

I wonder if I can be the man I once was? It's just a thought, but one that is highly pertinent to the story I am trying to relate. Perhaps 1986 was the best year there has ever been, but then the nomination of an annus mirabilis is a subjective thing, and has certainly nothing to do with politics or even sport. One man's emotional zenith is another man's nadir. If I am feeling miserable today then it's certain that someone very close by is feeling very happy. I can only declare 1986 a good year if I borrow the language of the wine trade and call it a vintage year. Why? Because the climactic conditions were just right, the fruit was at its best and when it was picked the excellence of the harvest was preserved without any taint.

Oh Bill this is all romantic, self-pitying twaddle. I feel the need to consult your thesaurus.

Ophelia married me, stayed with me for twenty-four years and then left. During those twenty-four years I became a journalist and she developed her academic career. We both worked hard, with long hours, lots of travel, a comfortable lifestyle. It was easy because we never had children. We didn't want them, despite many people assuming it was because one or the other of us was incapable of delivering the goods. It wasn't like that at all. My presumably fertile sperm was always killed off before it had a chance to swim with the abundant ova of Ophelia. Our frequent uterine unions were firewall protected. Procreation denied.

So now it has ended. Seeing Ophelia and myself come out of the station that morning was a shock. It's taken me back to the beginning. I'll sleep on it for now. To be continued tomorrow.

I wonder whether she meant it when she said that she didn't want us to have children. I wonder if I meant it when I agreed with her.

5 October

Good evening. A day in the fresh air. I went out on one of the bicycles left in the garden shed. It was a fairly flat ride in to Rothesay but the wind was fierce. I bought plenty of food, browsed the charity shops for books and even had a conversation with a woman who claimed that she had been meeting me every October on Bute for the last ten years. I couldn't get the words right to explain that she had mistaken me for someone else. I returned home and made a soup. I've had lots to eat and taken some exercise. Now it is late afternoon I am in front of the fire in an armchair with the laptop on my knees. Ghosts, living and dead, are watching over my shoulder as I write.

So I'm on a train to London having seen myself and my wife as we were in the past. I had been puzzling over what I had seen for most of the journey, coupled with the fact that sitting in the seat in front of me was Mark Kermode, the BBC film critic. I was tempted to engage him in conversation, as we had met on a few occasions, but he seemed so entrenched in his work on his laptop that I thought better of it. I know what it's like when you're trying to meet a deadline, think you'll get an hour in on the train and then you meet someone and spend the whole time chatting. It's frustrating, so I left him to his work while I ignored mine with thoughts of who I had seen back at the station at Southampton.

So when the train slowed down in the cutting just beyond Earlsfield I was coming to realise that I might see them again, me and Ophelia. I passed below the gothic Spencer Park building and then under bridges, past windows open to get air, the confluence of tracks, and then a train going at almost the same speed joined alongside my carriage. Then we pulled apart and my train slipped alongside the platform at Clapham Junction.

I had spent almost the whole journey either looking out of the window or playing with my iphone. In both modes my mind kept going back to that image of the two of us leaving the station. The train moved slowly on to Waterloo and I waited for the familiar landmarks to drift by, the Christies depot, Nine Elms, MI6, Lambeth Palace, the advertisement hoardings on the Lambeth brickwork, and while most people unfamiliar with this journey and excited by the thought of arrival in the capital were looking left to see Big Ben and the Wheel I looked right to find the Gherkin, the Shard and the towers of the City lit by the remnants of daylight.

But I'll move on and tell you why I was in London. So look away now Bill because the next bit is about you.

I was visiting an old friend who is an editor at one of the travel magazines I work for. I've known Bill since before university. We were at school together, but he was a couple of years my senior. His family know my family so we go back a long way. It was around the time of graduation that we started to become close friends, after I began to help him out with a political magazine he was launching.

Bill is one of the few friends I have who is a smoker. Bill puffs at a pipe. Nowadays, being prevented from smoking at work or in any public place, he has a cheek packed with gum that gives his breath a minty freshness. His clothes smell of Balkan Sobranie but when he speaks he exudes spearmint. It's a curious mixture, but one to which I am happily accustomed and in the presence of Bill's unique aroma I feel relaxed. Like now. Bill's smell is here with me in his house.

Bill, of course, was the person I turned to after Ophelia left. A typical conversation at that time might have gone like this:

"She sat up suddenly and said, 'this really isn't going to work'," I told him. It was a telephone conversation. I hadn't wanted to talk about it at first but Bill had phoned me about a point of fact in a piece I was doing on a weekend break to Cologne, specifically about the details of a new concert hall which he thought I had got wrong. We discussed this for a long time. It was late in the evening and I welcomed the distraction. When we had sorted out the details he simply asked after Ophelia and said that it was his turn to host us for dinner and were we free the following Saturday. I could have lied but I said:

"I'm free but Ophelia's not."

"Is she working somewhere?"

"I don't know," I said.

"You don't know?"

"I don't know Bill, I don't know where she is."

"What do you mean?"

I went alone to Bill's house the following Saturday to eat venison with him and his wife, Corrie. I ate a variety of meats with them over the following weeks, and drank a lot of wine that strangely, for me, seemed to have a very small effect on my head the next day. Talking about Ophelia conferred on me the ability to consume bottles of Rhone reds without suffering the kind of hangovers I had

struggled with in the past. I was temporarily liberated from an inability to hold my drink.

So when Bill invited me up to London that evening a few months ago to discuss doing a piece on the cities featured in the major European films of Eric Leers it was partly because he was trying to help me out. He wanted me to do a long piece that would be the lead article in the magazine. It was an idea that had been turned down by editors I knew at several newspapers as being a bit too specialist. Bill, it seemed, thought it was just right for his readers, even if I had my doubts. However, it was work, with expenses and would help to promote my book on Leers coming out later in the year. If someone was taking pity on me then I was going to accept it.

I've got to mention the next bit Bill. I hope you don't mind.

I nearly forgot to say that Bill has sight impairment. It always surprises people. He's not totally blind as he has some vision in one of his eyes. Bill doesn't like the word 'blind'. It's got nothing to do with his ability to do his job or his virtues as a friend, husband or father. I only mention it because when I wrote that Bill might have been taking pity on me by offering me some work I thought of how people pity Bill because of his sight loss. It's something he hates.

There's more, Bill.

Bill is the most perceptive person I know. He is a clear thinker, who can turn an idea on its side, see things from odd angles. He sees things that I don't see. He questions things in a way that I hadn't considered. Somehow he notices things that I would miss. This, of course, is what makes him a good editor. I hate to use the phrase 'thinks outside the box' because it's such a tired old cliché, but I can't think of another phrase. And it's got nothing to do with that old bollocks about the blind being gifted with inner sight. Bill is just perceptive.

It was Bill who made me realise many years ago that I actually live in Europe, so that when I cross the channel I'm not going *to* Europe as if it's a separate place, but merely moving into another part of my continent. Being on an island produces a feeling of isolation and separation. Bill made me feel European. It was why I wanted to go and see more of it while I was at university, why

Ophelia and I planned our big trip. It was what we were talking about that summer in Somerset, not about having a holiday but exploring the rest of Europe. Bill got me into travel writing. I wasn't just content with visiting these places, I felt I had to write about them.

And that's why I'm where I am now. Writing about writing about writing. I am on an island, isolated and separated. But I can hear Bill's voice: "Don't draw attention to the words or the craft of writing, let the reader feel at ease with what you're describing, don't remind them you might not be telling the truth."



I owe a lot to Bill.

6 October

Eric Leers was born in Leiden in 1933. My interest in him started at university during a series of free screenings of French cinema. I saw his first full length film, *A Man Denied*, and was captivated by the movement of the camera and the street scenes of Paris and Lille where the film was set. It took me a while to realise that Leers was not French, but Dutch. I remember watching it in a lecture theatre with perhaps a dozen other people and when I got up to leave after watching the credits to the end and then hearing the film run off the spool and the clattering from the projector I was the only one left. I remember taking

Ophelia to a second showing of it later that night. Her approval of the film made me determined to find out more about this new director. When I discovered that he was relatively unknown it made me more interested, because at that time I was very much attracted to writers and artists on the margins; the nearly forgotten. Look him up in articles about the Nouvelle Vague and he's often missing or at best mentioned in passing for his co-production work. Yet he made films that looked similar to what Truffaut and Godard and Rohmer were making, particularly the latter. But Leers was an outsider, with no commercial success and a small critical appreciation of his work. He was overshadowed by the bigger names of the new wave. It was not until 1967 that he came into his own with the release of the *The Bottle Collector*, by which time the new wave had really ended. It is argued by Collinson and Douglas in their 2007 book *The European Film Imagination* that the departure of the nouvelle vague directors from their earlier film making concerns allowed room for Leers to emerge and find an audience. Crucially, it gave him the support of producers who saw the potential to market his work to an international audience. However, I won't bore you with any more details as they're in the book I was working on before everything happened. You can look up all the details on his website (unofficial as he doesn't have his own one). To summarise, Leers was attracted by the money Hollywood offered him but he was unable to make anything to match his earlier European output. He became a one-hit wonder and quietly returned to Europe and started his year-long cycle tour down the Rhine and then along the Danube, photographing and writing about his travels. Eventually he returned to The Netherlands and resumed filmmaking, producing increasingly accomplished narratives about boundaries, personal identity and life on the margins.

Leers has nearly always used cities as the subjects in his films, placing characters within them and then observing the interplay of people and their locations. Collinson and Douglas argue that his city locations determine the mood of the characters in each film, but I think they miss the point. For me, the strength of Leers' direction is his ability to make us see parts of the cinematic city in entirely new ways, to experience each location for ourselves regardless of what is happening to the characters on screen. When we watch a Leers film we are following the narrative as played out in the script and also constructing

our own narrative about the city where the action takes place. The shots that follow city activities or simply fix on a street or a building allow us time to speculate about the possibility of an alternative action taking place beyond the central narrative. It is this dual sense of spectatorship that, for me, is compelling and masterly. I am referring particularly here to the the films Leers made in the late 1970s and into the 1980s and the ones he has started making again in recent years.

The fact that Eric Leers set films in Paris, Amsterdam and Berlin were not coincidental to our choice of destinations when Ophelia and I set out for our trip to Europe.

So when I began the research for the article that Bill had commissioned I started with Paris. It was only about a week after I had been to see him in London and then spent the night at his house that I was again travelling by train from Southampton, this time headed for St Pancras to catch the Eurostar service.

However, my mind keeps taking me back to that trip in 1988 which had started at Victoria Station in the pre-Eurostar days. Ophelia and I took the train to Newhaven then caught the ferry across to Dieppe late at night and then travelled through Normandy in the early hours, ending up in Paris. I don't remember arriving in Paris very clearly but I do remember waiting for the train to leave the dockside at Dieppe and looking at the cafés open early, serving coffee and calvados to blue overalled workmen. There were also men in suits with flat leather briefcases feeding pastries into their bushy moustaches. I remember being fascinated by these briefcases as I had never seem their type before. Everything seemed different, the haircuts, the lettering above shops, the intensity of the light inside the cafés, the shoes, the clatter of crockery. We were the only people, it seemed, on the train. The SNCF staff didn't put the lights on but they had let us on board and we had several hours to wait before the train got going. The smell of strange tobacco came through the open windows. We talked in the shadows and ate the remains of the food we had brought with us from England, even though I was ready to sample French food.



It was in a slowly lightening train compartment on the quayside at Dieppe that Ophelia told me about Klaus.

And that's another story.

Klaus was Ophelia's childhood friend and cousin. He was to meet us in Paris. He turned up in Amsterdam and I knew he'd be waiting for us in Berlin - after all it was a place where he had a home - but I began to get fed up with him hanging around. It's what happened between me and Klaus that all this is leading up to. I just wanted to get that straight.

Friend and cousin. But that's another story. His life and, for that matter, Ophelia's life and upbringing are so different from my own. It was a different world they both came from, but at that time back in the 1980s it attracted me irresistibly.

My mind keeps throwing up images of the Central Station in Southampton and the two of us coming out of it, then Paris, Amsterdam and Berlin where Klaus enters those images. So to get this straight, I'm on an assignment following fictional characters from Eric Leers' films around European cities but also following Klaus, Ophelia and myself as we were twenty-five years before. I'm chasing ghosts. But I was talking about Eric Leers.

Leers has made several highly acclaimed films set in European cities. The one I was researching in Paris is one of his most famous and the one I was able to interview him about via email for the book I did on him. He talked about his other films as well but *La Chute Malheureuse d'Yvette* (1980) is one of his favourites of his so-called second wave. After his Hollywood flops Leers went back to his old style of filming on the streets, constructing narratives about the lives of ordinary people. *Yvette's Unfortunate Fall* is a simple story about a young woman torn between two men and her duty to her elderly mother. Yvette is faced with a loyalty to her mother who represents her past life as a child and an agonising choice between two men who can offer her the freedom to start a new life.

Let Eric himself take up the story:

“I wanted to get back to the basics, to describe life in Paris for a very ordinary person. Why did I chose a woman as my subject? Because the choices available to women are more complicated than for men, or they were at that particular time. In Yvette I was seeking to tell her story that anyone, male or female, could relate to and could witness the oppressions of day-to-day existence. I was even more interested in her surroundings, where she cycled through, the markets she shopped in, the cafés she met in with friends, her childhood home, the apartments of the two men she meets, the streets and parks of Paris. I was seeing the city as if for the first time, like a visitor fascinated by its contours. Some have said that I adopted an American eye for Paris, so that is why it was received favourably by people outside France. Some critics accused me of making a travelogue, but only the critics who had always found my work to their distaste. I was merely looking through the lens and thinking about the composition of every shot. I was judged as ever by critics who had read nothing of my earlier work, nor had they bothered to watch it. They had lazily neglected that what I was trying to do was only what Walter Benjamin had written about in his reflections on the experiences of observing the great European cities like Paris and Berlin. My story was made up of a set of compositions, like a long series of separate photographs, like impressions or tableaux. Everyone knows that by doing this I fell in love with Monique [the actress, Monique Brelinck who played Yvette]. I was in love with her and with Paris at the same time. There is nothing wrong with being in love with a beautiful woman and with a city at the same time.”

So I arrived in Paris, checked in to a hotel near Odeon and wasted no time in starting to walk in one of the areas where *Yvette's Unfortunate Fall* was filmed. Immediately a young woman on a bicycle overtook me as I went diagonally across one of the narrow streets by the Sorbonne. It could have been Yvette rushing to see one of her lovers, Bernard, a middle aged professor who wanted her to move with him to his family's farm in the Auvergne where he was going to write books and escape the boredom of his academic commitments and his moribund Parisian marriage. Or she might have been on her way to see her mother who lived in an apartment overlooking a cemetery, where Yvette had played as a child and had fallen from one its elaborate sculpted tombs and suffered the fall that had knocked her unconscious that led to several years of

hospital tests and periods of absence from school. Or she might have been about to enter a café to meet with Roger, her boyfriend from the department store where she worked. Or she might have been about to travel anywhere on the left bank of the Seine.

After having walked with Bill through London on many occasions I have acquired the habit of stopping and listening, so I transfer this auditory awareness to anywhere I go. Before the girl who could have been Yvette almost brushed past me I was listening to the rush of the traffic on the Boulevard St Michel, to the talk of two men who were parting, to the leak from a woman's earphones as I twisted past her while she folded up her street map. The girl who could have been Yvette made no sound until she went past, but only then the faintest click of her pedals.

The last sound I heard from Ophelia after she left the house was the sound of her car starting up. The engine ticked over for a long time and with a faint trace of hope (I apologise for the creeping clichés, but I don't want to slow down and mess about finding clever alternatives) I wondered if she was having second thoughts and would come back into the house. I remember screwing up my eyes, in the way I had done as a child when I wanted the world to put itself right. When I hoped for something to be reversed, like the broken lid of a teapot I had dropped or a crack that I had caused in the glass of a picture frame by throwing a ball against the wall of the living room while my parents were out. But she didn't. She didn't come back inside.

"Does it have to be now?" I had asked that morning. I leafed through The Observer while she packed her clothes. I didn't take in a word, but used the holding of the newspaper - the scanning of my eyes over the typography, the rustle as I turned from one page to the next, the fascination of the adverts for the products I would never buy, the turning over of thoughts in the manner of a washing machine slopping shirts from one side of its drum to another - as something to hide behind while I waited for Ophelia to leave.

Why? Why? Yes, yes, yes, yes, no, no, no, no.

I've got to stop. I've got to poke the fire, find some fiction to read that doesn't have a man and a woman in it. It's harder to do this than you might think. Where

are your books about men on their own Bill? Where's the natural history section or the maps? I want a map to look at.

7 October

I was going to text Ophelia from Paris but I decided that a letter would be better. It was the way we would have communicated back in the 1980s. I pulled out the sheets of hotel headed writing paper from their wooden rack and applied my favourite ink gel pen to the heavy pale blue woven surface of the first page. It was to be the first of the three letters that I wrote to Ophelia on that trip. I addressed it to her office at the university.

But I never got round to posting any of the letters. I have them here in front of me, sealed and ready to be sent off. I've kept them in the document wallet I use to file the bits of paper I collect on my trips. Here they are.

There are three envelopes, different sizes and different colours. The blue one is the one I wrote in Paris, the white one is from Amsterdam and the beige one is from Berlin.

I have a strong urge to open them up.

I must tell you that hours have now gone by and I haven't opened them yet. I've had two glasses of wine and just sat here, alternating between looking out of the window and staring at the envelopes which I have fanned out on the coffee table in the way my mother would arrange a selection of biscuits on a saucer to

impress guests. Two glasses of wine that went down quickly, while I stared at the fire and then the envelopes. And then the fire.

Here goes. I take the pale blue envelope and open it, cracking apart the stiffened gummed surfaces of the woven paper compartment sealed by my own saliva just over a month ago. The firm fold of the letter retains its shape inside. I'm wracked with anticipation and I feel furtive because it seems like I'm about to read someone else's mail.

This, then, written on surprisingly expensive paper, is what I said in Paris:

Dear Ophelia,

What I want to say was going to be in the form of a text but not even an email seemed right, so I am writing this letter to you to try to explain how I feel at this present time. I am currently in Paris doing a job for Bill about locations of Leers' films to mark the anniversary early next year. I came over this morning on Eurostar and I am at a nice hotel near St Michel. I'm not far from that shop where you bought that red dress. There's that restaurant where the magician suddenly collapsed in the middle of doing an act at the table next to ours, it's just in the next street. Bill's office booked me so I had no choice over where I was going to stay, just said that it had to be Left Bank as many of the locations of Yvette's fall are on this side of the river.

It's full of memories, this area. Do you remember playing the game in the Luxembourg Gardens with the chairs and who was going to sit where and how people sat apart and how they seemed to make a pattern like chess pieces? We seem to have been to this part of Paris more times than any other part. Even on that first time, when we went in search of the house where Ernest Hemingway had lived.

So I'm here again. This time alone. I just wanted to say to you that I do miss you and I want to hope that things will turn out right. I am very happy to give things another chance, to try to mend things. I know you've said that you wanted lots of time to sort it out, but it's just that coming over here is like it's given me a jump in time. I'm starting to look back on things, more clearly now. I just wanted you to know that I'm ready when you are.

I'm here for a couple of days and then I'm off to Amsterdam by train again. I was going to text but this seems to be right somehow that I should be sending a letter from Paris. Please text me back if you feel it's right, or you can email me. The one thing you can't do is send a letter because I don't know where I will be exactly over the next week.

So I'm only saying that I'm reminded of you and the good times we had together. If it helps to say sorry then I'll say that too, but as you know I'm still not sure what it is I've done wrong. I still love you, whatever. The sun is bright here. I'm going out to do some work.

Love,

XX

I remember it all clearly, how I composed this letter. However, nothing in it now seems like it was written by me. It reads like someone else's letter to his wife. I had wanted to speak to her, to plead with her to come back. But this is the best I could do. The act of writing, taking care over how I formed my letters and concentrating on producing my best and most legible handwriting, diluted that desire. Writing is not the same as thinking. I remember hesitating several times, particularly at the start of what became the last paragraph, but I couldn't manage to write a line about wanting her back. This is what I had wanted to say. The act of writing prevented me from expressing what I really wanted to say.

I remember feeling better at the time for having written this letter. It was enough to help exorcise a small amount of remorse. Being outside England undoubtedly helped too, allowing me to see things differently.

Which I did, very soon after writing this letter.

As soon as I walked out of the hotel, before I saw the young woman on the bicycle, I noticed a man and a woman in their thirties saying goodbye in the street. He was getting into a badly parked taxi that was causing an inconvenient obstruction to other vehicles and she was hugging him tightly, obviously not wanting to let him go. Enfolded by the tooting car horns they kissed and re-

kissed until he had to pull himself away, leaving the woman waving at the rear of the taxi as it moved along the street and then out of sight. I had been fiddling with the straps of my new rucksack, slowly and deliberately, to allow me to witness the event in full. I even had time to watch the woman walk away towards the Metro entrance, noticing her turn her head back a few times in the direction of the scene of her lover's departure - I had already ascribed this role to him, plus the possibility that he might be returning to his wife - and then I lost sight of her bobbing black tress of shiny hair as it descended below street level.



I had been watching the sort of moment I dislike, and not just because it had obvious parallels with me and Ophelia. Everything at that time seemed to have parallels with my predicament. I felt very sad for that woman with the shiny black hair. I could imagine how she must have felt, the way I have always felt when someone whose arrival you have been looking forward to finally comes and then when you embrace them and stand back to admire them you have a mental image of them leaving again. You start to think about the sadness of their departure at the same time as you try to enjoy the excitement of their arrival.

All arrivals, I realised from a very early age, must result in departures. When my father came home from working away installing specialist refrigeration equipment in hospitals in the north I used to wake up in the night and worry that he might not be there in the morning, having been called away again to repair something or other. I enjoyed him being at home but I was worried that he would leave at any moment.

I saw that black shiny hair disappear down the steps of the Metro, felt my father pat me on the head and then wave us all goodbye, saw Ophelia not smiling as she drove away, then Yvette came by right on cue. Close-up on her face, then a long shot to show the street scene, then a tracking shot from one side as she rides slowly along, then she leaves the shot so that we focus on the café table

that she has just ridden past and how she begins to notice a man as the camera zooms in slowly, that he stops drinking his coffee and then suddenly falls from his chair to the pavement. It is an agonising time delay until someone comes to help him. The sound is with the camera so that we can barely hear what is being said. There is noise of traffic, people walking past. Cut to turning spokes of Yvette's bicycle.

It was early evening in August in Paris.

Outside the house here on Bute it's getting dark and I have been standing at the shelves holding open a copy of *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway's reflections on his life in Paris in the 1920s. I went straight to the section called *A False Spring* and found a piece about looking for a restaurant. Apart from having a description of James Joyce and his family perusing a menu and conversing with each other in Italian there is this piece that stands out:

'There are so many sorts of hunger. In the spring there are more. But that's gone now. Memory is hunger.'

I am hungry.

Hemingway continues with some dodgy writing that makes me laugh. But what's strange is that he is describing the Paris that I have been describing, the Left Bank and the streets around the Jardin du Luxembourg. He even talks about La Place de l'Odeon. It's a coincidence. The book cost 3/6 and is one of those well-designed Penguins in perfect condition. Anyway, memory might have something to do with hunger.

If memory is hunger is hunger also memory? Was picking up this book a coincidence? Is life just a series of coincidences?

Tomorrow it will be the time to talk about Klaus.

8 October

The notion of characters falling is common in literature and other art forms. Not only do we see characters falling from grace, from nobility or from favour, but we also see them decline - another form of trajectory - mentally. The falls might be obvious and spectacular, literally falling off buildings or natural formations, or they might be barely perceptible. And then there are the religious connotations of falling, again a popular subject for classical art. Eric Leers, we know, had many of these things in mind when he started to make *La Chute Malheureuse d'Yvette* but it was more the idea of falling in the political sense that underlines his film. It has become accepted that his work in the 1980s anticipates the fall of eastern European communism.

Yvette experiences a fall from her bicycle that is to prove a turning point in her decision to remain in Paris, but she also experienced a fall from a tombstone when she was a child playing in the Montparnasse cemetery. It is a place she visits on two occasions in the film and is where she has her final meeting with Roger.

I was walking in the cycle tyre tracks of Yvette. It was early evening and the Paris sky was clearing rapidly to give the brief impression that as the world grew darker it was also getting lighter. It had been an overcast day and only in the hour before dusk did the light of the sun suddenly appear. There was a warm twilight over the streets as I made my way back to the hotel. I had been at Montparnasse cemetery, walking along the paths between its divisions, easily locating the exact spot where Yvette and Roger have their final conversation and also the tomb of Charles Pigeon which shows him in bed with his wife reading by the gas lamp he had invented. This is where Yvette was drawn to as a child and where she fell attempting to climb the angel that ascends from the headboard. She was in hospital for several months and her mother feared for her life, but one day Yvette woke up from her coma and announced that she wanted to learn to be a matador. There is a scene in the film at Bernard's apartment where he finds her watching a bullfight on television and he asks her to turn it off. She hesitates but then complies. There is a long take in which Yvette sits on a sofa eating sherbet. Occasionally she gets up and moves closer to the screen which is to the side of the shot so that we can't see it clearly. We

hear the bullfight music and the crowd cheering. Bernard's voice comes from another room. Yvette stands close to the television until he repeats his request for it to be switched off. She looks out at the viewer very briefly before she does as she is asked. The shot is held for a moment longer until we cut to Bernard and Yvette walking hand in hand along a street.

I had managed to cover nearly all the locations and was feeling satisfied that they could be strung together to make a decent walk, and that little seemed to have changed in the years since the film was made, and that I could also comment on some of the notable features on the route, like the magnificent grave of Charles Pigeon and, of course, recommended bars and restaurants, when in the twilight ahead of me I saw them again.

Ophelia and I were coming out of a small supermarket carrying bread and what looked like a bag containing food and a bottle of wine. I came to a halt and watched them as they stood on the pavement outside the shop and looked at a piece of paper.

I was able to move forward, covered by a tall-sided van parked on my side of the street. I consulted my map, to make it look as if I wasn't staring at them, at the same time nervous that they might look over at me or even ask me directions, but I was too far back, safely obscured, watching them through the side windows of the van.

I remember that my heart was beating fast and that my hands were shaking. To any Parisian, or indeed any Belgian, I must have looked like a slightly anxious lost tourist, which is exactly what I wanted anyone to believe, particularly myself and Ophelia if they happened to notice me.

When I was at Bill and Corrie's house in London shortly after Ophelia's departure Corrie stopped me in mid-sentence while I was describing Ophelia's collection of snow globes, her city icons in a snowstorm. I told them that I had gone up to one of the spare rooms in our house and tried to set them all off at the same time so that it was snowing in every place in her collection, including Dubai, but there were too many of them and no matter what strategy I devised I couldn't get every one to be snowing at the same time.

“To get every one to be snowing at the same time...” I was saying.

Corrie had obviously remained thinking about the description of my experience outside Southampton Central station that I had related to them earlier: “I had that experience once, when I saw someone who looked just like me. I was in a shop trying on some clothes and I came out of the changing room and there was a woman who looked just like me going through the sale rails just as I had done not long before. It was very weird. I knew it wasn’t actually me but it was like looking in the mirror, only she was dressed differently. I found it very unsettling and I had to turn away but at the same time I wanted to keep looking, because it was fascinating. And then I began to think whether I actually liked the way this woman moved and looked and whether I gave off the same impression when I was out in public. She looked vulnerable, a bit passive, as if she couldn’t defend herself. I want to be seen as the opposite, strong, and I hope that’s how I come across. I’ve never had this experience again.”

I thought about what Corrie had said as I looked at Ophelia and myself across that street in Paris. I saw no signs of weakness in either of them. They were young and confident and oblivious to what was going on around them. I could have got much closer because, after all, I was twenty-five years older than them, a middle-aged bloke, insignificant, in no way relevant to their lives. They wouldn’t work out who I was, but I didn’t want to take any risks. I remember feeling very excited, watching them, not sure what to do next, my heart racing, only knowing that at any moment they would move off in one of roughly three directions. I watched myself as I began to eat the end off the baguette while Ophelia walked a few paces to the left to look up at the street name. When she returned they went off in the opposite direction, back the way I had come. I followed them. They held hands. They shared the bread. I stayed on the opposite side of the street and it was too wide and there was too much traffic for me to hear what they were saying.

They walked surprisingly fast. Corrie had said that she found the experience unsettling, but in that warm Parisian twilight, going at a good lick, my concentration firmly fixed on my younger self and my younger wife, in the streets trodden by Joyce, Hemingway, Pound and Stein, in a ruddy warm light, my tall girlfriend, future wife, pacing ahead with an adoring me at her side, I felt

elated. Me, me me. Both of them strutting along like the cover of Freewheelin' Bob Dylan. I was elated and nervous, expecting them at any moment to disappear by making a sudden turn down a side street.

I couldn't remember having shared that moment with Ophelia all those years ago. It was unsettling to realise that I didn't know where they were going or what they were going to do next. Of course I remember being in Paris in 1988 and some of the things that we did, but when they appeared out of that shop I had no specific memory of that moment.

But every detail of what I did earlier this year seems so very clear to me as I sit here, particularly that dinner with Corrie and Bill. It was when I went up to London and I had seen myself for the first time. It was when the shock of it made me both sad and hopeful. I talked too much during the meal. It was when Bill gave me the Eric Leers assignment.

Just as it was about to get dark and after I had been following them through Paris, heading vaguely north-west all the time, they stopped and looked at the map again. They were in the past and I was in the present. They were ghosts. I wondered what it was they were looking for, perhaps a hotel, but they weren't carrying the rucksacks we had at that time.

It was when they passed the Saint Placide metro station and turned into a street off the Rue de Rennes and started to look closely at door numbers that I remembered. I don't know why I didn't work it out sooner. I had been following them for at least twenty minutes, in an area of Paris that was unfamiliar to me, excited by what I was doing, not knowing what was going to happen, wondering whether what I was observing was just some trick of my imagination, concerned not to be spotted by them, convinced that the longer I held them in view the longer the image of them would remain. Then it became so obvious. They were visiting Klaus. Then the street seemed immediately familiar and I was plunged back into being there, back in 1988 with Ophelia at my side, looking for the right apartment. It was at the moment when the memory came back to me that they vanished. I must have looked down for a second because when I looked again they were gone.

9 October

Let's get things straight. Klaus was Ophelia's cousin on her father's side, where most of the family are of German and Luxembourgish descent. They were childhood friends, particularly after Ophelia had once rescued him from drowning while they were canoeing on a lake during a holiday in northern Italy. Klaus, she told me the first time she described him, was an only child.

I had been absorbed by these stories of her childhood that summer we spent intermittently in Somerset. My period of getting to know Ophelia had involved learning about members of her family and their eventful, happy gatherings all over Europe, particularly in and around Trier in northwestern Germany. It was undeniably exotic. I asked for more, and Ophelia was always happy to oblige. She had kept photograph albums, diaries and other memorabilia of family excursions.

There she was at Beethoven's birthplace, Marx's birthplace, the confluence of the Moselle and the Rhine, pressing grapes with her feet and being pushed in a wheelbarrow through a wooded garden on a hill. I had looked at these photos with the same intensity as if I was looking at my own relatives, at glimpses of my own past, fascinated by the background details, the signifiers of an upbringing far removed from my own.

I was very jealous of Ophelia's past.

The photograph albums were kept in a worn and scuffed wooden trunk - itself an interesting container - in one of the attic rooms of Ophelia's parents' house. Before she opened it she warned me that she would not know the names of all the people whose images were waiting inside and that some photographs she would find very embarrassing because they were of her childhood.

But they were much more interesting than looking at photographs of my own relatives, most of whom were sitting in armchairs with Christmas paper hats on, or standing against climbing roses and squinting into the sunlight, or arranged in lines with the front door of our house in the background. Lots of photographs of people about to leave, made to stand still for a moment while a picture was taken to mark their visit. People who looked impatient to get it over with and

climb into their Ford Escorts and Vauxhall Vivas and get away to the same kind of poky house in the same kind of street a hundred miles away. But the albums that were stored in that pine chest contained faces and locations from another world. I lost myself in them, slowly turning the pages as if I was following the text of a beguiling narrative of history, making sure that I took in every detail before the next chapter appeared. I remember Ophelia leaning against me, sleeping with her cheek pressed against my shoulder as I savoured the images from her family's past.

I remember many times when Ophelia leant her head against my shoulder, particularly in railway carriages with slatted light passing over and over our faces, the rhythm of light playing over the top of the rhythm of the wheels on the tracks. A sound track and a light track. In fact, just like some of those memorable scenes from Eric Leers films, where characters are being transported either in cars or on buses or on trains or bikes and their faces go in and out of shadow and there is the sound of the clicking of a crankshaft or the thrumming of a diesel engine and a tone change as a gear is shifted. Ophelia with her head against my shoulder is like the scene on the train when Bruno and Elisabeth leave Amsterdam and travel to Hoorn on the IJsselmeer to visit her parents in *The Bottle Collector* (1967).

But back to the past, to Ophelia's past, where I hoped to enter into those moments as I turned the thick album pages while she slept at my side. I wanted to have been there, in those places, anywhere but where I had come from. Now I think about it, I must have fallen in love with Ophelia's past before I fell in love with her.

At that time, in Somerset in 1986, I even loved Klaus, particularly his name and the fact that Ophelia spoke of him so highly. I loved him before I met him. I loved him because Ophelia seemed to love him.

Klaus, Klaus, Klaus, Klaus, Klaus. Is there a Klaus in the house? Anyone here from Luxembourg, or is it Germany? Anyone here with an attitude problem, an attitude bigger than the Black Forest? I didn't think so.

Keep calm and look at the books, the paintings, or out of the window. What must you be thinking of me Bill? No, this is what you wanted to happen isn't it? Corrie, you advised me that writing it all down would be the right thing to do.

So it's no wonder I get angry sometimes.

Ophelia had saved Klaus from drowning, but she never gave me much detail of that day he had tumbled from the canoe and didn't immediately reappear. All she said was that she dived into the lake and found him under the upturned canoe, then tried to drag him to open water and held his head up until her uncle arrived to complete the rescue. Her uncle with the long naval beard, the one who looks like WG Grace in the photographs. He was paddling towards them at great speed with a look of determination and self-assuredness. This is how I imagined him to be looking as she certainly didn't use these terms to describe him. She couldn't remember what happened after that. She was twelve years old at the time. Klaus might have died in a lake in Italy, if it wasn't for the prompt actions of Ophelia. Or maybe it was her uncle Walter. She couldn't remember the accident clearly, and didn't want to say much about it after she had revealed it to me. It was as if she wasn't really supposed to have told me and that she had disclosed the information in an unguarded moment.

Maybe if Klaus had drowned things would be different now.

I took it as a strong signal that she loved me. It was an incredibly intimate moment when she showed me the photograph of her uncle and told me about Klaus nearly drowning. I wish I had a copy of that photograph. She looked at me in a way that no one had ever looked at me before. I can't describe it.

I remember asking Ophelia again, another time that summer, what had happened to Klaus after the canoe accident. Only when I pleaded with her did she tell me about the coma he was in and the anxious wait they had had for him to recover.

Ophelia told me that she cried every night he was in hospital, thinking that she was responsible for not helping him fast enough while he was in the water, assuming that it was her fault that he wouldn't regain consciousness. But then after a few weeks he opened his eyes and began talking, but she said he was

never the same again. The accident had affected his health and as he grew older he suffered recurring bouts of dizziness and spells of melancholy, alternating with periods of great creativity which left him exhausted and meant that he had to spend time recuperating at various spa locations in Europe. She showed me the photographs of these places.

What else do I want to tell you about Klaus? He had long blond hair and in many of the photographs in Ophelia's family albums he looks like a girl. In Paris in 1988 he looked like a large child even though he was older than me. His face was perfectly shaped, with a dimpled chin, and his eyes were a deep blue. He was thin and frail and walked with a slight limp. His blond hair curled at the edges where it met his uneven shoulders. In his uncle's borrowed apartment there was a grand piano which Klaus could play without recourse to musical notation.

He played for us that first evening in Paris when we went to visit him. I listened in total admiration, wondering at the situation I had found myself in, bound rigidly to the seat of my ornate chair, taking glances at the mirrors around the room and noticing the thick drapes over the open doors on to a balcony. Then he took us out to a restaurant where he seemed to know the owner and he settled the bill for the meal, which included a lot of wine and then cognac. I remember having a bad hangover the next morning and I had to stay in the apartment while Ophelia and Klaus went to watch a puppet theatre version of 'The Three Sisters' in the afternoon. They spent the evening talking about Chekhov and other writers while I lounged on a sofa and nibbled at slices of a baguette which had been cut up for me and placed on a silver tray. I had a craving for the salt in the butter that I spread on each slice and slowly I began to shake off the feeling of nausea that had been with me throughout the day. We played Scrabble in French, which I was hopeless at, and then Klaus offered me a drink. I can't remember what it was, but again the next morning I awoke with a thick head and a dry mouth. I was told by Klaus that the French call it a 'wooden mouth'.

I was excited when Ophelia had whispered to me, in the gloom in that train carriage on the harbourside in Dieppe, that Klaus would be meeting us in Paris. But now I am wondering why she whispered, why she waited until it was early

morning and dark and we had arrived on French soil before she told me. They had obviously been in contact before to set it up but she told me at very nearly the last minute. Why hadn't she told me before?

At the time I'm sure that none of this bothered me as I was excited to be meeting one of Ophelia's cousins, indeed her most famous cousin. I was also excited, of course, to be in France for the first time, to be in another country where everything seemed different. When the light came up and the train started its journey towards Paris through a waking Normandy I was transfixed by what I was seeing out of the window. Everything I saw I was seeing for the first time. That journey from Dieppe to Paris is one that I can play out in my mind at will. I can take myself back to that moment at any time. It was my first view of a foreign country and what I thought then was a foreign continent. I was in love with a beautiful woman, heading towards what I was told was a beautiful city, on a beautiful clear blue morning. There would be nothing but beauty ahead of me. My entire body and soul tingled with the pleasure of it all. And the train rolled slowly on. I'll never forget my first time in a foreign country.

And now an old song has come into my head:

"Hey, if you happen to see the most beautiful girl who walked out on me, tell her I love her...."

It was sung by Charlie Rich and I'm sure it was also in my head when I was in Paris walking the streets, doing the guide to Leers locations. It was a song that Ophelia and I knew and liked. I think I was humming it as I walked out of the Montparnasse Cemetery.

And then along came Klaus. Incy wincy spider. Along came Klaus and took it all away.

10 October

The final shot of *Yvette's Unfortunate Fall* is of the eponymous heroine cycling round and round a tree in the Luxembourg Gardens. It's a crane shot, which is rare for Leers as he usually shoots at street level. We are distanced from Yvette for the first time in the film, looking down at her, no longer closely involved in her actions. It's a typical Leers narrative closure though because it is left up to the spectator to decide whether Yvette will find happiness or not. Yvette is played by Eric Leers' wife, Monique Brelinck. I remember being captivated by her performance in the film the first time I saw it and after that she became my favourite actress during the 1980s.

It seemed fitting, therefore, to spend my last few hours in Paris walking in the Jardin du Luxembourg vaguely trying to find the exact tree Yvette had circled. My job in Paris was done and I had a train to catch.



But it was more than just wanting to re-visit a scene from the film. I went to the gardens because it was a place Ophelia and I visited several times back in the summer of 1988. To be honest, I was hoping to see us again.

However, instead of us I saw a marching band of people dressed as cowboys and Indians playing glockenspiels, cornets, drums and twirling batons, bashing out their fast-paced tune as they snaked a route across the gardens and out to face the cars on the Boulevard Saint Michel. They continued playing as they crossed the road, holding up the traffic.

And then I realised that I wouldn't see myself and Ophelia that afternoon. On my way to the RER station I worked out, on the basis of my experiences so far,

that there was one obvious reason. They only appeared at twilight. It occurred to me while watching the marching band that on the two occasions they had appeared it had been nearly dark.

On my way to Amsterdam I gave it some more thought, just as I had done that evening on my way to see Bill in London. I have always had my best ideas on trains.

And this was the idea: If I could go to the places Ophelia and I visited that summer in Amsterdam and it was evening then I might see them again. But it was more than just a hope. Somewhere between Mons and the Belgian border, in the battlefields of the First World War, I decided that if I could be in the right places at the right time I would see them and get a better look and hear what they were saying, get closer to them, maybe even talk to them. I never doubted that I would see them again. This lack of doubt seems strange to me now.

The train was running fast and it had started to rain. I was listening to Kraftwerk on my headphones. But that was not what Ophelia and I had ever listened to together, not back then. On our Walkman we listened to pop music, some classical, but mostly whatever was in the charts at the time. Our preparation for final exams had been filled with music. After sessions in the imposed silence of the university library we would listen to music at high volumes back in the flat. We took this music with us on the trains.

On the Thalys service to Amsterdam I was listening to music that belonged to my present, watching the rain fall, windscreen wipers on cars moving to the beat of Kraftwerk.

What I now realise is that on that journey I was planning a way of trying to change what had happened. It seems strange to me now that I thought I could change what had happened in the past. If you believe something might be possible and you have been living with the occasional guilt of what had happened in the past for so long, then it would prove irresistible. Wouldn't it?

However, I must tell you more about Klaus.

I must tell you more about Klaus because wanting to change something in the past directly concerns him. He has become an important part of this story.

I remember listening to him talk when I first met him. In his presence I felt that I needed to be quiet, to hold back in case I sounded naïve or somewhat lacking in knowledge. I was in awe of his impressive loquaciousness, and that accent which I couldn't quite decide whether it was German or French. I listened with the intensity of an acolyte to everything that he said, and I would smile and shake my head when he invited my opinion, uncertain of the meaning of what was coming out from between his pink lips, as if he had been talking in a foreign language, even though his English was very good and clearly enunciated. I listened to what he said but I didn't hear what it was he was saying.

In his presence I felt that I had lost a large part of my vocabulary. I contributed to our meal time talks with short utterances and questions, supplying Klaus with the permission to maintain his verbal meanderings on subjects ranging from theatre to botany. His voice was slightly too high. It had a faint squeak to it and an occasional underlying breathiness which I took to be the consequence of a respiratory difficulty, perhaps as a result of his near death experience as a child in that Italian lake. In those first few days of being with him in Paris I felt I had been transported to an incredible world where people never stopped talking about everything and everything and everything. If I had met Klaus in England it would have been different, but being with him on foreign soil with strange plumbing, the aroma of coffee, fat cigars and odd looking vegetables smothered in gloopy sauces made it feel like life was being lived inside a cloud. Klaus made me feel that I was constantly floating from one moment to another. It was both a comfortable dream and a frustrating reality.

That was my first impression. I even loved the way he pulled out a monocle from his cardigan pocket to examine the small print on the back of a cinema ticket. It didn't seem to matter that I did not understand a word of what was happening on the screen. It was incredible to be sitting in a cinema in Paris with Ophelia on one side of me and Klaus on the other. I was the filling in a love sandwich. No, make that a baguette. And I'll have a coffee and a Badoit to go with it. Klaus was the source of new experiences. He was an ever present source of fascination.

And that became the problem, his ever-presentness. Novelty is newness, and never fails to beguile. And then it wears off. It becomes too familiar, like catching

planes to go to work or the ordinariness of a new car's interior once its factory fresh smell has worn off. Some things lose their novelty value sooner than others. On balance, I still find aeroplane travel exciting. Klaus, however, became someone I grew tired of after being with in Paris and Amsterdam.

When I heard that he had died I felt terrible.

But I never felt sad.

11 October

I've spent a very wet day in the house dipping into Bill's books. I've poured a glass of whisky. I'm beginning to feel a little more relaxed. The wind is beating at the windows and the fire is well stoked. It's the setting for a ghost story, so back to the task. Reader, beware.

So can you change what happened in the past? I arrived in Amsterdam with this thought in my mind. It was still there when I left. In between the arriving and the leaving I did this:

I stayed in a small hotel between the Albert Cuyp market and Museumplein, went to visit a friend, wrote another letter to Ophelia, cycled for miles, took a train to Hoorn, got drunk, bought books and fought off two men who tried to steal my laptop from me as I walked back to the hotel from dinner at my friend Sophie's apartment.

It happened to be early evening when I caught the tram outside Amsterdam Central Station. I knew, of course, that this was the time when I had a chance of seeing them again. I had worked out that this was now the very witching hour and that strange things might happen.

The area outside the station was busy with commuters and, as always, blocked with tourists in knots of brightly coloured waterproof clothing, their flapping garments intended to cheat the sharp wind. Clouds moved quickly overhead, which I had been watching on the train in to the city. I had seen office building windows facing the sunlight being washed across from orange to grey, a canal surface stroked with rippled mauve and a line of traffic at a road junction immersed in brown and yellow. A cricket pitch - which is always a surprise to see in The Netherlands, but shouldn't be - turned almost blue. But it felt, as I was arriving, that it wouldn't rain, that there would be a strong sunset. And I was right. It was one of those evenings when as it approached darkness it grew lighter, the layers of grey stratus clouds left suddenly behind. A switching on of light.

I waited for the number 16 or 24 tram that would take me south through the city centre to my hotel. I could just have easily got into a taxi and driven off, businesslike, efficiently, effortlessly, picking up every step of the journey on Bill's expenses. But I like trams. I like the way they stand still for no one, I like their rattle and swagger, the sense of being on a fairground ride. Those Mercedes taxis are so boring and, besides, Amsterdam is not a place for cars.

As soon as I saw the hotel stationery I knew I had to write another letter. I have it here, in the folder. I opened it and read it through the other evening in bed while waiting to drift off to sleep. My handwriting looks so serene, so well crafted, so unlike the way I keep those scribbled notes in jotting pads where that scrawl of gel nib that evades any line constrictions goes where it wants to, like thoughts, barely readable by me, so safe from any prying eyes. But this, on cream paper, is all elegance and sophistication. Look at those loops. Since when have I done loops on my d and p? I do remember, though, thinking for a long time about what I would write. I sat looking out of the window of the hotel room, across at other windows, looking at people who had come in from work, staring at them through their unguarded panes of glass. I waited for inspiration.

No, I was just putting it off. That commitment of words to paper. They are marks before they become words. I only had to get out on to that paper what was inside my head. I wrote her name.

Dear Ophelia....

And then waited, watching a man in the apartment just below me as he stood in front of a television screen and flicked through the channels. In another apartment I could see a meal being prepared, people talking, wine being poured. I felt hungry but through the hunger the words were forming, the phrases shaping, a rough approximation of what I really wanted to say. Memory is hunger.

This is what I wrote:

I arrived here this evening after an easy train journey from Paris. I seem to be re-tracing the journey we took before we got married. Do you remember it? Only then we must have stopped in Brussels. This is a coincidence as I find myself here in Amsterdam on business of course. It had been raining on and off most of the afternoon but now it's very clear and is promising to be a good day tomorrow.

I am thinking about you all the time and about how nice it would be if you were here with me. I am about to go out and get something to eat and it would be good to have you share dinner with me. I would love to have the chance to talk. I am sure that in due course we will sit down again. I just want to say that as each day goes by I know that I feel more strongly about you. I realise just how much I am missing and what you mean to me, what you have always meant to me and always will.

As you know, I am still uncertain as to what this is all about but I do understand that sometimes we all feel unsure about what it is that is troubling us. I am just doing what I have to do so time as ever rushes by, but that doesn't mean that I don't miss you. It sounds so corny but it was only after you had gone that I understood what I have seemed to have lost. That sounds stupid, but I don't want it to sound that way. I feel that I have been foolish but I don't know why.

I do hope you get in touch soon and I am looking forward to seeing you again when I get back. I am invited to have dinner with Sophie tomorrow. She, as you know, lives here permanently now so there should be a lot of catching up to do. She will ask about us but I won't tell her what has happened. I will send her your love.

I send you my love. My love.

Much love

XX

Sophie already knew what had happened. Sophie is a friend of ours and before I could say anything when I arrived at her apartment she announced that she had heard and that she was very sorry. I must have seemed surprised, but I shouldn't have been as she and Ophelia have been close for many years.

So the welcome I got from Sophie was confirmation that, as far as Ophelia was concerned, things were officially all over. It also dispelled the illusion I had been under that it was a secret between Ophelia and me, which was ludicrous because Bill and Corrie knew about it and probably the neighbours in our street. It had just felt more controllable, containable, to think that no one knew about it, even though I had told Bill very early on. I hadn't thought about Ophelia doing the same thing as me and confiding in people. So when Sophie said she was sorry, it flashed into my mind that probably she was going to present me with the potentially awkward statement that she would have to take sides in this marital breakdown, be on the side of Ophelia and never speak to me again. This was absurd. But it was the kind of thing I have seen happen. A marriage ends and with it the friendships. So when Sophie said that she was sorry to hear about it I suffered one of those visceral waves, a kind of faint nausea that accompanies the imminent delivery of some unwelcome news. I looked into her eyes instead of the floor and saw a very, very kind smile. When Sophie said sorry she meant it. In Amsterdam, travel weary, I couldn't have had a more sincere greeting. What Sophie did next was expected and unexpected. One gesture followed on rapidly from another.

She gave me a hug. And then she kissed me on the back of the neck, leaving her lips in contact with the hairs of my bent nape just above the collar line. Her mouth lingered above the impress of wetness she had imparted to my skin. I reacted to her firm, meaningful embrace with one of my own. Then she stroked one of my ears with the tip of a finger. As we pulled slowly apart - I think I was the first to make the move - she kissed me again, this time on the cheek, quickly, but with open lips, her tongue grazing the stubble of my face, possibly scoring the tip and conferring a mild laminal abrasion. Suddenly, I relinquished bodily contact but I wanted to make it known that I hadn't consciously flinched and that I wanted to convey my gratitude for this moment of close human contact, so I said "thank you". She said "what for", so I said "this". She smiled. I was thankful for what had just happened.

What had just happened was feeling the fragile bone structure of another person in my grasp, the brush of hair, the sensation of touch. It wasn't the kiss, the osculatory moment or even the lingering, lingual collision, it was the reassurance that I was not about to face rejection. This was the unexpected part.

Looking back, that's what it was all about. It wasn't what later happened that evening in my drunkenness, it was the recognition that I still existed. I know it sounds stupid but it wasn't until that moment, that embrace with Sophie and her tenderness, that I was assured that I was not travelling in a land of ghosts, a foreign land of illusions, allusions, broiling memories, half-baked ideas, wearing an existential tagging device, floating through a succession of twilights, chasing the dead and the living on equal terms, moving, moving, planning and re-planning journeys, looking, looking, looking, looking, not sure of anything anymore, let alone what it felt like to be touched. Sophie's hug had woken me up. It might seem obvious to you, Bill and Corrie, but I couldn't see what was happening to me until that point.

Amsterdam. Evening. Interior. Two people eating dinner.

That cinematic moment between Sophie and me remains as fresh as a clichéd daisy in my mind's eye. In my mind's eye, Horatio. I can see it now. She had touched her tongue against my face and I liked it very much. I felt connected,

felt warmth, smelled the shampoo in her hair, felt like I hadn't felt for god knows how long. It was like being touched by Ophelia. By my wife.

Sophie, at that moment - evening in Amsterdam, interior, two people embracing before eating dinner - reminded me of Ophelia.

It's common in The Netherlands to leave curtains undrawn so that people passing in the street can see inside the house. So at Sophie's small house in the Oud-Zuid we could be seen as we sat face to face at her table eating cassoulet and drinking red wine.

Exterior: A man and a woman eat and drink, talking animatedly, the man gesticulating to make some point, obviously lacking the necessary vocabulary to convey his ideas, having to rely upon expansive body movements. He's a man who talks with his hands, therefore lacking a certain something. She, on the other hand, looks demure, gorgeous even, mature but retaining the fine features of her youth. She is as still as a painting while he flails in fits of non-verbal ticks. She is stillness and he is absurd exaggerated movement. We're outside, looking in. We're passers-by. These are our impressions, made in an instant. These are our judgements. We look at them.

This is how, perhaps, we looked to the world as we sat and talked. Interior shot. Sound of contemporary popular music in the background.

At one point, sitting at the table and looking across at Sophie, I was both inside and outside, aware of her looking at me and also getting a sense of how we both looked from outside the room. There's a word for this kind of feeling, but I can't think what it is.

Before I allowed the wine to get the better of me and before I did what I did which I now feel embarrassed about, I was able to tell Sophie about my work and what had brought me to Amsterdam where she now lives.

Part of the conversation went something like this:

"I know someone who knows Eric Leers well," she said.

"Have you met him yourself?" I asked.

“Yes, but only at a social gathering. But I can ask Arnie if he can arrange something for you. You’re in luck, like you often are, because I believe Eric might be in town at the moment. You’ve timed this trip well, so if you like I can see what Arnie can do to get you two together. How many days have you got?”

“I can make time, especially if there’s a chance I can meet Eric Leers. I’ve interviewed him by email before but never met him.”

The above is a rough recollection of the exchange between Sophie and me. I’ve included it because it came out of the blue, in the middle of our conversation about her job and my job, in the way that you trade information about each other’s professional life in a polite way. I could still feel her tongue on my ear and I was feeling so noticed, listened to and, basically, welcome. After talking about me I asked her about her own work. She paused, wiped cassoulet drips from her chin with her napkin, held her wine glass up to her face, looked at me with open eyes, smiled and then said, taking me by surprise: “I know someone who knows Eric Leers well.”

Now, sitting here and looking at the fire when I should have been writing, it goes around in my head like a line from a catchy song, or a show tune: “If you know Eric, like I know Eric, then tell me, we’re in love....” Sometimes I wonder whether it’s just the effects of the tablets or that liminal boundary world between sleep and being awake where I cross and re-cross throughout each day, because I have these sensations. I hear speech, snatches of music, clear images of me and Sophie, Ophelia or even Klaus. I’m crossing and re-crossing boundaries. It’s not unpleasant, in fact I quite like it. I like not being able to control it. I consider it to be part of the recovery process. Now that’s Corrie’s phrase, the recovery process. I’m constantly borrowing phrases from other people. I’m a wanton free-cycler of other people’s words. Perhaps none of what I’ve written so far is mine, perhaps I’ve pulled it together from what other people have said. I’m a plagiarist. I’m not sure. Maybe it’s the books in this house. I’m borrowing things from them. All I know is that it starts inside my head, so it must be my own, but then it is subject to the process of writing and that I then rely on tired old expressions. I’ve raided the mausoleums of language. I’ve created a mad lexicographical mashed up monster. But then that doesn’t matter, it’s the

thought that counts. It's the effort I'm making. And then again maybe I shouldn't mix whisky with these tablets.

Cut to Amsterdam interior. Night.

And then, to my delight, extra delight, Sophie went on to say that Eric Leers, as far as she knew, was shooting a new film. I didn't know this. She suggested that I might be able to visit him on set. Or maybe I suggested that. Until that moment I hadn't known about any new film by Leers. I had read rumours on the blogs, but this news came as a surprise. I think I must have just politely accepted this knowledge but at the same time convinced myself that Sophie had got her information wrong. I know all there is to know about Eric Leers. How could I not have known that he was in Amsterdam shooting a new film?

It turned out that he was indeed shooting a new film but not in Amsterdam. He was working down in the south of the country in Baarle-Nassau. And I did get to meet him. The reason I didn't know about this filming was because it was a private project. Eric was shooting a piece at his own expense. It's what he calls a sketch or an outline for a bigger idea. I knew he had done things like this in the past but none of the sketches is available to view anywhere.

After dinner in her publicly visible kitchen, in a goldfish bowl that would unsettle the English but not the Dutch or Sophie, I accepted the offer of some brandy. Now, you might recall my youthful inability to hold serious alcohol and I have to say that in my middle years I have not improved my capacity for spirits. However, in my low points when suffering from the after effects of alcohol I usually attribute my hangover to some extraneous factor and not just the amount of the stuff swallowed. Excessive drinking doesn't help maintain a clear head the next day but I do seem to suffer more when I have been travelling, as if the effects of perpetual motion are exacerbated by the accompaniment of booze. Drinking after driving, drinking after flying, drinking after a train journey are all liable to mess up my body chemistry. So I can use this excuse for the reason the drink went so fast to my head once the brandy left the lip of its glass balloon and rushed in to my oesophagus.

Sophie had been telling me about how her life had changed direction. She said that she was looking for someone new. I assumed she meant a man, but I worked it out later what she had actually meant.

This is a bit about Sophie in the form of a lonely hearts advert I've just decided to make up:

Sophie works for a Dutch bank, is divorced and likes theatre, country walks, foreign travel and going out to restaurants. She is a slim brunette in her mid-forties with no children or pets. She would like to meet attractive women of her own age or younger for a possible long term relationship.

I listened to Sophie telling me about herself and I felt so welcome in her house. I loved being in the presence of her perfume. And the smells of the food and the brandy. It was a combination that influenced me to act rather foolishly at her kitchen table. I spent a few hours madly in love with Sophie that evening.

Sophie suggested hope. Like standing before the statue of a saint, being in her presence promised an answer to my prayers. I had prayed for the return of my wife. It was not just what Sophie said to me while we sipped cognac but how she looked, the cock of her head, her wide eyed face that set off a scream for hope inside me. Her deeply unwrinkled forehead I took to be a sign of encouragement. It might have been the candle burning on the kitchen table and the smoke in the room that got me all ecclesiastical. I remember saying 'please' over and over inside my head as she suggested in her voice stained with almonds that Ophelia needed time to think things through. She never said it had ended, she never held her chin in her hand and consumed nuts and gave off the impression that things were final. From all this I felt relieved and exceedingly calm. The candle, the cognac, the essence of almonds and Sophie's evening scent I welcomed through my nostrils. So once she had taken my hand to affirm her belief that things could possibly be all right I gave in to impulsiveness. We were standing in the kitchen after finishing the washing up.

I pulled Sophie towards me and hugged her. Then I kissed her. Then I continued to kiss her. On the lips. Then I held her closer. Then I clenched one of her buttocks. I made noises. Not sure what I said. Then Sophie broke it up. In

the nicest possible way. When I had the courage to look at her I saw that she was smiling. I apologised profusely.

It went like this, only different:

“I thought for a moment that you were Ophelia,” I said.

“It was passionate,” she said, still smiling.

“I didn’t mean to.”

“You didn’t mean to be passionate with Ophelia?” she asked.

“I did, but....”

She had put her hand on my shoulder and tilted her head slightly to one side. Her gaze was in neutral, that’s all I can accurately say about it. There was a few seconds of silence, when I strained to think of what to say next. So I apologised again, feeling her hand on my shoulder, calming me, comforting me. The smell of a candle. I was confused.

Then I told her that I loved her. In a matter of fact way. In the way that friends should say it. She told me that she loved me too and that she always would. I felt pleased about this and couldn’t think of any more to say, so I let her look at my pathetic face, my plaintive, beaten gesture, my contrite, humble, innocent and puzzled expression so that she could read into it a cue for what would happen next. Was she expecting me to run away? She offered coffee and I hastily accepted.

Later I had to fight off two blokes before I got back to the hotel.

12 October

When one of the men grabbed at my laptop bag I didn't feel frightened or intimidated, I felt angry. It was the excuse I think I had been looking for for a long time. The anger that I had washing around inside me, pumped up by veins full of brandy, came out in that swift moment of attempted robbery. I remember holding on to the bag tightly and reaching out for the man's throat, shouting at him, repeatedly shouting very loudly, an obscene, angry rant that must have led to me being rescued so quickly.

The other man started hitting me in the back, which I found annoying rather than painful, so I ignored it, concentrating on the one who had made the move to dispossess me of my precious laptop. I had taken him by surprise by fighting back and was able to force him against a wall and then I started to kick out at him and push his head against the kind of brickwork familiar from a reproduction of a painting by Pieter de Hooch. It's the one, Bill, on the postcard in your downstairs loo. I remember you buying it after one of our visits to the National gallery in London. I was attempting to smash my attacker's head against these bricks until he let go of the laptop, screaming at him that he was a cunt. I only ever use that word when I am extremely angry. So I don't know whether it was the scale of my anger, my enhanced strength or the word 'cunt' being repeated in the genteel surroundings of a street near the Vondelpark that thwarted my attackers, but it was quickly over as people came up to my rescue and the two men fled.

I was helped by a young couple whom I offered to buy a drink as a way of saying thank you, but they politely declined and led me to a tram stop so that I could get back to my hotel. I was still fizzing with anger when I fell asleep that night, intoxicated with the evening's booze and a brain that didn't know whether to re-play my moment of madness with Sophie or my moment of madness with my potential muggers. So it played one after the other as alternating images for what seemed like the whole night.

When I woke up I was calm. I remember that the morning sky had a deep blue tint. I decided that I had to get to work on what I was supposed to be doing in Amsterdam. Starting early, using the bike the hotel supplied me with, I cycled

the Eric Leers walking route of Amsterdam. It saved time, and the effort of pedaling helped to clear a mild hangover.

Mes souvenirs indistincts or *The Bottle Collector* uses locations in the centre of the city, apart from the scenes set in Hoorn, a short train ride to the north. The main characters, Bruno and Elisabeth, meet at the house of a mutual friend and soon become romantically connected. The film follows their courtship and Elisabeth's secret desire that they become married. However, Bruno is keeping concealed the fact that he is about to leave Amsterdam to return to his wife and children in Paris. Elisabeth's sadness at losing the first man she has loved is made worse by her realisation that some of her friends knew about Bruno's deceit but she had refused to listen to their warnings.

The film is noted for its memorable final scene where Elisabeth breaks suddenly from Bruno's embrace and runs towards the Amstel river, with the action freezing the moment she reaches the edge of the water.



The English title refers to the empty wine bottles that Elisabeth saves as mementoes of her evenings together with Bruno. The French title refers to the fact that Bruno is the narrator of the film and how he struggles to remember the exact order of events in his affair with Elisabeth. Like many of Leers' films much of the action takes place outside with the characters moving between locations. The film was restored not long before I started the travel article, ready for the

major respective of Eric Leers' work at the British Film Institute. It is regarded by many critics as a fine example of his auteur style and by some critics as the end of his new wave film-making.

To be honest, this part of the trip was easy as I had walked the route of *Mes souvenirs indistincts* before, so I could afford to take advantage of the weather and spend some time browsing in bookshops. Amsterdam is a good place to buy secondhand books in English, particularly American editions of texts that are difficult to find at home. For a few hours I felt relaxed and almost forgot to think about Ophelia.

In a complete reversal of the mood I had found myself in when I returned to my hotel room after dinner with Sophie, and the attempted robbery, I felt oddly calm. I put it down to the run of good luck in finding several sought-after books including a collection of stories by Donald Barthelme, the fact that the weather was good and that I was somehow cheating by not really having to concentrate too hard on my research in Amsterdam. I was taken by surprise by my good fortune and, pondering on it, I felt elated. It's a bit like now, alone in this house, never quite knowing what thoughts are going to stray into my mind and then what effect they might have on my mood. This afternoon, for example, I felt mildly euphoric after laughing when a squirrel fell out of a tree.

It must have been due to my change of mood that I decided to catch a train to Hoorn. I reasoned, as I cycled to the Central Station, that I could offer it in my article as a side trip to the walking tour of the city. It would fill up a panel on the page, the essential information bit with web links.

So I went to Hoorn on a whim. It is only a short sequence in the film, the part where Elisabeth takes Bruno on a journey by train to meet her parents. Actually, it was originally a longer sequence but Leers cut it down. The footage no longer remains but it's described by the French critic Serge Manon, a former friend of Leers, as a scene where four characters take lunch and not a lot is said. It was cut out because Leers felt that it was enough for the audience to know that Elisabeth was intent on marrying Bruno and the desire to take him to be inspected by her parents made the point adequately. The official line is that Leers felt that there was no need to introduce the parents in the narrative. We

just get the train ride and then after a fade out we're back in Amsterdam. We are left to imagine the scene with its quiet awkwardness. This is what academics have suggested in conference papers from a symposium on the lost scenes of the nouvelle vague held in Dusseldorf in 2004.

I once went to a talk entitled 'Lost Leers' and I heard people discuss scenes that do not exist. Someone from Norway, I think, is doing a PhD based on Leers lacunae. There are also people who have imagined these missing sections and attempted to film them in the style of Leers. They're not worth trying to find on YouTube. But if you ask Eric Leers himself, which I did, he says that removing elements during the editing process is just a natural part of the creative process. To be creative, according to Eric, is to destroy. He's probably not the first person to come up with that aphorism, but once I read it in his email I took to the phrase and held on to it. I held on to it like a squirrel clinging to a branch. According to Leers we don't need to mention everything when we tell a story. Those who create also destroy.

To be creative is to destroy something. This is what he actually wrote in his email to me. Thank you Eric for planting this in my mind. And thank you for being behind the reason to go to Hoorn, a pleasant town on the IJsselmeer where I had a late lunch of pancakes, accidentally ordering off the children's menu so that they came in the shape of fish. The waitress, a girl in her late teens, gave me a seductive smile as she placed the plate on my table. I will never forget that smile, even if for her it was meant as a gesture of pity. I am sometimes pleasantly haunted by an image of that Dutch serving girl.

Travelling back to Amsterdam it felt like I was having a good day. It was as if the unusual and unexpected events of the evening before had shaken me out of the spiritual fug I had been wading through. Everything was going smoothly and it was, as I have said, a complete contrast to the day before. It might have been the simple combination of the sunshine and the sea air. I began to think that a new pathway had appeared in front of me or that a new set of possibilities was opening up, that one thing was leading neatly to another, that where before I had hit barriers I was now slipping effortlessly through the narrow kissing gates of daily existence.

When I started to cycle back from the station to my hotel in the low saturated light of early evening, taking a route determined by nothing more than decisions made on the spur of the moment, I saw them again.

13 October

There was Ophelia. Look, look at Ophelia just as she was twenty-five years ago. There was Klaus. Look, look at Klaus just he will ever be. There was me. Look, look at me, walking half a pace behind them as they laughed and joked together and I struggled to keep up. They sometimes spoke in French or some other language that sounded like it might be Latin. I pretended to find it all funny while I walked slightly behind. Ophelia would glance back and she would smile at me and it would seem all right because she was smiling that big smile and I could look at his back again and his long blond hair and the way his body rolled to accommodate the limp that he had. Sometimes I gained ground and I kept in there at Ophelia's side and she would kindly acknowledge me with a smile and sometimes wink. I suppose she winked to let me know that things were all right and weren't we having fun and didn't I tell you it would be this good. That's exactly what was happening when I saw them on the other side of the canal, saw their bodies stretched out in wavering reflections across the water. Look, look at them.

So can you change what happened in the past?

I arrived in Amsterdam with this thought in my mind. Seeing them across the canal I knew that I had to put this question to the test. There was part of the past right in front my eyes. I was separated from myself by water. I followed on the other side of the canal as they walked, keeping level with them. It was on this sighting that I noticed how similar Ophelia and Klaus looked. Both had long blonde hair, they were of similar height, both in tee shirts and faded jeans. Walking behind them in 1988 I must have found it difficult to tell them apart, except that one else had that erratic, disabled gait.

It was while we were in Amsterdam that summer that the novelty of Klaus began to wear off. I was the one left out of the conversation, forced to take photographs of boats and groups of chained up bicycles, having to run to catch up with the other two who hadn't noticed my absence. Someone watching us back then might have felt sorry for me. Look, look at the gooseberry with the camera. Look at him. It'll end in tears, mark my words. Look at his gauche, uncivilised ways, his English manner, his inability to be erudite, spontaneous, garrulous and frivolous. Look at him. Poor bastard. Look, look, look at him.

Cut to still from an Eric Leers film. Freeze frame black and white. Gesneden om nog van een Eric Leers film. Freeze Frame zwart en wit.

I held my breath as I watched them, no mean feat as I was walking. What I mean is, I was frightened to make a noise, as if I was stalking wildlife. The quietness of canalside Amsterdam was in contrast to the noise of Paris where I had seen them last. I had the sensation that I was creeping but in fact I was walking briskly. The past was going faster than the present, yet it wasn't making much progress along the canal. Like a cartoon backdrop that is on an endless loop it took a long time before we got to the first bridge. I was moving quickly to keep up with their slowness, holding my breath for fear of them flying away. Slow and fast. Silence. Twilight.

Twilight. Fast and slow. A washed out colour moment. The backdrop to the past was on a continuous loop. I began to think how I might change this past. But first I had to work out how to hold on to it. To be creative is to destroy something. Anything new that you create has to be offset by the destruction of

something else. Things can be left out of any story. The viewer or reader can fill in the gaps.

It's all in the gaps Eric. It's in the spaces.

We were separated by water. Should I cross at the next bridge and join them? This is what I thought. Should I cross the canal and join them before they vanish? This is what I thought.

I can stop the action now though. I can make that moment last as long as I like, make that loop roll on for as long as I like, for here, in Scotland, I have control over everything, except time. I have control over the story, over where I go next.

Add a gap. Change direction. My finger nails need cutting.

I want to stay with Ophelia and Klaus for a while longer, to say how beautiful she was then and why Klaus became an utter fucking nuisance of the grand order. I want to say how I found him no more than an effeminate cripple, even though I could never say this to Ophelia. You can't discriminate against people with disabilities, but I can now, I can here. I can say what I fucking well like. No one can hear me. In Bill's second home no one can hear you scream. What a great tag line for a film.

Ophelia was beautiful then and Klaus became a nuisance because he was always turning up. Meeting him in Paris was fine but then he started turning up in other places. The only time Ophelia and I had alone was on the trains between cities. We crossed through Flanders hand in hand and sometimes with our hands inside each other's clothes, daring to touch the other's skin in those places that when stroked arouse an agonising pleasure. Through the Low Countries, in busy carriages, we challenged ourselves to maintain restraint as the other circled nearer with a flick of a nail or left an immobile finger poised within a millimetre of triggering an uncontrollable response in our somatosensory system. I remember being engaged in conversation with a friendly Belgian businessman about his trip to the RSPB centre at Slimbridge in Gloucestershire and, hidden by the magazine on my lap, Ophelia's index finger was foraging inside my trousers. Deliberately, she kept the conversation going while deftly, in a beautiful hidden act of prestidigitation, she tested my resolve.

We would check into our cheap hotel, have sex and then later Klaus would appear. It was obvious that we were not meeting by chance, that he had decided to follow our itinerary. So I knew he would be in Amsterdam. He materialised before my eyes in a post-coital haze outside a bar near the Oude Kerk. I can't remember where we were going but we bumped into him in the street. He had arrived. But it wasn't until Berlin that I decided to make him go away.

Can you change the past? Can you remove the bits that didn't work or re-position things so that they work the way you wanted them to work? I can leave Klaus out of this account. I can remove him, but without him there wouldn't be the same story to tell. He is the story. So he stays. But I can push him in the background, put him out of focus. I can bring Ophelia sharply into view. I can re-edit everything.

I can add a space. Lacuna. A silence.

And then one morning she just said, "It's not going to work anymore." And then I said, "This is just like the film we watched." I said that life was turning out like the film we had seen the night before.

Now, sitting here looking at the fire, I wish we had decided to have children. You probably know why I'm thinking about this.

Back to Amsterdam. When we got to a bridge I crossed it, over to her side. I walked quickly, boldly, and I was on the same side of the canal as they were. I was behind them, but very close. I kept looking at them, mostly Ophelia, not wanting to take my eyes off them for one second in case they vanished, as they had done before. I followed them, with a feeling of great excitement, wanting them to see me, wanting them, one of them, either of them, to turn and notice me, just to see the look on their faces, to see if they recognised me. Most of all I wanted Ophelia to turn and look at me, to look at the look on her face. I thought about saying something to get them to turn, something about them having dropped something. I could have said, "Excuse me one of you has dropped this." I felt in my pocket for some euro coins, ready to be holding it out, to inform them that some money of theirs had fallen to the ground and I had kindly picked it up. Who wouldn't smile when they saw money being offered back to them,

money that was theirs and was nearly lost. Who wouldn't smile at the stranger committing an act of kindness?

But what use would euros have been to them? They were in the past, just ghosts. How was I going to produce guilders from my trouser pocket? What a trick, a sleight of hand, that would have been. Such prestidigitation.

It would have been even better if I had found the photograph I always carry of Ophelia in my wallet, the one from 1988, taken of her at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin. What if I had been able to hand her a photograph of herself of a moment that was yet to happen?

And then they were gone. I had got to within touching distance and was about to attempt to overtake them so that I could brush past Ophelia, to touch her. But they vanished. It was twilight. I was about to make contact, but....

She had gone again. Again she had gone. And that was that. The next day I left Amsterdam feeling that If I could change the past then I would. I just had to work out how to do it. I was thinking about this problem as I drove south in intermittent sunshine towards Baarle-Nassau, also known as Baarle-Hertog.

14 October

Bill's house is in Scotland, where I am now, purging my semi-tortured soul of the ghosts of the past. But it's taken me fourteen days to get this far. All I've managed to tell you is that my wife left me and then I saw her several times and that she was twenty-five years younger.

Ha, bloody ha. So what?

I'm sorry Bill, but I woke up feeling grumpy today. The weather has been bad and the books in your house have reminded me that I am supposed to be telling a story. I need to write down what happened and in doing so the therapeutic effect will make me feel better. I know what I'm supposed to be doing. But every house, every place is full of stories. Things have happened here in the past long before you moved in and claimed it as your holiday home. What of the minister who once lived here? What stories are there of what went on inside these rooms? Your neighbour has been telling me about the secret life of the minister and the women from the mainland who came and went.

But that was someone else's past. It's very late and the fire has gone out. I am making myself bash this out on the keyboard otherwise the day will have passed and I won't have written anything. The story so far...

I've pieced together my trip to Paris and Amsterdam to do the Eric Leers travel article and how the whole journey got wrapped up in what had happened in the past during a similar journey. So what? Well, you know someone dies and that I hold myself responsible for that death. That's a mystery which I'm holding back on, because as I'm telling you a ghost story it seems that I should follow the conventions and reveal the answers at the end. I'm telling it as it happened. I hate reading stories that keep messing about with the order of events.

I am on the Isle of Bute at the mouth of the Clyde. I am a long way from Southampton, about 460 miles. Going east from Southampton for the same distance takes me into Germany. So this is why I am here, to get some distance, as they say, from where it all happened.

I hate it when people say things like, "it will be good for you to get some distance between yourself and what happened."

Thank you William and thank you Cordelia for letting me use this place. Thank you both for being so understanding when other people doubted my hold on reality. You are great friends and I don't know what I would have done without you. You saw goodness in me when I and the others saw something else. Your kindness and compassion are much appreciated. I raise a glass to you both.

From this house it is only a short distance to the beach and I have a bicycle so I have been able to ride to other places on the island. It is the autumn so the weather is turning, but it is still surprisingly warm some days, possible to go all day in just a jumper. At night I can light a fire, which I enjoy doing. It's not easy to get the logs going but I'm learning. How to get a good log fire going. I could write a paragraph on this, but I won't.

You don't want to know about lighting fires or my walks on the beach or my bike rides or what the weather is like. I hate it when people waste time telling me about the mundane aspects of life. We can all imagine those. Leave those to the gaps. It's like the Twitter feeds I've read that say things like, "Just had to buy a rain poncho would you believe." Who bloody cares? Why don't I ever read one that says, "I've just killed my wife"?

That would be interesting.

Anyway, back to Bill. I don't want him to come across as being another middle class tosser with two homes, one in London and the other in Scotland. So this will put the record straight on you, Bill.

Bill, like me, comes from an ordinary family, not much money spare but both parents who went out to work. In fact, his background is so similar to mine that by writing a bit about you Bill allows me to write about my own upbringing. This, then, is a biographical sketch of my friend Bill:

Bill worked hard at school because he found that there was a teacher there who took an interest in him and could see that he had some ability. He was encouraged to go to university and the more he received this encouragement the more his confidence developed. Eventually he realised that he was clever, especially with words and putting arguments together. He passed his A levels and got a place at a university. He was the first person in his family to do so and

everyone was very proud of him. His father presented him with a portable typewriter the day he left home. Even when later on word processors and computers were widely available Bill continued work on his Olivetti. When I started to get to know him he was my neighbour in the hall of residence and I listened to him tapping on the keys late into the night. He still has that typewriter. It's in this house and I've had a go at typing on its heavy keys.

Bill met Corrie before I met Ophelia. She was at another university, a year ahead and two years older. They met during the summer vacation at a party Bill had been invited to by a friend. Bill told me all about it in the autumn, pleased as he was to have found himself in love with an older woman, one both beautiful and rich. He wanted to tell me in detail how it had all unfolded, to try to share with me his incredulity. For Bill, his life-changing experience had not come about through a few months doing charity work in an African country but by following the upper classes through a home counties summer of Pimm's, pyrotechnics, plenitude and prelapsarian partying and punting. I must add here that Bill has a penchant for alliteration. For a lad from a terraced house in Leicester, after his summer with Corrie, he was considering himself to be doing very well indeed.

It was a pleasant coincidence, then, when later I discovered Ophelia, also from a different social world and a woman endowed with brains, beauty and that elusive quality that only comes with a background comforted by monied ancestry. It was also a pleasant coincidence to find out that Corrie is short for Cordelia, another Shakespearean name. However, the downside to such a set of coincidences is that they are the names associated with tragedy and not romantic comedy. But this is why you should never read much into coincidences.

Bill has done good. The partially sighted lad from the East Midlands has done very well for himself. His parents are very proud of him. I am pleased for him. I am pleased to be offered his house to recover in, with the only condition being that I write all this down. It will only be about two weeks from now and then I'll go south again, leaving this stone house to the cold of winter until Bill and Corrie and their family warm it up at Christmas and New Year. It was at the very

beginning of this year we're in now that Ophelia and I joined them to ring out the old and ring in the new. If only I'd known then. If only we'd known....

It's very quiet here, as you can easily imagine. There are many books, ones that no longer have a place at the house in London. Up here he keeps his classic collection, the branch of Bill's library that includes fiction and poetry and drama, the stuff of degree courses. It's a reference section with examples from all literary periods. There are rows of orange spined Penguins.

I have stopped to find another bottle of whisky. I must admit that I fall asleep a lot, even though I get up late. It must be the air, or more likely that I am just tired. I read, sleep, write, make coffee, listen to music, watch the television, go for walks and for bike rides. Sound like a holiday? I'm also getting recognised at the Co-op where I buy provisions. The whisky is a night cap.

I'm looking at the books again and the pictures on the wall. Each time I look I see something I hadn't noticed before. This is true of both looking at the bookshelves and the pictures on the walls. There is a Goya print on the way to the downstairs toilet.

It's a dog's head looking up at nothing. You can't see the dog's body because it's obscured by a ridge and you can't see what it's looking at either. There is nothing in the background. I've just noticed that the dog is wide eyed as if surprised. What has he seen? What's that shadow it appears to be looking up at? Why does Bill have this bleak picture of emptiness hanging here? I know that he likes Goya because we have stopped to look at one of his paintings in the National Gallery on one of our walks through central London.

What does this have anything to do with the story I'm telling? Why do you want to know that I am searching for whisky and wandering around someone else's house looking at their things late at night?

Don't you hate it when people waste time telling you about trivial things? But this is really a way of telling you about Bill. It's part of my biography of him. By learning about Bill you might find out a bit more about me. I've been standing still in the hallway and thinking that this is the most frightening picture I have

ever seen. Therefore, I can't stop looking at it it. I'm going to be looking at it for a long time, but I need to move it into better light.

I have to stop now. I've got this painting to look at, some thinking to do. The day has turned out differently from how I imagined it would be. It's very late. Let's take a break, an intermission. Have a look at some Eric Leers clips on YouTube, learn about the curious place that is Baarle-Hertog, find out about the lead up to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 or listen to some of the music from the period.

INTERMISSION.

ICE CREAMS ON A TRAY. CARTONS OF KIA ORA . TIME TO REFLECT ON THE NATURE OF EXISTENCE. GO SUCK A GOYA ON A STICK OR DRINK DOSTOEVSKY THROUGH A STRAW. Roomijs op een dienblad.

Kartons van Kia Ora. TIJD te denken over de aard van het bestaan . GO SUCK een Goya OP EEN STOK of drinken Dostojevski door een rietje. GLACES sur un plateau.

CARTONS DE KIA ORA. TEMPS de réfléchir sur la nature de l'existence. Va sucer un Goya SUR UN BÂTON OU boire DOSTOÏEVSKI avec une paille. EIS auf einem Tablett. Kartons KIA ORA. Zeit zum nach denken uber die natur des Daseins zu reflektieren. GO SUCK A GOYA On A Stick oder DRINK Dostojewskij durch einen Strohhalm.

15 October

To sum up a few things:

1. Ophelia got her first academic post at the University of Southampton and we lived in a small house in Portswood on the east side of the Common before buying a larger house in Shirley on the west side of the Common.
2. It was Ophelia who said that we were living in the city that never wakes. I can't take credit for it.
3. Although Ophelia got her next post in London we never moved there. We did talk about making a move but we never really offered any commitment to the effort of packing up and leaving.
4. Ophelia commuted to London from Southampton Central. This station, once known as Southampton West, is twenty minutes walk from our house.
5. Once or twice a week I went to London for meetings. Some weeks I could be found anywhere in Europe. Sometimes Ophelia would be out of the country as well, so our house was left empty.
6. Southampton turned out to be a good place for Ophelia to announce that our marriage wasn't working anymore. As a port city people come to Southampton to leave for somewhere better, and now Ophelia has done the same.

When we travelled in Europe that summer after graduation we only visited large cities. We went from city to city by train, not bothering to stop at smaller places on the way. We ignored what was in between.

Back in 1988 Ophelia's long blonde hair caught in the flapping curtain of an express train's window as we sped across the Netherlands. We were alone together in a compartment. Her mouth made circles to expel stray ends of fringe as she sat before an open window with the rattle rattle of the tracks behind her.

I love to fall asleep listening to the rattle of a train carriage.

In 1988 Ophelia's head was bowed over a book as the train followed a twisting river in Germany. Ophelia up on the luggage rack laughing and laughing while I watched out for the ticket collector and when he appeared at the door there was a defensive curtain wall of a castle visible across the corridor behind his uniformed shoulder. Ophelia asleep as another train passed and shook the carriage. And then the arrival, the slowing down, as if coming down out of the sky, a kind of descent, the change of direction, into a cutting, out into parallels of tracks, rusting iron machinery, the markers of the destination, the finer details of the journey, the almost stopping, the anticipation of what was outside the terminus. The halt, the judder, the sound of doors thrown open. The smell of the platform and the advertising banners. Ophelia taking my hand. Ophelia leading the way. Ophelia talking another language. Ophelia laughing at a tram stop. Ophelia drinking from a plastic mineral water bottle. Ophelia sweeping hair from her eyes. Ophelia taking both my hands. Ophelia in the city.

But Ophelia and I never went to Baarle-Hertog and we never went to Baarle-Nassau. They are not cities, they are not destinations, they are exclaves. Let me explain briefly. Baarle-Hertog is a collection of small Belgian territories inside the Netherlands but close to the border with Belgium. Baarle-Nassau is the name for the town's Dutch parcels of land. There are even Dutch exclaves within the small Belgian exclaves. Countries within countries within countries. The border cuts across streets and through people's houses. You can walk in and out of the different countries several times in the space of a few hundred metres. You can walk through a country without realising it. I went there to meet Eric Leers.

There had been a couple of phone calls on my last evening in Amsterdam from Eric's personal assistant. In the first one a woman very courteously pointed out that her employer was not able to take part in any interviews with the press about his films. I was at pains to tell her that even though I was a journalist I was not expecting to report anything that he might say to me when I met him. I think she was suspicious so she repeated the gist of what she had just said but this time clearly stressing that Eric Leers did not take part in any interviews.

Our conversation went something like this:

“But I can talk to him, can’t I?” I asked in as polite a way as possible. I got the feeling that my chance to meet Leers in person was about to slip away. “It will be possible to meet with him and just talk to him naturally?”

“What do you mean by naturally?” she said after pausing for a long time.

“I mean by saying whatever comes up in conversation. You know, just have a chat. If I’m with him watching him work there might be the opportunity to talk about things,” I said.

I pictured the woman at the other end of the telephone line to be young, possibly with someone else whom she was looking at for her lead. This would explain the pauses and the hesitation. I imagined that it was Eric Leers that she was with, so as I continued the conversation I felt that I was actually speaking to him. I spoke clearly and with raised volume.

“What sort of things?” she asked.

“Whatever comes up I suppose. I won’t have a prepared set of questions. I won’t be conducting an interview. I’ll try not to get in the way. I’m just observing. You can get rid of me if I become a nuisance.” I was trying to make her smile, even laugh, to win her round.

“Observing?”

“Yes, and perhaps talking whenever the situation arises.”

“Talking about what?” she asked. “Just nice things?”

“Oh yes, only nice things.”

After another pause she said, in a tone that suggested she was now satisfied with my motives, “As long as there are no questions about his films. And no photographs. Then everything will be OK and we look forward to meeting you tomorrow.”

“What time and where?” I remembered to ask.

“These are good questions. I’ll get back to you with answers in a short while. My name is Anna. I will be in touch.”

After that conversation I began to fall a little in love with the sound of her voice. If Anna had been a sales consultant I would have signed up for her special offer. And there was a special offer, about which I was to find out later.

The second phone call came much later, after I had been out to eat and I was back in my hotel room with the television on in the background while flipping through my notes, making sure I could read what I had been scribbling down. I was distracted by a programme in Dutch about a police detective hunting down a serial killer in a small town on what looked like the Friesland islands. You don’t need to know the language to be able to follow the plot and, in fact, I’ve seen many similar programmes in hotel rooms around Europe. Strangely, I seem to get engrossed in TV more when I am abroad and when what I am watching is not in English. This plot about the detective hunting a murderer terrorising a small community is one I’ve enjoyed in many languages. Other programmes I particularly enjoy on my travels are quiz shows, particularly the German one called ‘Quiz Taxi’ where unsuspecting people who get into a cab find themselves being driven around a city by the quizmaster who then asks them questions for prizes. But I haven’t seen this programme for a long time.

I was admiring the Friesland beaches and the way the detective’s female assistant was able to get her mobile phone to connect so fast when the phone I was holding in my hand rang. It was Anna. She said something like this:

“Sorry for not getting back to you sooner,” she began, “Eric will be at the Royal Brabant Hotel reception at 11.45 tomorrow morning. We look forward to seeing you then.”

“Thanks, I’ll be there.”

“And please be so kind as to wear casual clothing, maybe something sporty, but not red. It’s going to be unpredictable weather. So sporting wear, but definitely not red. Mr Leers doesn’t like this colour.”

I remember throwing my arms up in the air after that call. Thanks to Sophie I was about to achieve something that had proved impossible for any other journalist. For the second time in a few days I felt elated.

16 October

I found out that Eric Leers was working on a project about national identity and was filming in Baarle-Hertog where borders between countries are indistinct. There was speculation about this on the internet, with reports of sightings of him in the town. Anna, after I had texted her, emailed me with confirmation that the bloggers were right, adding that although real people were used in the filming there were fictional characters as well, played by young actors working for free.

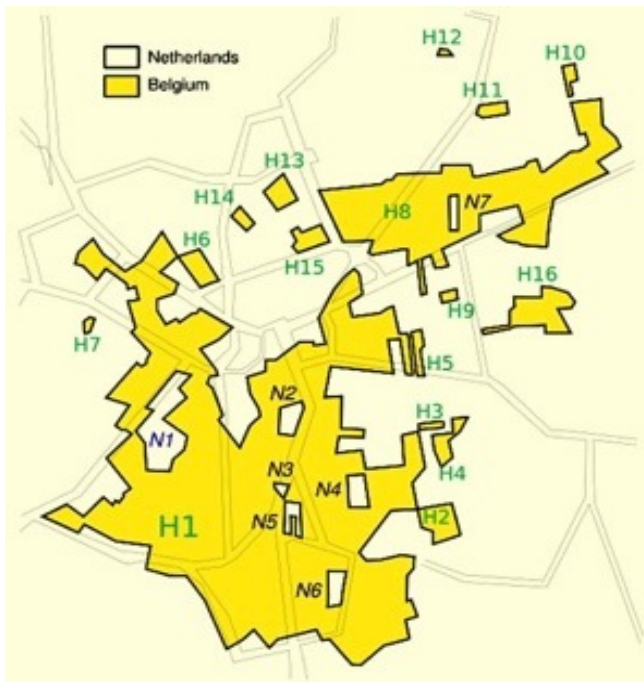
This is the end of her email:

There may or may not be a bigger element to all this as it depends on the results of what is filmed over the course of the week. Mr Leers' work in Cuba is a direct follow on to this sequence. It is expected that post-production should it be needed will commence in Australia in due course. Please be reminded that no one should wear red in the presence of Mr Leers. I hope this is useful for what is of course an observation and not an interview.

Regards, Anna

I drove south out of Amsterdam in a rental car. I put it on the expenses that I was expecting Bill to cover when I got back even though this journey was not

strictly part of the research for the article. It only took about an hour and a half to get down to Baarle-Hertog, even though the last few kilometres were on small roads with speed cameras at frequent intervals. I had driven fast along the motorway thinking that I might be late but instead arrived with time to spare. I parked at the Hotel Royal Brabant which was, I think, in The Netherlands and then went for a walk.



At some points the border between the two countries is marked on the pavements and also on houses. Some of them have door numbers set into the flag of their country for easy identification, but it doesn't necessarily aid orientation as the shape of the borders make it difficult to really know which country you are in. I found a place where the border rang diagonally across a street and then continued through the houses on opposite sides of the road. It was a quiet residential street backing on to a field so I was able to stand in the road for a moment with one foot on either side of the border. I had been to frontier meeting points before and felt the desire to do what I was doing then, stand on the exact point where two countries meet. Usually I had been in the presence of other strangers performing the same trick of being nowhere temporarily, having their photographs taken, posing on a line. And then I would wonder whether this really was the border or just somewhere set conveniently at this point because it was the closest place to the real frontier that happened to have a huge car park, toilets and a gift shop. But In Baarle-Hertog I was

alone, so the experience felt more genuine. The experience of being in two places at once.

I was neither here nor there. I was in the narrow gap between two places. If I had been struck and killed by a car at that moment it would have depended which way I had fallen as to where it could be said that I had died. I was enjoying being nowhere, or at least in a place where I had a choice between somewhere and somewhere else. I could walk the line between here and there. I was nowhere. I was in the rain, somewhere between two countries, never quite sure which one I had wandered into. I was between not being with Ophelia and being with Ophelia.

When I got to the Royal Hotel Brabant I went up to the young woman on the reception desk and asked for Anna, but as I repeated this request for the sake of the distracted receptionist who seemed to be trying to retrieve something with her foot which had fallen on the floor - trained politeness preventing her from bending down and losing eye contact with me - I was approached from behind by Eric Leers' assistant who spoke my name in an accent I couldn't immediately place. When I turned round Anna was holding out her hand and smiling.

I was immediately troubled, in a pleasant way, by the thought that I had seen Anna somewhere before. She looked as if she might be from one of the Baltic countries but the accent suggested it was more likely Russia. She had high cheekbones and eyes that reflected a northern shimmer. Her oval face greeted me with friendliness. She spoke about how there had been a change of plan to the day's schedule owing to the inclement weather - she did actually use the word 'inclement', which I thought was rather striking as I had rarely heard it used by young people in the United Kingdom - and then began to outline the background to the film project she was here to help organise, I took in less of what she was saying and concentrated more on my speculation as to her nationality and where and when we might possibly have encountered each other in the past. I was drawn to the light in her eyes and stared at them for too long.

Anna, sitting opposite me on a leather sofa in the dimly lit hotel foyer, seemed very interested in what I did and in particular my work related to Eric Leers. We

talked for a long time about what I had written before she looked at her watch, excused herself while she took her phone from her bag and looked up something on its screen. She nodded to herself, clicked the phone off and then signalled with an intake of air through her nostrils that our polite conversation had come to an end and the real business of the day was about to begin.

While we had been speaking I had been puzzling over how I thought I knew her. I almost asked her but held back. Instead I asked her where she came from and she told me that she grew up in Riga. I told her that I had been there and she said that she knew because she had read an article I had done on the three Baltic capitals for Bill's magazine. She said that she had enjoyed reading it but wanted me to know that Riga's central market housed in old zeppelin hangars was not closed on Sundays but open every day of the week. Apparently I had made this error in my article and she politely, with a wide eyed smile, corrected me. I said that I would update it very soon on the online edition of the article and joked that it wouldn't happen again. I asked her if there were any other inaccuracies and she said that nothing came to mind.

I was running together thoughts of Anna's provenance and domiciliary status, openly staring at her face, when she started to tell me about what the arrangements were for the meeting with her employer. I had arrived not fully sure what access I would be granted to Eric Leers, assuming that I would be allowed to watch him work and then get the chance to strike up a conversation whenever I could. It was a pleasant surprise, then, when Anna started to say that owing to the rain there would be no filming today and that therefore Mr Leers had made himself available to me exclusively for the early part of the afternoon. As she revealed this, I could feel a sense of excitement welling up inside me together with the idea that I might just get to interview him after all. Behind Anna's smile I could sense that perhaps she was prepared to give me some leeway now that she had made my acquaintance and, as so often with young and earnest personal assistants in the media business, the brusqueness of her earlier written communications proved to be merely a defensive barrier. Now that circumstances had altered and we were sitting opposite each other in comfortable chairs things could be handled differently.

Anna said that as Eric Leers is a keen cyclist and likes to ride every day he would be spending the next few hours in the hotel's fitness suite on one of the stationary bikes and that I was welcome to join him. Trying to reduce any signs of my obvious delight at this invitation I casually remarked that this was why she had instructed me in her email to wear sporty clothing. She replied that she was hoping that the weather would be suitable enough for me to take a proper bike ride with Mr Leers in the countryside but with the onset of heavy rain his doctor had advised against him going out. I remarked that it was a shame but that I would still be honoured to cycle with him indoors.

I had no idea at that point what all this was leading up to and it hadn't dawned on me why Eric was happy to spend a wet afternoon in my company. I was to find out later.

On the way to the fitness suite Anna said that she knew that I, like her employer, enjoyed cycling. When I asked her how she knew this she made reference to several of my articles where I had mentioned riding around a city on a bicycle. She said, also, that in one of my essays on Leers I had stressed the importance of the bicycle as a leitmotif for freedom. As we took the lift up to the top floor of the hotel I could sense that I had made quite an impression on Anna and, therefore, I was hoping that I could also have a similar effect on Eric Leers. When she smiled at me and raised her eyebrows as the lift slowed for the top floor I sensed that things were going to work out well. I thought that I could smell on Anna one of the perfumes that Ophelia wore.

17 October

I was not to be disappointed. There was Eric, seventy-nine years old, doing some stretches on an exercise mat. He was the only person in the room and at first, as Anna held open the door for me with her mauve painted nails, I wasn't sure whether it was him. For a few seconds Anna and I stood side by side as Eric finished off a stomach crunch and then drew himself up into a sitting position. He seemed tall even sitting down and as he acknowledged us with a smile his large muscly neck grew wider. He was wearing a yellow singlet and grey shorts and appeared a lot younger and fitter than I had imagined. He looked better than in any of the recent photographs I had seen of him and certainly thinner than in the film for the BBC made by Alan Yentob over seven years earlier.

Looking at Eric just before he greeted me, waiting for him to draw breath, watching while he wiped the sweat from his forehead with a brilliant white towel, noticing the sinews in his neck pull sideways as his smile formed on his lined face, I realised that I could have walked past him in any street and not known who he was.

Anna made the introductions, showed me where to get changed, and then left the room. My rucksack containing sports gear hung awkwardly over one of my shoulders. Eric got to his feet and shook my hand firmly and also patted me on the arm. He urged me to get ready to join him, adding that if I had not come prepared then it wouldn't matter, I could go naked. He laughed heartily as he said it and I was glad, nonetheless, that I had come prepared. The next few minutes as I disrobed in the deserted changing room I was all fingers and thumbs, feeling nervous for the first time in ages, and excited, wondering what it was I had come here for and what it was I would learn from one of the most elusive film directors in Europe. Also, I felt unsure why I had been allowed this access to him in these circumstances.

First of all let me get the setting clear. We were on the top floor of a hotel that rises to five storeys in a rural area of The Netherlands. The building could have been designed with a much lower elevation. There was a view out over the town

of Baarle-Hertog, so that if you knew where to look you could see the shapes of the various exclaves that made up the area.

It was raining heavily and runlets of water attached themselves and trickled over the glass wall in front of us, their speed of descent determined by the changing turns of the wind. It was a squally August day and there I was facing the grey, barely perceptible landscape sitting on an exercise bicycle next to Eric Leers, pedalling unsmoothly until I found my rhythm.

Eric was on my right and so the entire time I spent with him I was looking at his left profile. Anna had gone out of the room, which I was pleased with as I had expected her to act as a chaperone and make sure that I didn't start to ask Eric any personal questions. While I programmed my wattage and hit a few buttons on the instrument panel I adjusted to the fact that my planned observation of Eric Leers the film-maker was simply about to be replaced by my observation of him taking his daily exercise. For a short time, when I noticed the patterns of the rain on the window, I struggled to get the strap on a pedal adjusted and then nervously made an inane comment about the weather and how I hadn't been on many of these exercise bikes before. Eric said nothing but stared ahead, sucking in some air and moving his upper body in a regular swaying motion that made him look like he was on a real bicycle, pushing hard up a steep gradient and using a high cadence so that his feet turned the pedals smoothly and quickly. All down the left side of his body I could see how taut his muscles were and there was not the kind of saggiess that you might expect from one so old. The thought flashed through my mind that perhaps I wasn't after all in the presence of Eric Leers but someone else, a stand-in. Maybe, I thought, that this was some kind of joke, that I had been duped. After all, for one who keeps himself hidden from publicity and with few photographs of him taken in recent years, who would be able to tell that they were actually meeting the real Eric Leers? That, I thought, might explain why he appeared to look different in virtually every shot I had found of him, no two snaps really alike, his weight fluctuating and, indeed, his age. These thoughts disappeared, however, when he spoke.

This is what Eric said:

He said that he enjoyed reading the articles I had written about him and that Anna had told him all about what I have done, including the current article about his famous films' locations. I said that I was very grateful that he could make the time to see me but you could tell that he didn't want to hear these platitudes, that he had probably spent more than enough of his life being ingratiated to by eager admirers hoping to befriend him. I sensed from the earliest revolutions of my static bike ride with Eric that he hadn't invited me to put up with fawning idolatry, nor was he going to give in easily to the interview I was half hoping might occur. No. The way he was turning those pedals produced an air of stoical application, like someone who wanted to get something achieved. After he politely shrugged off my attempts to compliment him on his artistic achievements I could feel that he was determined to go somewhere that afternoon. And, yes, I had to keep up. I tried to keep pace with Eric as he bent into the oncoming rain high over the Brabant countryside.

Then Eric took me completely by surprise.

He said me that he wanted my help. He was, I think, deliberately enigmatic when he announced this, repeating it and then looking over at me with a questioning look that made his eyebrows ride up. He nodded very slightly and I nodded back, simply to confirm that I understood his request. At first I couldn't imagine what he meant, about how I could help him, but then he explained.

He told me about his wife, the actress Monique Brelinck, who had not made a film for many years and, as far as I was aware, had retired from the screen. I understood that she was writing her memoirs and running a charity to help families affected by the collapse of the steel industry in Wallonia, southern Belgium. He remarked, as a minor diversion, that Liege, where Monique is from, is not very far in the direction we were looking. He said that his wife spoke English, French, Flemish, German and Italian fluently and liked to read books and newspapers in these languages.

I listened attentively. Monique, he said, came to his attention years ago because of the way she could switch from one language to another and that she used different languages to suit her moods and that she, contrary to received wisdom about the nature of the sound of various languages to the English ear, would

use French to express anger and more likely use German to show affection. Sometimes she would mix up languages in one sentence if the word was more suitable for whatever emphasis she wished to give. It was her wordplay and inventiveness with language that had attracted him to her. Despite her obvious beauty, it was the sound of her voice and her adoption of different accents that had caused Eric to fall in love with her many years ago when she was cast by him in *La Chute Malheureuse d'Yvette*. She was, and is, fifteen years younger than him. Up until he met Monique no beautiful young woman had ever stirred any great longing within him (these are exactly his words by the way, although I am obviously paraphrasing and recollecting the gist of most of it all). He told me that the sound of a woman's voice can be the most erotic thing to a man, and if such a voice comes out of the mouth of a beautiful woman then it is a very hard combination to resist. This is what had happened with Monique, Eric said, smiling at me quickly, cycling hard up his invisible hill, then leaving the brief smile behind and pulling on a reflective neutral grimace. I waited while he worked determinedly at the gradient. Finally, he said that her voice had weakened him, and he enjoyed the emergence of this weakness (his exact words).

I just listened, for it was obvious that Eric had found his rhythm.

I listened to the way he spoke perfect English with the intonation of a Dutchman speaking French. Or it might have been the other way round. I did my best to keep up with the pace he was setting, struggling to match the speed of a man approaching twice my age. Eric's yellow singlet was stained with perspiration and every so often he would dab at his forehead with the towel that was stuffed into a compartment mounted in front of the handlebars. The television screens above our heads were blank and it was the sound of our spinning wheels and breathing that filled the empty fitness suite. At one point I did wonder why no one else had come in but then I made the assumption that Anna had probably fixed things and that we had the place to ourselves, for our private meeting.

Eric told me that falling madly in love with Monique was the best thing that had ever happened to him and now it was the worst thing that had ever happened to him. He said it so casually, without any drama, dropping it into his monologue like an everyday saying. The silence that followed this remark and the way he

kept looking at me meant that he was inviting me to seek clarification, so I did. I asked him what he meant, adding a somewhat glib comment about whether this equated to his often quoted remark that when you create something you also destroy something else. He nodded, blew out his cheeks as riders in cycle races do when they are trying to draw air into their lungs, especially on mountain stages, and said that it was simple, that when something good ends suddenly then there is confusion and ultimately sadness.

This is what had happened to him.

Monique, he said, had gone from his life, and there was nothing left but sadness. He told me that she had gone back to Liege to be with her mother who had been slowly dying of old age, as he put it, for the past ten years. She had decided to leave him because she felt ready to start afresh, to do something new with her life. She had an interest in politics and the issue of Wallonia's future. Eric said that he told her that he understood that their relationship was permanent and that, after all, this is what marriage meant. Monique told him that she had never entered marriage with that thought, so he asked her about the vows she had taken and she said that she had read them like lines from a script and that they had never had any meaning.

Eric spoke for what seemed like a long time about Monique and how he felt confused about her decision to leave. He went back and forth reflecting on their time together and could only say good things about her, pulling out one memory after another, describing her attributes. It was like the conversations I have had with Bill about Ophelia. In fact, when there was a suitable pause I caught Eric's glance as he began to ease up on his effort to pedal and started the descent from the top of the final climb he had programmed into the exercise bike's computer. I watched him smile again, and then I told him that I was sorry to hear about what he had said and added quickly that something similar had happened to me and that I could fully understand what he was going through.

Eric said, to my surprise, that he knew that I had experienced some distress with my marriage and he hoped that I might be able to find an appropriate resolution.

I was astonished. Sophie must have told him about me and Ophelia.

He moved on without any more on the subject of my marital trouble and gave me another surprise by suggesting that I might be able to help him try to win back Monique.

He explained that his wife is an avid reader of newspapers and that even though very little had been written about her in recent years she would obviously be drawn to anything that mentioned her. Eric wanted me to get a piece in The Guardian because Monique held it in great respect and they had run a few very sympathetic pieces on her in the past when the popular press had lambasted her for turning her back on a film career to support, in their view, barmy left-wing causes in a forgotten part of Europe.

Eric asked me to interview him, during which he would focus on the support he has received from his wife over the years and how much she has contributed to his career. It would be, he suggested, just like a love letter to Monique. I said I would be delighted and honoured to do so but I couldn't be sure that I could secure the commission. Eric said that Anna would do the necessary arranging, and then he flattered me by saying that he particularly wanted me to write the piece because he had admired what I had written about him in the past and that I seemed to be the most positive commentator on his work. Also, he said he wanted to return a favour back to Sophie who, it transpired from a few brief comments by Eric, was more than just an acquaintance of his. He said that she had recently helped him out in some way. I'm not sure how and I couldn't really ask. He sounded distinctively Dutch when he said, "Any friend of Sophie is a friend of mine." Eric said that a piece in the paper was worth a try, and indicated that something similar had worked before. I'm now not sure what he meant because unfortunately I wasn't being entirely attentive at that moment, as my mind was still trying to process the shock of the request he had made a few moments earlier about me interviewing him.

The meeting I had with Eric Leers in the top floor fitness suite of the Royal Hotel Brabant was an experience that seemed unreal, like a dream. I could barely take in what he was saying to me, finding that the effort of keeping up on the exercise bike, even though there was no need to feel that I had to ride at the same pace as we were obviously going nowhere, took up a lot of my concentration. The physical demands being made on me reduced the capacity

for my brain to do little more than allow it to listen adequately to what was being told. Sometimes you can listen but you can't comprehend properly what is being said, especially if what is said to you is not what you expected to hear. This is what happened to me in the presence of Eric Leers.

After we had returned to our rooms and showered I met with Eric for a late lunch. It was still raining heavily outside as I sat and waited in one of the hotel bars for him to arrive. After a long time I began to feel a bit anxious that he might not appear, even contemplating that I might have misunderstood or that Eric had never suggested any kind of further meeting. I looked across the quiet bar, at a group of young men playing cards, and wondered whether I had imagined what had happened earlier.

Then Anna came over to me, carrying a laptop computer. She sat beside me on the sofa and said that Eric would be down soon and that I should be reminded that I was a guest of her employer and that I should order whatever I wanted from the bar. I glanced at my half drunk bottle of sparkling mineral water and mentioned that as I was driving I could only really drink in moderation. She opened the laptop and showed me some bullet points that Eric was thinking of stressing in the interview. She went to a new page and then invited me to look at some paragraphs that were pre-prepared statements that I could use in my article. Then she showed me some recent photographs of Monique taken by Eric and that one of them at least should be used to illustrate the piece. It was apparent that I was to put together an article based on Anna's press release, which at the time didn't bother me at all. I was ready to accept authorship of an exclusive interview that was merely little more than a publicity platform for the interviewee. I could put my own particular spin on the questioning of course and make it look like an article based on an apparently probing interview. I had done this kind of thing many times in the past and it is standard practice in many areas of journalism. But now that I look back on it I wish that I did have the opportunity to sit down and really chat with Eric about his life instead of accepting his prepared statements. Anna said that she had already emailed me all the information I would need and that she had spoken to the appropriate person at The Guardian.

When Eric arrived he was wearing an orange polo shirt under a blue jacket. He pointed to his shirt the moment he sat down opposite me and said that it was for the game later that day and asked me whether I liked it. I said it looked very good and asked him if he meant that there was a football match involving Holland and he said “of course” in a surprised manner. He then asked me if Anna had shown me the notes and I nodded, politely saying that they were exactly what I needed. Then I glanced at Anna and I think she knew what I really wanted to say because she asked Eric if he wished to add any points of clarification. I noticed that Anna, too, had changed her clothes and instead of the simple brown top and black trousers from before she was now dressed in a floral patterned dress. She gave off a subtle aroma of perfume that I noticed as she moved her arm in front of me to point to the notes for the interview on her computer screen.

I have to say that Anna appeared very attractive in that moment and it was like I had been suddenly alerted to this as I looked at her looking at Eric, listening to the noise her legs made as she crossed them inside her dress. Eric told me that he wanted to stress a few things so that the readers could understand how he felt. Both Anna and I got our notebooks ready while Eric called for a beer for himself and two coffees for us.

Looking back on it now, and at the notes I made, that afternoon passed quickly. I remember it vividly but I am not aware of any time passing. I can re-play what must have been several hours in the company of Eric Leers and Anna, and each event can be re-called exactly as it happened.

I wrote down how Monique supported her husband throughout his darkest moments and that she had actually forced him to start making films again after his career had come to a stop following the bad experience in Hollywood. I can remember the way Eric described this, with a faltering voice and an expression of blankness and long pauses that at one point took Anna’s gentle prompting to get him talking again. He alternated between hearty garrulousness and gloomy introspection, sometimes in the same sentence, so that an anecdote that began with a rapid succession of adjectives would stutter into a monosyllabic series of quietly uttered words. I remember it very clearly. He sounded Dutch when he was speaking animatedly and then French when his voice began to trail off. His

mixed accent is very clear in my mind, so much so that I can do quite a good impression of Eric Leers should the need arise.

18 October

"There is nothing more devastating than the loss of the woman one loves."
Leers.

I was confused by the coincidences that had occurred on my travels through France, The Netherlands and Belgium. It was only when I got back into the rental car and fumbled for the ignition that I realised just how crazy it had all become.

I was struck by the amazing coincidence that Eric, too, was, in search of his wife. It all added to the strange dreamlike void I had appeared to have entered on setting foot on continental Europe. I was tempted, as I drove back to Amsterdam, with the skies finally clearing, to change direction and head for Liege in the hope of finding Monique.

As I drove I played out in my mind the possibility of finding her. I engaged in a reverie, barely aware of the passing cars alongside me on the motorway. I must have felt that it would complete the day to have met Eric and then his wife. It entered my imagination that I could go straight to her and tell her the way Eric was feeling and therefore I wouldn't have to write the article.

Anna had asked that I send her the copy before it went to publication so that it could be approved by Eric. I had lamely agreed to this - Anna had such a gorgeous smile - even though I would not normally have let anyone else see what I had written about them. I knew that that there was only a very slim chance that Monique would be moved by what she might read in the newspaper. In fact, I thought that the idea was desperately hopeful. If what Eric had said was true then she might possibly notice the piece about her in The Guardian, or at least someone else would tell her about it. I ruminated upon the effect it might have while a speculative scenario manifested itself and took over my thoughts.

I drove north through an intense waking dream.

I imagined going to Liege and finding Monique, thinking that it wouldn't be too difficult to locate her. I drove along the busy motorway towards Amsterdam as this vision unfolded.

This is my dream sequence; a feature of gothic novels. It went something like this:

When I found Monique I would probably meet her in a café and tell her what her husband had said about her. She would need some persuading, but after a walk together along a canal and then through a flower market - I have never been to Liege so I don't know whether such a market exists - she would begin to soften and realise that walking out on her husband had been a mistake. She would cry a little and then thank me by planting her lips on one of my cheeks. She would, in fact, thank me profusely and then insist that I have dinner with her and her mother before I return to Amsterdam. I would enjoy a hearty dinner of Wallonian fare and a few local beers, remembering to not exceed my limit. Her mother would take a shine to me and insist that I spend the night in one of the spare bedrooms, saying that as I reminded her very much of her youngest son Edouard then it would be only fitting that I should take his room. I would spend some time exploring the leather bound books in her son's bookcase before going to sleep, turning off the bedside lamp before falling into the darkness of an unfamiliar room with its sloping floor and creaking floorboards. In the morning Monique would hand me a letter that she had written, telling me that

she had been unable to sleep and had woken very early to compose its contents. She felt that she had to put her thoughts down on paper for Eric to read and that she wanted me to take this letter to him. She would explain, over a breakfast of porridge, cheese, ham, soft rolls and greengage jam, that she would return to Eric very soon but she wanted him to abide by a few small conditions that she had outlined in the letter. It would sit beside my breakfast plate inside a plump lavender envelope, making me wonder just how many pages she had written and what exactly those conditions were. A radio would be playing in the background, leaking old songs in French at a barely audible level. I would notice the large buttons on Monique's brightly patterned wool cardigan and the way that she used one hand to sweep back her wave of black hair. I would be completing the graphic match between those dark luminescent buttons and Monique's eyes while her mother, despite her frail condition, would make many visits into the kitchen and return to the dining room with more food and coffee. I would offer to help but Monique would say quietly to me, because Mme Brelinck still had remarkably good hearing for her age, that her mother enjoyed having a man in the house again and that she had temporarily resumed the energetic demeanour of her former years. After the meal Monique would thank me once again and then allow me to excuse myself from her attention and go to my room to collect my things. On the stairs I would notice photographs hanging on the walls of various family members, including Monique as a child sitting on a camel. Before I left the house her mother would give me a bundle of food in a basket covered with a green gingham tea towel, for the journey back to Amsterdam. As the two women waved me goodbye I would see them grow smaller in my rear view mirror but as I found my way onto the right road back to The Netherlands I would notice a ghostly imprint of their figures on the windscreen in front of me. I would be returning to Eric with some very good news and the thought of that instilled in me a sense of euphoria, the like of which I would have never experienced before.

So that's how I returned to Amsterdam, on an increasingly clearing late afternoon, the journey taking me towards a monumental pale blue sky. I dreamed my way north, barely aware of changing lanes on the motorway.

It only occurred to me much later that I should have been bold enough to ask Eric Leers for a favour in return. He had said that he knew that Ophelia had left me and, I think, this was one of the reasons he had looked favourably upon me and allowed me to visit him. I assumed that he had heard about this from Sophie, and I found out later from her that she did indeed know Eric more closely than she had let on.

I think I was still in some kind of shock when I returned from Baarle-Hertog, still not fully aware that what I had experienced was actually real. Its reality was confirmed when the emails from Anna came in with some extra material for the article.

I did write the article, staying up late in my hotel room in Amsterdam the night before leaving for Berlin. I have noticed that it was published, but as far as I know Monique has not returned to Eric. But I did make sure that there was a message for another potential reader of the article, when I borrowed this phrase from an Eric Leers film in its opening paragraph: "There is nothing more devastating than the loss of the woman one loves."

I regret now that I didn't ask Eric to do something similar for me, like send Ophelia a video clip of himself appealing on my behalf. I have a fantasy, though, which I can sometimes induce when I'm in that half awake state early in the morning. It involves Eric making a short film using actors who look like Ophelia and me. We laugh and frolic together in a bucolic light. It changes every time I conjure it up, has no particular plot, but always involves us holding hands as we wander in some idyllic urban setting. We are both cast younger than we are now, both good looking and without any signs of flabbiness. In some versions there are flashbacks to when we were really young, but this doesn't happen very often. The clearest picture I get is of two people who do not look like us but wear our clothes. They are stand-ins for us. I suppose I'm hoping, in my reverie, that Ophelia watches this on YouTube and then phones me up to say how sweet it is and that we should forget everything and start all over.

Don't all the best ghost stories have dream sequences and the imagining of voices of the lost and the dead?

Sometimes I stare at my phone. Then I pick it up to check for one particular message. I was hoping that Ophelia might contact me after the article about Monique Brelinck appeared in The Guardian's Friday review section. But I check every day. When the phone rings I steel myself:

"Hi, it's me."

"Ophelia? How are you?"

"I'm fine. How are you?"

"This is a nice surprise."

"I saw the film and wanted to say how sweet it was of you."

"I wanted to say sorry."

"And I want to say sorry too."

"Where are you?"

"If you look out of the window now you'll see me waving."

On a few occasions, hearing a woman's voice when I press the button to receive a call, I have screwed up my eyeballs in hope and expectation. Once, I mistook Anna for Ophelia.

I wish I had asked Eric to help me out in some way. It might not be too late, even now.

19 October

When I returned the car to the rental company in Amsterdam I headed off to the central station to check out the train times to Berlin. This wasn't really necessary as I had the ticket and I could look on the internet to check for any changes. I wanted to see the list of trains on the destination board and then look at the schedules, as if only by being at the station from which the train departed could I really satisfy myself that everything was all right and that things would run as planned the next day.

I feel a sense of excitement when looking up at those destination boards, especially the ones with the trains listed in order of their departure and arrival. The international trains are mixed in with the local ones so that it takes a few moments to pick out the one you are searching for. I like to look at the people heading for those long distance trains, to see, for example, who is taking the overnight train to Vienna. This sense of excitement is helped by the station building, being one of those grand terminuses that in itself establishes a feeling of impending drama. Like all good railway edifices, Amsterdam Centraal imposes itself the moment you get near and catch your first sight of it. I have found out that its architect, Pierre Cuypers, also designed the city's Rijksmuseum.

I was conscious, too, that it was twilight on what had turned into a very clear and mild evening. From the steps of the BGV ticket office overlooking the tram stops in front of the station I waited, watching. After the day I had experienced I was hoping to round it all off by seeing us again. I was feeling lucky so I waited to see us as we were in 1988.

After about a quarter of an hour I took the first tram I saw going towards Museumplein and got off near the Rijksmuseum. I know now that this was a rather fitting connection, to leave one building and then travel straight to another designed by the same architect. I went there simply because I remembered that it was Friday and therefore late night opening. I had no idea at the time of the architectural link I was making even though in my walks around London with Bill he had often been good at connecting places by theme. For example, he had taken me on a tour of sites associated with Lenin, even though we had not

intended to set out on such an itinerary. I had read out a plaque, I think, on a building or told him some place name so that he could get his bearings and it reminded him of another place nearby with similar associations. So off we went, on a walk determined by connections, with me sometimes guiding Bill by his elbow as we crossed streets and dodged cars.

We travelled in directions determined by the pieces of information that Bill was recalling in his mind about the Russian thinker's residences in London. This led to related links to people like Trotsky and Stalin, as ideas came rapidly into Bill's head. He took me to the site of a house that Stalin had lived in and then on to other places nearby connected with revolution, anarchy and dissent in the early part of the twentieth century, culminating, after a bus ride to save time, in a visit to the site of the chip shop in King's Cross that Lenin used to go and where, it is thought, he treated his fellow Bolshevik members to a fish and chip supper in 1905. I remember that day very clearly as Bill affected a demonic look, pointing his folded white cane at landmarks that I helped him locate by following his commands, his mind going even faster than normal, stringing together a commentary as we walked that sounded just about credible but could have been made up.

And there they were...

...walking ahead of me, across the road to the museum. It was just the two of them. It was Ophelia and it was Klaus. I looked for myself, quickly scanning the area in case I was somewhere nearby photographing the museum's façade. There was Ophelia and Klaus on the other side of the road. My eyes moved quickly between them and where I thought I might be, aware that I might lose sight of them as it was getting dark and the crowded street was making it difficult for me to pick up details. I had to cross Stadhouderskade to get closer to them, risking the traffic and the long procession of bikes, people riding while on their phones, carrying large bags on their backs. I had to dodge a man with a double bass strapped, incredibly, to his back as he cycled slowly and unevenly.

I saw them go up to the corner of the building and then stand for a moment looking at a piece of paper Ophelia was holding in her hand. I got closer, almost to within touching distance. Her hair was tied back into a ponytail and it brushed

the back of her neck as she looked down at the piece of paper and then ahead. I was hoping that she might turn round, to see me. I expected her to turn her head and look out for me, wherever I was. I took a quick look up and down the pavement but there was no sign of me at all. Klaus was right next to her, also looking down at what Ophelia was holding in her hand. I think it was more like a piece of card, but I couldn't make out what was written on it. Klaus was saying something but it was difficult to make it out. I heard that he was speaking but I couldn't hear what he was saying. It was the same when Ophelia spoke, I couldn't make out her familiar voice. It was like my ears had been partly blocked, muffling the sounds around me, like the after-effects of diving into a swimming pool. I strained to hear her, swallowing hard to clear the blockage. I leaned towards them as closely as I could, taking a risk, intruding on their space, wanting them to notice me, to feel me breathing down their necks. There was Klaus, shorter than me, weedy looking, his hair too long. They were standing together, cousins, unaware of what was going on around them, shut off in their own little world, especially him, beguiling Ophelia with that special charm of his, his richness and otherworldliness, the way he did things right, always knew what to say and do, smirked at my mistakes, caught the glance of Ophelia as if to question with his raised pencil-fine eyebrows her choice of me as a lover, made her laugh, whispered things, plotted things, encouraged things, started things, created things and generally did things that I would never even think of doing.

They started to move forward, remaining side by side, walking as one, walking towards the Rijksmuseum. I let them go, watching them as they got closer to the building, until they were almost at the building site fence in front of it, as if they were going to crash into it.

And then there was a loud scraping of car tyres on cobbles, the high pitched squeal of an emergency stop, a small crashing sound, the persistent extended tinging of a tram and a muddle of words in Dutch. I turned to look out onto Stadhouderskade. A cyclist had fallen off his bike at the junction with Jan Luijkenstraat and people were running to help him. The traffic had stopped. The cyclist seemed to be all right, but when I looked back Ophelia and Klaus had vanished.

Owing to ongoing re-building work at the Rijksmuseum, which has now almost reached its completion, the collection is shown in a limited format. The museum has been undergoing an extensive re-building programme for many years and there is a special entrance for visitors to its exhibition of the collection's highlights. In 1988 the entrance would have been where Ophelia and Klaus were heading, but now it is situated at the other side of the building. This is where I went that Friday evening to look at what the museum calls its 'Masterpieces' paintings in the Philips Wing, which includes Rembrandt's *Night Watch*. You view it in a small auditorium with raked seating so that you get a chance to see it clearly over the heads of the tourist parties. Once inside the museum I made my way to this famous painting and sat before it, finding the viewing room comfortably quiet and calm, strangely devoid of the usual crowds. At first I speculated on what it is the characters are pointing at in the picture, but my mind kept going back to what I had earlier witnessed on the street outside the museum.

I sat there for a quite a long time, no doubt attracting the attention of those who monitor the CCTV, not really looking at the painting even though my gaze kept firmly fixed on the space covered by its extensive canvas. I realised that I had almost touched them, Ophelia and Klaus, but annoyingly couldn't make out what they were saying. I tried to remember visiting the museum back in 1988, but even though I do remember touring its rooms I don't remember how we got there or what we did afterwards. I don't even remember Klaus being with us.

Some people maintain that the clues to solving a murder are hidden in 'The Night Watch'.



As I stared at the Rembrandt painting at the end of the room I saw Klaus as he was in 1988, growing clearer and clearer until he was almost part of the canvas. He took the place of the girl just to

the right of the man in red carrying the musket. There was Klaus looking out at me like a frightened child, a girl caught up in the animated business of men in ruffs sporting pointy beards. What is she frightened of? What made Klaus frightened?



I knew, also, while staring out at the most famous painting in the Rijksmuseum (open every day from 9:00 to 18:00, on Fridays from 9:00 to 20:30. Adults €11, under 18s free) that I would be seeing Ophelia and myself, and Klaus, again and that there was also a possibility that I could change things from how they had happened in the past. I thought, looking at the space in front of me where the painting was housed, that I might then as a consequence be able to change something in the present.

Sitting alone in the Rijksmuseum I knew that the past was the key to the present. I was at the heart of the mystery.

It was a hope, but on that Friday evening after having travelled up from meeting Eric Leers and then seeing Ophelia again, it was as if an important conjunction had taken place and that if I tried hard enough I could put something right. It felt, quite simply, that I was at an important moment and that if I didn't act upon it then things would never right themselves. There had been some wonderful coincidences and I was feeling lucky. I had come close to solving something far more important than a murder.

20 October

I used to write a column in a newspaper's travel section where I answered readers' queries about potential holiday destinations. For example, someone might write in and ask about where to find a good place in Spain to take their mother-in-law who wants to learn backgammon but that it should also appeal to teenagers who like small bore rifle shooting. It was an easy thing to do and I quite enjoyed doing it.

This morning I woke up and started to think about the whole thing with Ophelia as if it were someone else's concern, their problem. I had been reading one of those agony columns in a magazine in the bathroom last night. It was about how somebody's marriage had fallen apart with advice on how to try to rescue it.

I thought that I could offer myself some advice on my own problem. It went something like this:

Q: My wife has travelled the world extensively for her job and has recently left me for no obvious reason. I would like us to get back together and was thinking of suggesting a romantic getaway in the hope that this would help repair the damage, even though she might not see flying away for a weekend as particularly restful. What do you think?

A: Sometimes it's just the surprise element that makes all the difference. Don't worry that your wife might be put off by yet another trudge through the security procedures of an international airport, she'll probably enjoy going on a trip that you have organised and therefore one where she has to take no responsibility. I can't guarantee that she'll say yes to your offer but there's every chance that she might, especially if you have the tickets (even an e-ticket printed out on coloured paper will suffice) delivered to her office on a tasselled cushion or inserted inside a balloon chosen in her favourite colour. The clincher will be the destination, so it's probably best to avoid the places that she associates with work. It's not clear from your email which places are the ones to avoid so I'll steer clear of all the obvious big cities in Europe. This leaves a wealth of possibilities especially as you haven't specified coast or countryside. One of my favourites is San Sebastian in the Basque region of Spain. It's very easy to get

to so you can reduce the amount of time travelling to ensure maximum moments in this trendy resort on the Atlantic coast. There are many hotels to choose from and its shops provide plenty of opportunities for that impulse buy or two. I always feel that good food and wine should be at the heart of a romantic weekend, so San Sebastian will not disappoint. Its restaurant scene is definitely on the up and you will find some excellent examples of modern Spanish cooking in its Michelin starred eateries, but there is a range of good places for all budgets. Fish is obviously a big feature of menus in these parts and there is no shortage of places where you can get a close look at what you are going to eat before it's cooked freshly for you. There are plenty of bars in the old town to partake of tapas or to relax in for a late night digestif. The covered market is also a wonderful place to stock up on tasty fillings for a lunchtime bocadillo to take on a beach picnic. If you feel energetic then you can climb up nearby Mount Ulia for a splendid view over the city. With so many possibilities to tickle your taste buds it's highly likely that your other senses will be aroused in this Spanish location. One of the newer boutique hotels will offer the perfect setting for renewing the old passion and letting off some pent up frustration. Imagine how your wife might react to a room with minimalist decor and the biggest LCD TV you've ever seen, mounted on a rough hewn wall facing a rigidly constructed bed that subtly massages her while you work up some vibration with your vino fuelled ardour. It won't take long for your wife to cast off her former reluctance to share the marital bed with you once again, especially if it is fitted with an array of electronic knobs and gizmos. You'll be glad you forked out for the deluxe room with the soundproofing and disco ball because she'll soon be leading you a merry dance, screaming with delight as you groove and grind the night away. In the morning you can put the icing on things, quite literally, with a sweet pastry and coffee while you work out that plan for your future happiness. If this location doesn't work and you two aren't back together by Christmas then let me know and I'll send you more than just the usual crate of pear cider for being the letter of the week, I'll eat my sombrero.

The funny thing is that I've never been to San Sebastian, but it didn't stop me imagining being there with Ophelia eating dinner at a snazzy restaurant. This morning, as I brushed my teeth I looked out over the sea and was surprised to see how calm it was, the water a mauve disc cut in half by the horizon. Being

here on Bute is undoubtedly doing me good, but I do get the urge to be in a city, probably because I know that's where Ophelia is right now. She's in a city. If I were to bump into her, hope to find her, it would be in a city, certainly not here. Ophelia is a city.

Ophelia is my kind of city, the kind of place where there are always surprises. We have cities in common. She is out there in the labyrinth.

Ode to Ophelia:

Ophelia is the city and the energy of the city.

She is the air brakes of the bus on a boulevard and the rush of warm wind from a pavement grate.

She is the lighting beneath baroque statuary and the spiced up smell of bakeries.

She is the strange fish in the market barrel and the crushed tree fruits on marble steps.

She is the feel of early sun on bare arms and the murmuring, murmuring of a never ending pulse.

21 October

I got woken up by the wind here this morning which made me feel scared. I know this house is as solid as they come and nothing is going to blow it away, yet I felt frightened by the rattling of the windows and the force of the gale as it displaced flower pots and buffeted the curtain over the window. I awoke feeling like I was a child.

Actually, I awoke thinking about how much I had depended on Ophelia to make decisions for us. I listened to the wind, realised that there was nothing to fear and then thought about how Ophelia had taken control of everything, and that I had been content for her to do this. Her voice was there inside the wind.

Oh woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me.

And then I thought of Klaus again, because the two of them are so strongly connected in my mind at the moment. I thought about the time when we heard that he had died. She never said anything about my part in his death. Ever. But there was a link that she could have exploited if she had wanted to. For all that time he was in hospital I felt very close to her. I was drawn to her despair and I did everything I could to make her feel better. I held her close, felt her breath on my neck, felt the movement of her chest. I made her scrambled eggs late one night. I ironed some of her clothes. I bought her flowers. I listened to what she told me about her cousin. I stroked her hair until she fell asleep. I patrolled the house in the middle of the night while Ophelia slept.

Klaus had a condition that I didn't fully understand at the time, but it involved his nervous system and it took him a long time to recover, involving moving to a hospital in Cologne and then a period in a Black Forest clinic near Stuttgart. Corrie has since given me the benefit of her medical knowledge and has explained that Klaus, like many patients, was able to make a full recovery simply by resting. I can't remember what they called his condition, but you know what I'm referring to, Corrie.

So he recovered and went back to join the living.

Corrie has also pointed out that the poor judgement Klaus exercised when crossing the road in front of a van could be attributed to his illness but it could not be linked in any way to the fact that shortly after my confrontation with him in Berlin he went into a nervous decline. I have been reassured on medical authority, therefore, that I wasn't to blame for Klaus' death. He should have looked properly before crossing the road and being struck by the vehicle. I have always understood that Ophelia knew this too, and that when Klaus was knocked down and killed by a van carrying racing pigeons back to Belgium she had seen it as just a sad coincidence.

He could have been killed by any Belgian.

But now I'm not so sure. I wonder whether she ever really forgave me. As if I was that young Belgian driver who killed her beloved cousin. I wonder if he is still haunted by the sight of a limping minor aristocrat appearing in front of him on a rainy street in Trier.

When Ophelia returned from the funeral in the spring of 1989 she hugged me fondly at the airport and ran her fingers through my hair. I had to stay at home while she went on her own to Germany as I was recovering from a bout of diarrhoea and vomiting. Feeling stronger and beyond risk of passing on any infection, I drove down the M3 while Ophelia talked animatedly about the people she had encountered at the funeral whom she had not seen for many years. She said that there were representatives from all sides of the family and that people had travelled from every continent to attend. She had even brought me back a bottle of kirsch and I remember her pouring it over a large bowl of sliced fruit before adding cream and tucking into it with a childish smile on her face. From the time she returned I never mentioned Klaus again and she never talked about him either. There was an end to the affair, and because of this silence between us on the matter I never knew whether Ophelia had officially forgiven me. I could never work out whether the kirsch was a token of forgiveness or merely a present she had really brought back for herself.

I still can't work this out.

We entered into our long period of marriage, chose mutually not to have children and threw ourselves into work and careers. Ophelia took off on a rapid rise through the ranks of academia and before long found herself one of the country's leading experts on urban policy. I must admit to being astonished by the way she relished the work that it took to get her to this stage and the way that she was able to write prolifically. I struggle, as now, to get words down the way I want them to come out. Ophelia has an ability to transfer her ideas on to paper with ease.

The early years of our marriage were marked by successes and the excitement of never knowing what was going to happen next. This was particularly true for me as there were a couple of faltering starts to my journalism endeavours. My literary output trailed a long way behind Ophelia's until I got a few breaks and things settled down. If it wasn't for Bill and his contacts then I would never have got started. When things did go a bit slow Ophelia was content to carry me along on her salary. And then, of course, there was always that private income from her family that I never really asked too many questions about, but I was

grateful to have it in the background so that we could fall back on it when necessary.

I've never really understood where Ophelia's money came from or how much she received each month. I never wanted to ask.

Over the years Klaus was hardly ever mentioned. I had buried his memory, so it was a shock when I saw him again on the streets of Paris earlier this year.

Can you really forget someone? Some people say that nothing is ever forgotten, it's just not recalled. The past is responsible for the present, as a character might say in an Eric Leers film. His film, *Briser puis reparer* or *Broken Dreams*, is what I went to Berlin to write about. The English title is misleading because it suggests a negative mood whereas the French title clearly indicates that what is broken is then mended. Such is the problem of putting words to feelings. Or using words to recall memories.

"I can't explain it," is what Ophelia said that Sunday. "I can't explain why I need to get away."

With this howling wind and the voices of the past being carried upon it I am reminded that I am writing a ghost story. Boo!

22 October

I left Amsterdam on an early morning train to Berlin, having spent part of the night before hastily writing up the article on Monique,. On the six hour journey I thought about Eric.

I thought about what Eric had asked me to do and considered that his idea would probably not work. I went back over the conversation we had before our meeting ended. I couldn't get over how young Eric had seemed, looking more like he was in his sixties than a man who will be eighty in a few months time. I thought about how he had shaken my hand and the way he held it for longer than normal, and then he shook it again as he thanked me for the third or fourth time. He had placed his left hand on the side of mine and then enclosed my hand inside both of his. Eric's big hands.

I thought about Anna too and what her relationship was to Eric. I had the feeling that she might be more than just his secretary, but it was only a feeling. I saw no evidence that they were in any way intimately connected. However, it was the glance he had given her as he cupped my hand in that thankful valedictory gesture that made me wonder. Maybe she reminded him of Monique. He smiled and winked across at Anna and I'm sure that she blushed slightly. But it was probably nothing. I got this feeling because the way we parted seemed so odd, as if strange unsaid things were going on around me in the hotel lobby. I wasn't expecting to be shown so much familiarity and warmth, but at the same time it didn't seem genuine. Eric said that he would be happy to meet me again but he said it in the direction of Anna rather than to me, as if he was seeking reassurance from her. It was a drawn out affair, our parting, with lots of smiles and moments of brief silence.

It wasn't a surprise, then, when Eric contacted me when I was in Berlin. It was the first of several occurrences in that city that I'm still trying to put straight in my mind. You'll have to forgive me at this point if I seem vague, but this is the hard part. A lot happens in Berlin, probably because a lot of significant things happened to me there in the past. Of course, there was one moment in particular which I'm thinking about now. I need to get this right.

But while travelling through Germany on the train I had no idea what was going to happen when I arrived in Berlin. I enjoyed the quietness of the journey, but unable to concentrate on the notes I was trying to write up for the article. After a few hours I began to relax. I experienced a detachment from myself which I have managed to achieve on other train journeys, given the right conditions. It felt like I was falling forward, feeling like the train was taking me downwards on a steady incline. There was a fluttering sensation in my chest, as if I was taking the brunt of the train's high speed. In my mind I was travelling faster than the engine, going slightly ahead of my body, caught up in an enjoyable visceral sensation of motion. I held on to the armrests to prevent myself from falling, even though there was no danger of this happening. The train was so smooth. It was in this braced position and with my eyes unable to stay open that I entered a moment of disengagement. Then I was ready let go. I was in free-fall, my mind snagging loose from my body. I floated on towards Berlin, beautifully

unable to move, feeling disconnected from everyone else in the compartment, feeling as relaxed as I had felt for a long time. There, through the train window, were the fields in morning sunlight, my faint reflection in the glass. I was looking beyond what was outside the window, beyond German farmland and into a reverie of sustained pleasure.

Then Anna appeared beyond the window beyond the German countryside.

Once she had entered I couldn't get Anna out of my mind, so much so that I started to envisage a meeting with her at her office in Amsterdam. There she was outside the train window, leaning over a manual typewriter that I recognised as an Olivetti from the late 1970s. She was chewing the end of a pencil, being flirtatious, raising her eyebrows. She told me that she was busy working on Eric's new script but that it didn't matter that I had arrived while she was typing because she needed to take a break. She said that she would like to share the contents of the script with me, but that I was to be sworn to secrecy. I asked her why she wanted to tell me, and this is when she put the pencil in her mouth and took off her tortoiseshell glasses so that I could see the green of her eyes. She said that she could trust me and that she had to tell someone who would understand. She said it enigmatically, and I thought for a moment that she was just teasing me.

"You're someone I can trust," said Anna. "I can trust you."

She said that she needed to finish off a sentence, so she put her glasses back on and glanced down at the reporter's notebook beside the typewriter, which obviously contained the script that Eric had dictated to her. She typed like someone who didn't know the arrangement of the letters on the keyboard, slowly and with hesitation, looking down at the notepad and then at the keys in quickly alternating movements, as if she was incapable of memorising more than one word at a time. This was not the same Anna, the brisk and efficient Anna, I had encountered at the Royal Hotel Brabant. The one I had conjured up out of the Lower Saxony countryside was a pale and nebulous replica.

"There," she announced. "That's finished. Oh, you're wondering why I am using this machine. I can tell by your expression. It's because Mr Leers insists on having his scripts typed only on this machine because it has sentimental and

superstitious value to him. It was a present from his wife and the first thing he wrote on it was *Mes souvenirs indistincts* which was very successful and helped to re-start his international career. Ever since he has used this typewriter for his creative work, now asking me to do the typing. He likes to read his words in this particular typescript produced on this machine. It doesn't matter if his fingers are not the ones that do the typing. This time he has created something very special. This is the most amazing thing I have ever read and I have a strong feeling that it will be the piece of work that will act as a landmark in the career of Eric Leers. All we need to do now is to arrange for production, which as you are probably aware can take a long time. Getting the funding for these films is so difficult, which you wouldn't think would be so given the reputation of Mr Leers."

She took off her glasses and smiled at me as if I was a close friend or a potential lover.

"Currently we are in talks with a German television production company but nothing is certain at the moment. Yes, this film is an amazing piece of work and it starts with a striking but simple idea. Excuse me please."

She paused to look at her phone where a message was displayed on its screen. I watched her read it and then followed her fingers as they tapped a reply.

"That's interesting, that was a producer at the BBC. Where was I? Oh yes, this film script which is only just over halfway completed is the most amazing thing I have ever read. I have to tell you about it and I know that you will not tell anyone. I have been working on it for several days now, working from the notes that Mr Leers has provided. In fact, of course, work started on it a long time before that because, as you know, he likes to walk around locations feeling for ideas and allowing himself to get lost. I know it's something you have written about, about how he shapes the part of a city that he is interested in to the story he is trying to create, the way he gets, if you like, his inspiration from the city around him. You know all about this, and you know also that he later likes to improvise, to deviate from his original script once he starts shooting, when new ideas come into his head. This is what gives his films, in my opinion and the opinion of many other people, like yourself, that air of spontaneity, that

randomness, that things are hard to predict, like life. I think you could express what I am struggling to say in a much better way.”

She smiled at me and then pulled at a strand of her hair.

“I know that you have done this and Mr Leers appreciates the way you have interpreted his films. So you know what I am saying here. We have been travelling around for a while, straight after the main idea of the film came to Mr Leers. So, I was telling you, this film starts with an idea that occurred to Mr Leers as he was waiting for his wife to come out of a railway station here in Holland. He was standing near the entrance when he noticed someone who looked just like himself coming out of the station and going over to unlock his bicycle. That was his starting point. This other man had surprised Mr Leers in his similarity to himself, so he immediately got an idea that a film should start in the same way. And this is exactly what I have here, a script that begins with a man who is about to enter a railway station to catch a train when he walks past himself and also, Mr Leers decided to add, his wife. But it is more than just witnessing doubles, as the people he sees are younger versions of himself and his wife. He is seeing the past. The film then works through further sightings so that the man begins to suspect....Excuse me.”

Anna’s phone rang and she answered it first in English and then in Dutch. She spoke for some time, gesturing to me an apology, pulling a sad face and shrugging her shoulders. She took notes as she listened, constantly glancing over at me. From the tone of the conversation it sounded very important, like there was a negotiation taking place, with Anna having to repeat things and push forward her point. I had no idea what was being discussed and I could only make out a few words and phrases. I sat cross-legged on a hard leather chair and played with the fold of my trousers, trying to pretend I wasn’t listening to a conversation I couldn’t understand anyway, adopting that air of polite and patient distance easily affected by the courteous Englishman abroad. Anna, as I could tell from her gestures, was highly appreciative of my diligent reserve. She mouthed the word “sorry” to me at one point and I waved at her and smiled. Her red glossed lips spoke eddied streams of Dutch and out of the corners of my eyes I was content to watch the words leave her mouth and slide seductively into the space between us.

“What happens next?” I asked Anna when she had finished her phone call. But she didn’t hear me. I had lost sight of her. I couldn’t hold on to her any longer. The countryside gave way to factory units and I saw my reflection in the window. “Please tell me what happens next...”

If I was writing a novel or a screenplay I’d have the character suddenly shout out “Please tell me what happens” in front of his bemused fellow travelers.

Anna had faded. Woman much missed.

Such was the nature of that train ride from Amsterdam to Berlin that I felt myself falling forward and all thoughts of past, present and future were mixed together. I remember clearly that journey, where nothing happened except the inevitable passing of the time it took to get to my destination.

However, something had happened inside my head so that when I got to Berlin I felt different. Not only was I more relaxed but I was in possession of a state of mind I had not experienced for a long time. I felt calm. I knew I could do it. Like the hero of many ghost stories I was convinced that I could go where no one else had dared to go, and I could do what no one else had dared to do. I could go into that locked room or down that dark corridor. Incredible as it sounds I felt that I could change the past.

I arrived in Berlin a happy fool.

23 October

I was about six and a half hours older arriving in Berlin than I was when I left Amsterdam. It wasn't so much that I had passed over a border and far into another country but that I had aged slightly. I realised that every significant event in my life was constantly getting farther away from my ability to accurately recall it. Time made its presence felt everywhere that day, and when the train slowed to arrive at the terminus I took my bag from the overhead rack, aware that its handles would fray and weaken eventually and then I would replace it with something newer. Everything wears out.

This armchair I am currently sitting in at Bill's house is threadbare and it is sagging to the point where a profound saucer shape of my buttocks remains when I stand up. It is a tired old piece of furniture that is near the end of its useful life.

I am also wearing out. Those hairs that gather in the waste trap at the bottom of the shower tray mark the advancement of baldness. Occasionally, in the right light, I can see shards of dried skin fall from my forehead. My joints are also stiffer than they were, especially in the mornings when I hear a crack as I stand up. Since being in Scotland I've noticed this progressive deterioration of my body. Corpus knackerus.

I'm here to recover, thanks to Bill and Corrie, but the reality is that I'm losing more than I'm gaining. Now I can't remember the exact order of everything, even though I can remember things with great clarity. So what does it matter if they come in the wrong order?

Where was I? On a train coming in to Berlin Hauptbahnhof. But in 1988 it would have been Berlin Zoologischer Garten, in the former western part of the city. Ophelia and I arrived from Munich in a train that sealed its doors at the stops we made in East Germany. Guards with dogs walked the platforms. Hot drink trolleys served passengers through windows. A cloud of smoke filled the sky over these stations. Tall chimneys emitted industrial effluent. I can't remember the names of the cities we stopped at.

How many times have I been to Berlin? The first time was obviously when I went there with Ophelia, but she had been there before, like she had been to many of the places we travelled to that summer. She has family in several places in Europe and in other parts of the world.

I have fond memories of being in Munich in 1988. We had an exhausting tour of the city's sights, including a visit to the Olympic Stadium where I remember making Ophelia laugh uncontrollably after some remark of mine about female Soviet shot-putters. At least, I think that's what it was about. I remember Ophelia doubling over with laughter, giggling at anything I said for the rest of that afternoon. I can see her now, sitting in a pull-down seat high up in the stadium with her long blonde hair hanging over her face, slapping her hands to her thighs. We attracted the attention of other visitors, which was something I found slightly embarrassing but also very exciting. Ophelia has never had any problem with social confidence, but at that time it was something I was still learning from her. Just as I enjoyed hearing about her younger life and her travels I was beginning to consciously adopt some of her behaviours. I was learning to treat the stares of strangers as admiration, or at least curiosity, rather than as threats.

It was in Munich that Ophelia told me that she knew I was not comfortable with the fact that Klaus had tagged along on our adventure. She wanted to tell me about him. We were walking through the English Garden, getting closer to the park's pagoda, holding each other's swinging hands and tilting out heads together the way young lovers do - especially in parks, especially at twilight, especially when they think no one else is watching - when she told me about the curious case of Klaus von Steffenberg.

Let's say it went something like this:

"Klaus," she began, "is someone I have known all my life. In many ways he is like a brother, yes the brother I don't have. He is there in my earliest memories, as if we share the same moments, the Christmases and parties. I was sent to stay with his family when I was young for the long summer holiday while my parents went off on holiday. I remember crying when they left me, possibly my earliest memory, and then crying when it was time to leave. I didn't want to

leave my friend. When I got older I began to pick up on the stories about him, those family secrets I suppose, except they weren't secrets because they all knew. I must have been about ten or eleven when I found out. I knew that Klaus was some kind of child prodigy and that his intelligence was obvious but I didn't know that he had been responsible for the death of another child, the daughter of the family's housekeeper. It was a terrible accident but, as if as a reaction to what he had done, it was also the starting point for Klaus's desire to learn the entire works of Shakespeare by heart, including the sonnets. It was the beginning of his many obsessions, so the story went. He was only six years old when he tipped over the barrel that the slightly older Hilda Brunnweger was hiding inside and sent it crashing down the steps of the verandah and then onward down a hill until it struck a tree. After her death Klaus had been taken away, sent to another branch of the family in Denmark, and when he returned he had embarked on his love of theatre and had started to astound people with his recall of entire texts. When I heard about this I was shocked but I never thought of Klaus as having done anything wrong. No one in his immediate family sought to punish him, quite the opposite, for he was indulged thereafter. The family of Hilda was well looked after and the matter was resolved agreeably. In fact, one of the brothers of Hilda Brunnweger is now a banker in Hamburg, having been supported through private school and university by my uncle, Klaus's father. I know what you're thinking...."

She had stopped and turned towards me so that our noses were barely a centimetre apart, the closest they could be without touching. I could smell coal tar on her hair. At least this is how I imagine it to be now, sitting in front of this roaring fire on a windy night in October, in Scotland, in the present.

"You're thinking that my family made sure that it was all hushed up, to protect Klaus and hide his guilt. You're probably thinking that this is all wrong and that he should have been punished."

I shook my head, careful not to hit either of Ophelia's cheek bones with my tilting chin, soundless, devoid of words, allowing her to continue. At least, this is how I imagine it happened.

This is how I think her speech went:

"I thought so too for a while, later when the stories were told to me, but it was soon forgotten because Klaus charmed everyone with his intellect. He had that happy blend of kindness and great intelligence. He was not at all precocious. I looked forward to my summer holidays with him and we became great friends. It didn't seem possible that Klaus could have done such a thing. He seemed incapable of malice. His debilitating accident on the water meant that he missed his chance to go to university but this only made him more determined to study, so he worked on his education alone or with the help of friends of my uncle, intellectuals who were fond of game shooting and long weekends at the lake with an endless supply of alcohol. And now, as you know, he lives in Paris but goes where he pleases, wherever fancy takes him, to seek out new experiences at the theatre or art exhibitions or any cultural event that interests him. But I could sense that you were growing tired of him being with us when we were in Amsterdam. You might have thought that I was ignoring you, but Klaus sees me as his best friend and, I'm afraid, he is not too good at reading the signals of others. He is a pleasure seeker and likes to pull others along in his enthusiasm for life. I don't think he could ever understand why a person would not want to share in the things that he enjoys. He likes to be with me and I'm afraid that he forgets about you. He's not being rude, he can't help it. Don't be jealous."

Don't be jealous. I remember clearly those words. I am sure she said them.



We had arrived at the beer garden beside the pagoda from which a brass band was playing above the drinkers and diners. Our hands had fallen apart by this time. There was nowhere else to go except join a queue for beer and a sausage.

"Don't be jealous, that's all.... Now, I could murder one of those big weisse biers," she said.

Some young locals next to us smiled at what Ophelia had said and the way she blended her well enunciated English with equally well sounded

German. But even though I felt proud of Ophelia for being able to somehow get us to the head of the queue without anyone objecting and glad that she had told

me about Klaus, I was oddly unmoved by everything she had just said. Not one bit of it shocked me in the way that it should have done.

At least I think it happened like this. It's impossible for anyone to recall accurately what was said so long ago, but I am writing down now what has just come into my mind.

When I found out that Klaus had killed a girl I was not surprised. Oddly, I felt pleased.

24 October

The second time I went to Berlin was on my own, for an article I was writing about how the city was transforming itself after the wall came down. I travelled around the newly opened eastern part of the city in search of hotels and restaurants, heavily dependent on English speaking locals who acted as my guides. Because I spent most of my time in this new part of the city I don't think I ever stopped to think about what had happened between me and Klaus in the old western part just five years earlier. The areas I was working in held no associations with my recent past and it was like being in a new city, a place that I was seeing for the first time.

The third time I went to Berlin was to meet up with Ophelia who was speaking at a conference in the city. This was almost exactly a year ago. It was October and

I remember thinking on arrival in Germany it looked like autumn had already set in and yet when I left England we were at the tail end of a period of extended summer. I had gone over to meet Ophelia because she had called me a few days before from Bamberg and she had suggested that I might like to join her in Berlin for a few days, where she was going by train the next day. She sounded a bit drunk on the phone, confirmed by her announcement that she was having a piss up in one of the town's breweries. I could hear the usual noise and music in the background that you might associate with a bierkeller. I was at home in Southampton and had been watching a Champions League match on television and had fallen into a light sleep in front of the screen. I knew it would be Ophelia when the ringing pulled me awake, but it still came as a surprise to hear her voice having to compete with the collective chatter of the inebriated and the rasping notes of an oompah band. She shouted that she had two free days and that she wanted to know if I was able to join her. At that time I was doing lots of work for trade journals but luckily I was up to date with jobs. I had been planning to use a couple of days to start work on the Eric Leers monograph for the BFI, having only picked up the commission for it the week before. I never hesitated. The thought of packing up some things and dashing off to Heathrow the next morning offered a buzz of excitement that I had least expected at the start of the evening. Like all surprises my heart began to beat faster as I both listened to Ophelia on the telephone and at the same time made plans for my departure. I could barely hear what she was saying, but it didn't matter. In my mind I was on a plane bound for Berlin.



We met up at her hotel, but I noticed immediately that she looked unwell. I realised that she was probably hungover, but she denied this when I made a joke about her not being able to hold her booze anymore. After letting me into the room she sat down near the window, barely looking at me long enough for it to count as a greeting. She waved her arm towards me as she settled into the armchair, a gesture that for her was an acknowledgement of my presence but for me it looked like the

kind of signal a football referee might give to indicate that I should back off and think twice about talking myself into trouble.

Ophelia stared out from her thirteenth floor window over Alexanderplatz. I looked at the back of her head, waiting for her to turn. I could sense, quite obviously, that something was wrong. The fact that she had barely smiled at me and then retreated to the other side of the room, and then turned her back on me, threw me into a mild state of panic. It was the exact opposite of the way I had anticipated our meeting would look, especially after she had specifically invited me



and I had left at short notice compelled by her spirit of romantic impulsiveness. Like a siren call I had responded to my wife's appeal without hesitation and was brimming with eagerness to be with her. Seeing her run her hand through her hair as I had watched her do many times in the past to signify her thorough dissatisfaction with life made me ask what had upset her. I walked over to her and repeated my concern, putting my hand on her shoulder, then feeling for her hand and holding it, aware of the lack of pressure she was applying.

"What's the matter darling?" I might have said. I looked for an answer in her distant expression, her eyes fixed out over the square, staring at the television tower. "Whatever's the matter?" She seemed upset, and for those long seconds before she replied I had the impression that her current state of distress was directly attributable to me. It was like being thrown back into the aftermath of a former argument, taking up where we had left off once before, with me having to apologise for upsetting her. Stepping in to that hotel room in Berlin was like being in our bedroom at home. Whenever she was unhappy or troubled by something Ophelia would stand by a window, as if answers were to be found outside.

Why do we look out when there is something inside us causing us anguish? I'm doing it now, staring out at the trees at the end of the garden, watching them sway and then jerk back into shape, over and over, increasing the possibility that a branch might snap at any moment. I'm staring at the effects of the wind,

almost forgetting what I'm thinking about. Maybe that's it. Maybe we turn outside to hide from what's churning round inside our heads. Maybe that's what Ophelia was doing looking out at Alexanderplatz. Maybe by not looking at me she was distracting herself from thoughts about me. Maybe, though, she wasn't thinking about me at all, that it was something else, or someone else. Maybe she turned her back to me because she didn't want me to see her crying, even though she had already revealed her moistened cheeks when she had opened the door. Maybe she felt ashamed or embarrassed. Maybe I had been the cause of those tears. Maybe she had been in this state for a long time and I hadn't noticed until then. Maybe I have got it wrong. Maybe it was nothing.

Maybe it was really to do with what she told me later in that hotel room.

"Tell me," I said. "Whatever's the matter darling? Tell me. What's upset you? What's the matter?" I asked her a series of questions to which I received no answers. I held on to her, my arm around her shoulder, pulling her in tight, pressing my face into her hair, speaking close to her ear. I could smell coal tar mixed with perfume. I whispered and could smell Ophelia, her familiar smell. She continued to look out of the window as I pulled her even closer, rubbing one of her arms, fingering a fold of her grey cashmere cardigan. I repeated the questions. I remembered that I had been in a similar situation before. I knew that all I had to do was wait for the mood to break, for Ophelia to come round, to feel her return the contact I was giving her, for that passing of time, that specific length of time controlled by her. But I was not part of that time. It all belonged to Ophelia. I waited, patiently, as I had done before, looking out over Alexanderplatz just like she was, looking to see what Ophelia was thinking.

I'm doing it now. Looking at the trees in the wind. I asked her what the matter was, then waited for Ophelia to return to me.

When this period of waiting was over she told me that a wave of anxiety had come over her only moments before my arrival. She said that she had started having these attacks recently. She said that they were brought about by sudden feelings of emptiness as if she was not part of the world, that she was invisible, that she had vanished. When she felt in this state she then started to feel guilty of something, but she couldn't work out what it was and it was this feeling of

confusion and detachment that made her cry. She laughed when she finished telling me this, as if to confirm that she had returned to another state of mind.

“That’s why it’s easier to say that it’s nothing when you ask me what’s the matter, because that’s the truth. I do feel like I’m nothing temporarily and it frightens me and I cry. You’ll laugh when I say this, but I thought I had died,” she said.

At least this is what I think she meant. She didn’t quite say it like this. When she blew her nose, and finally looked me in the eyes and laughed, she remarked on the view from the hotel window, as if it was this that had enraptured her and moved her to tears. She said that she had been looking at the former heart of the city and now it was empty and given over to tourists who came to look at the relics of the former east. She might have been continuing a conversation with a colleague during a coffee break at her conference. It was all so matter of fact. I pressed her to say more than this. I held on to her until she told me about feeling empty and guilty and dead. I listened to her talk about the view from her window, about how the television tower was built and the role it played during the Cold War, and what it replaced and the shape of the former city and how the square now housed hotels and facilities for tourists. I listened to all the things that she was interested in, until I felt that I had to force her to tell me why she had been crying. I just came out with it. I asked her, forcefully.

“I don’t like this feeling of being dead,” she replied. “It’s not at all as peaceful as you would imagine. I wouldn’t recommend it to anyone.”

Then Ophelia went off and delivered her speech somewhere in the city and that night we had dinner in a restaurant that a colleague, a Berliner, had recommended to her. It was in Friedrichsheim, off Karl Marx Allee. I had been in this area when I visited the city shortly after the wall came down, but the place looked different now. We walked from the U-bahn stop through streets of houses that were being turned into attractive apartments but there were also squats and boarded up buildings. We walked down a street with a row of craft and fashion shops and then small bars and record shops, with people sitting outside on old armchairs holding bottles of beer and smoking, the sound of quiet techno music leaking on to the pavement.

We found a square with a garden in it and knew that we were near the restaurant, but on the corner a crowd was gathering, quiet and orderly, onlookers to some police activity. We could just about make out the police tape cordoning off the area and then we saw the revolving lights of an ambulance. We chose, without saying anything to each other, to move across the road and leave the scene. Ophelia asked a young woman who was waiting on a corner with a young child in a pushchair what was going on and she said that she thought there had been a stabbing.

The restaurant turned out to be in part of a former industrial building, and so we entered down some steps into a subterranean scene where we were older than most of the occupants, but certainly not unwelcomed, and found ourselves sharing the company of loud echoing voices in a cellar lit by dim lights suspended from its arched ceiling. We started drinking.

Later that evening we added to our drunkenness in our hotel room but woke up the next morning amazingly clear headed. I had been conscious that I was drinking too much but I wanted to match Ophelia and keep the mood going. For several delicious hours she was as I had remembered her, laughing and carefree. She was twenty-five away from the woman I had been with earlier that day.

We discovered that there had been another stabbing incident overnight, this time not far from our hotel, near where Karl Marz Allee joins Warschauer Strasse. Ophelia had asked one of the staff about it when we returned from a stroll outside before our late morning breakfast. There were still police cars in the street and television screens were reporting the murder of one person and the serious wounding of another. She was told that there might even be more casualties and it had appeared that someone had gone on a random killing spree and the culprit was still being pursued by the police. We went out that afternoon picking up more information about the attacks as we walked from the Gemäldergalerie, via Potsdamer Platz to the Hamburger Bahnhof art gallery.

I saw death everywhere that afternoon, from the canvases and installations in the museums, to the television pictures of crime scenes, to the look of morbid anxiety that seemed to lurk behind the apparently cheerful mood of Ophelia. I

thought about what had happened to Klaus and what I had done to him in Berlin.

I sent the base of my hand, palm facing forward, into the middle of his face. If I kicked him it was because I just wanted to shut him up. What happened to him later wasn't my fault.



In one of the rooms of the Gemäldegalerie Ophelia sat in front of Lucas Cranach's *Venus and Cupid*. Of the two versions of the same subject in the room it is the one on the right where Cupid is holding an arrow aloft and pointing it at his mother's thigh. Ophelia sat looking at the painting for a long time so I left her and drifted on into another room of the gallery, distracted for a while watching someone copying a painting I now can't remember the name of, but I stood behind his easel and stared at the slow and meticulous way he worked his brush, looking at his subject and then his canvas, working far too slowly for me to stay for long.

When I wandered back to find Ophelia she was still staring at the Cranach painting. When she turned to look at me it seemed as if she had a tear in her eye. I could only smile at her. I remember her rising slowly, biting gently at her bottom lip, lost in thought, about to say something.

All that day Ophelia was lost in the act of looking. As we walked she looked up and around her, sometimes remarking on buildings, following up her interests in the city as a living space, and sometimes just looking at objects in shop windows or at people passing us on the street. She took photographs. I watched her looking at the things around us. Although distant, she seemed happy. I had the feeling, however, that I was not really part of her thoughts that afternoon.

We crossed in front of the Reichstag and then took the footbridge across the Spree to the central station. From there we walked to the art museum in the former Hamburg line railway station. Although Ophelia had been holding my



hand as we walked up the steps into the foyer she moved away after we had got our tickets and said that she wanted to go and check something and that we would meet up later. We left it at that, knowing that eventually our paths would cross. It wasn't very long, however, when I spotted her in the Joseph Beuys section standing in front of a glass case containing a lemon and a yellow light bulb. I could hear the sound from speakers mounted on the wall playing another Beuys work called 'Ja Ja Ja Ja, Nee, Nee, Nee, Nee'.

There she was, alone with two attendants in this section of the museum, not looking directly at the lemon and the lightbulb but looking up to where the artist's voice was chanting yes and no over and over again. I decided to go out and leave Ophelia to her thoughts. I wasn't even sure that she was aware of my presence. I have since found out that this Joseph Beuys's sound piece goes on for one hour, four minutes and fifty-three seconds.

I went to the museum annexe outside, housed in a concrete building on three levels. It's full of contemporary stuff, and I wandered in there for a long time expecting Ophelia to appear. But she didn't. I went back into the main building, where the former station platforms were and looked out for her, able to take in a broad sweep of the possible directions she might emerge from. But she didn't. So I went back to the room with the Joseph Beuys collection in it and for a while I couldn't see her, even though the moment I began to walk past the Beuys pieces - a soft felt suit hanging from the wall and rusted girders on the floor - I knew that she was there somewhere. Yes, Yes, No, No. I blocked out the voice. There were several people in the room and I brushed past them to get to Ophelia who was writing in the Moleskine notebook I had bought her for her birthday.

I spoke to her and she smiled at me and asked me the time, even though she was wearing a watch. When I told her that it was nearly six o'clock she nodded

as if she was confirming something and then asked me if I had seen any interesting things. I said yes quickly because I wanted, needed, to ask her the same question. She looked up at me, perhaps through me, and nodded. So I asked her the question again. Her reply was just like mine, a simple yes. I asked her what she was writing and she said that she had been inspired to make some notes for her work from what she had seen in this room. Then I asked her what else she had enjoyed in the museum, and she named some of the things I had looked at, in other rooms, even the part of the museum outside. However, I had got the impression that she had spent over an hour in the same place. I was convinced that she had been subject to the repetition of yes and no over and over again while the light outside had faded and it had become Saturday night in Berlin.

That evening we talked about work over dinner. The next morning we continued to talk about work and Ophelia first mentioned the possibility that we should move house. I was surprised about this but she said that London would suit her better now that her role at the university had changed.

We sat in a bakery beyond Alexanderplatz near the Hackescher Markt scanning the newspapers, and even I with a little knowledge of German could make out that there had been another murder. We drank coffee and ate sweet pastries



while we read. When I saw the headline and the word *Tod* I was reminded of someone I once knew at school called Todd Mort. I had never made the connection - and obviously nor had his parents, or anyone in my class or on the estate where we lived - that both his names meant death. He was embarrassed by

his first name, saying that he was named after a famous movie star when anyone began to tease him about it,

I was wondering what had happened to Todd, and that his full name meant dead in two languages, when Ophelia announced that we should sell the house and move to London. I said that it was probably a good idea and we said no more about it. We strolled around the Mitte district of the city with no particular destination in mind.

Before we got the train to the airport we went shopping for a present for Ophelia's mother. After that we bought a currywurst and I dropped half of mine down my shirt. At the airport I went to get a beer in one of the bars to kill time as the flight was delayed. Ophelia wasn't where I had left her when I returned to the rows of seats in the departure lounge. I found her by the window looking at out at the airport apron in the fading sunlight and listening to music on her iphone. I said that I thought she had gone without me. She said that she had got bored sitting in one place and that she had gone to the gift shop and bought a snow globe with the Reichstag inside it. I said that I could understand that. She gave me a look as if to say that she didn't think I did understand it. Then she rubbed at the stain on my shirt with a tissue she spat into and said, "I don't know what we'll do with you." I asked her what she had been listening to and she said that it was *The Swan of Tuonela* by Sibelius. This was yet another thing about death, but I didn't realise that at the time, so I smiled and said, "That's nice." She then asked me if I wanted to see the snow globe but I said that I didn't because I could imagine what it looked like.

I now regret saying this.

25 October

I'm sitting by the fire and the wind is strong. It's the perfect evening for a ghost story. I've been drifting in and out of sleep. I've felt tired today. In a half awake state I create vivid stories in my mind involving people I don't know in places that are vaguely familiar to me. It's as if a succession of new narratives is

introducing itself. Some people have entered my head, dressed from another era. It has not been an unpleasant experience, this drifting along the edge of the subliminal. I quite like this state of floating reverie. I like not being in control of my thoughts.

The house rattles and creaks. Good ghost story noises. I want to tell you about the first and fourth times I went to Berlin but other things keep coming into my mind. I want to get things finished, to get things straight. I need a drink.

A few months ago I got off the train at the new Berlin Hauptbahnhof and took the S-bahn and then the U-bahn to my hotel in Kreuzberg. It was warm and sunny when I arrived and I had got off the train a few stops early because I wanted to walk through the streets leading up to my hotel and look in the shop windows and try to find a record shop that you, Bill, had recommended. I was also in the neighbourhood where some of *Briser puis reparer* had been filmed so it counted as research that I should wander through this part of the city.

Eric Leers made the film in 1974 but the production encountered several difficulties owing to funding and a dispute between the director and one of his producers. The film wasn't released until 1976 even though it was shown at Cannes and in Venice the year before. A different version resulted after the delay between its festival showings and exhibition, with Leers changing the ending and including a sequence set in Paris that filled in the backstory on the couple whose doomed relationship forms the plot of the movie. At the time the film received criticism for its attempts to pay homage to early French new wave films, particularly those by Godard, and the fact that the divided Berlin was an inappropriate setting for what some critics dismissed as a romantic comedy. Leers has commented in interviews that his ideas were misunderstood and that far from a light romance he was making a film about separation and human suffering. *Briser puis reparer or Break and Mend* has since been reclaimed as an important part of the Leers canon.

It concerns a woman, Celine, and her lover, Jean-Marie, who leave for Berlin to escape their dull jobs in Paris. Inevitably, trying to make a living in the new city and the problems they have with the language, leads to tensions in the relationship. This is further compounded by Celine's penchant for following

strangers. One day while tailing a woman she sees coming out of a department store she is herself followed and detained by the woman's bodyguards. The woman she had been following turns out to be the wife of a jealous and over-protective diplomat at the French embassy. The diplomat's wife befriends Celine and uses their physical resemblance to each other to escape her husband's constant spying on her. Celine assumes the identity of the diplomat's wife for a day, allowing her to spend hours shopping on an expense account and dining at an expensive restaurant. When she returns to the anguished Jean-Marie, who has assumed that she has gone missing, she tells him what has happened. Jean-Marie realises that if she can repeat the role again the couple can exploit the situation for financial gain. Celine at first agrees but then changes her mind when she meets the diplomat's wife once more. A long conversation between the two women as they walk in the Tiergarten leads Celine to re-evaluate her relationship with Jean-Marie, who had been following them through the centre of West Berlin. When Celine finds out that her lover had been spying on her she decides to terminate the relationship immediately. The film ends with the now famous slow motion slap Celine delivers to Jean-Marie's astonished face. It wasn't long after the negative criticism this film produced that Eric Leers set off for the United States.

When I got to my hotel I saw that the room contained headed note paper just like the other rooms I had been staying in. It's very rare to find such paper in hotels today. I decided to write another letter to Ophelia to add to the collection. This time it was written on pale green paper in the orange ink of one of the many Muji pens that I carry with me to make notes and sketches.

It's barely readable in the firelight:

Dear Ophelia,

I'm in Berlin where we had such a good time last October. I have fond memories of the time we spent here, and now only really a few months later I am back, continuing my tour of those film locations I told you about in my previous letters. I hope you've also been getting the texts and the email with the photo attachments. This hotel is small but in a good location in Kreuzberg. It's quite different from the enormous chain hotel room in Alexanderplatz. I know you'd

like it in this neighbourhood, as it's a bit like the kind of atmosphere we found in Friedrichshein. I'm here for a few days and then I'd better head on home again. So I'll be in London by the end of the week, then back in Southampton.

I actually met up with Eric Leers before I left Amsterdam. It was quite an experience which I can tell you about sometime. I'd like to tell you all about it, so it would be good to get together soon and swap stories. I think I'm going to be lucky with the weather while I'm here.

I really mean it when I say that I want to apologise for whatever it is I have done to upset you. I think I understand why it is you're not getting in touch. What I'm saying now wouldn't work in a text or an email or even on the phone. It's easier, isn't it, to write things down sometimes? If we could meet I think I could explain to you that I still love you, and perhaps you could explain to me what it is that keeps you apart from me. I don't want it to seem like I am begging you but I do think it's time we sat down and talked.

I've just remembered that night we had the last time we were here. I am going to lie here and think about it. I've been travelling all day and I'll probably have a sleep before I go and find some dinner. I'll drift off thinking about you, and about the good time we had here not so long ago.

I look forward to hearing from you. A letter would be nice.

XX

It's seems so embarrassing now to read it through, but I want to share these letters with you, Bill and Corrie. It seems strange but it makes me feel a bit better that someone else is reading them. I don't know why. I'm glad, though, that this one was never sent, along with the others. At the time it was meant with great feeling, but that's the trouble with feelings, they don't translate into words. I wonder how Ophelia would have responded to them, my epistles from three European cities. But now this one seems like something written by a desperate man who couldn't find the right tone, or tried too hard to find the right tone and ended up crassly pleading. I sound like a jerk. That's the nicest thing I

can say about it. I present it here as evidence of my jerkiness. Or should that be jerkiness?

It still seems like a night for ghost stories. There's the noise of wind and the cracking of the log fire. I am in possession of a letter discovered among my papers. It would have been better if they had been discovered in a nook or beneath the floorboards or that I had given in to the temptation to pry into the private letters of my absent host. That would have been more in keeping with the genre. But they are here in one of my folders, the accumulation of this past year's writing and travelling. As for Bill's letters, I have found none. I have wandered about the rooms of this house and looked at things, but I have found no letters, just books and pictures and objects and all the paraphernalia of someone's second home on the Isle of Bute. If there are any secrets here then I can't find them Bill. The discovery of a letter, though, is one of those ingredients of a classic ghost story, often the cause of an unsettling feeling within the narrator.

I'm the narrator and I am unsettled, but not by this letter. I'm telling a ghost story. It involves events in the past that have a bearing on the present and the strange appearance of doppelgangers that lead the narrator into trouble. Perhaps I have a gothic or even a romantic tale to tell.

And as if to further emphasise this, just along from the fireplace is a print of *Manfred on the Jungfrau* by Ford Madox Brown. There he is, in utter despair, those great pointy shoes hanging over the edge of the precipice over which he is about to jump, but he is pulled back from the brink by a man who seems to be calling to him.



That's why I love this house. There are pictures everywhere. And books. Manfred is about to leap to his death, looking like a red bat, poised at a dangerous angle. How can he get back from there? Will he escape? Find out in the next episode. Literally, we've left him on a cliff hanger. What happens to Manfred? What happens to me? I can delay it no more.

The reading of that letter to Ophelia makes me cringe rather than feel the tremble of love-sickness that it should have evoked. It has brought me to my point of no return. However, I must confess that I am enjoying the feeling of delay and I am aware that after the telling of my tale my soul may once again rest in peace, and the torments of the last few months could be behind me and I will be able to leave this place of sanctuary and venture south to resume my life.

26 October

It wasn't difficult to spot them in Berlin, or should I say that it wasn't difficult to spot us. It wasn't long after I left my hotel that I saw them. There was a long twilight and the afternoon sun edged reds into crimsons and the air became saturated with colour. I was trying to find a street that had once been near the wall and where some scenes from *Briser et reparer* had been filmed. The early evening light made it perfect for photographs, so I took shots of the area I was walking through, trying to figure out the course of the wall and where the apartment block was that Celine and Jean-Marie had lived in. I knew it was near some abandoned factory buildings but I was having difficulty trying to get my bearings.

I saw them, myself and Ophelia, ahead of me, standing and looking up at the sky, holding a map. I could tell who it was immediately, even though they were a long way up the street. I think I probably sensed their presence even before I saw them. I knew they would be there. By the time I got to Berlin I was expecting them, especially after what had happened there. I knew they would be waiting for me. Ophelia was wearing a green tee shirt and faded jeans, her

hair in curls down her back. I was wearing a red tee shirt and shorts. It was the red and green of our clothes in that evening light that caught my attention. They are colours that absorb light very well and come out well in photographs. So it was a photoluminescence that I saw ahead of me, two characters standing out from the other people in the street, as if they were being lit by arc lights but, in fact, they were simply absorbing the low rays of the light against their backs as they were looking east, away from the setting sun. I have many old Agfachrome slides where the reds are really strong. I can picture them now in their distinctive blue plastic mounts.

It took me a little while to work out that they were staring directly at the wall, only, of course, it wasn't there. When I realised this I was able then to locate where Celine's apartment had been. We were near Michael-Kirchplatz on Waldermar Strasse. Their presence was actually helping me, because they turned to their left and the direction they began to walk in followed the line of the wall. They faced a barrier that they couldn't cross, and as I approached behind them I continued to walk ahead of them on the other side of the road into what had been no man's land, an empty tract heavily guarded by watch towers and set with landmines. When I turned back they were still looking up. It had been about thirty minutes since I had left my hotel and already I had found them. However, the city they were in was different from the one that I was walking through.

I was able to follow them for a long time, as they headed west, then down through Oranienplatz. As I had done in Amsterdam, I was able to draw close, right behind them. They seemed now like other people, rather than myself and Ophelia, and the initial strangeness had diminished. I was following them as if they were people I knew today rather than figures from my past. The feeling that they might turn around and notice me was also absent. I was following two young people who were dressed not unlike the way any other young person on the streets around us seemed to be dressed. However, those who take notice of fashion would have spotted that the cut of the jeans and the shape of the shirts of my quarry were anachronistic and clearly dated to the 1980s.

They disappeared as I thought they might, because as I strained to hear what they were saying we drew closer to the site of the former border crossing at

Heinrich-Heine-Strasse. With nothing left of this barrier there was nowhere for them to go but to vanish back into the past before my eyes.

I must have looked unwell or in some distress because an elderly man began to ask me in German if I was all right. I know this because he switched to English when I didn't reply. He asked me if needed any help, or any directions, and would I like to sit down. He said he thought I was about to get run over by a car and that was why he had shouted at me. I didn't remember hearing a shout, just someone talking to me loudly in a language I didn't understand. I thanked him and said that I would be all right to continue and he stared at me for a moment longer. Then he asked me if I was British, and when I said that I was his eyes widened and he said, "Are you Bruce Robertson?" I said that I wasn't, so he nodded and shrugged. "I thought you might be." He stared at me as if he was about to say some more. Then he turned and walked on.

Later that evening I began to work things out. I sat down at the same table in the same restaurant in Friedrichshein where Ophelia and I had eaten a year earlier. I had made up my mind to go there while I was writing the letter. It was just through luck that I was able to get the same table. I sat and looked across the room, out to the edge of the square where one of the murders had taken place the last time I was in the city.

It was a much calmer night than the last time I had looked out of this window. There was now an ordered passing by of local residents returning from work and groups of people meeting up for drinks. Being alone I had nothing much to do but watch the movements of people outside the restaurant window.

It was during the meal, the contents of which I now forget, that I worked things out.

I had to go back, first, to 1988 and recall what had happened when we were staying in Berlin. I had to sort out once and for all the issue of Klaus and what had happened to him. I ordered my food, whatever it was, and let it all come back into my mind. It was very easy, as a catalogue of memories presented themselves before me and I was able to flip from one to another.

Those memories went something like this:

We had arrived in Berlin from Munich and went straight to an address in Charlottenburg where Klaus was staying. I'm not sure whether his family owned the apartment but he was living in it and the three of us had the run of it to



ourselves. It was large and comfortable and in a very upmarket neighbourhood near Savignyplatz. At first we had a lot of fun, pretending, I suppose, that we owned the place and spreading ourselves out in it. We skipped from room to room, played hide and seek, found a spacehopper which only I could master, tipped out a box of wooden toys and created a Saxon market town in miniature. Klaus left us for most of each day because he had to attend some lectures, I think, at a university or it might have been to do with a piece of music that he was working on and that he had to visit a composer he knew. Ophelia and I played at being children while he was gone.

We explored the city, returning to the apartment for meals in the evening which Klaus had prepared for us with the help of a woman he had brought in to do some kitchen work. It was the first time in my life that I had experienced the use of a servant. I can't remember the woman's name but she was middle-aged and seemed at first to get on with Klaus very well, to the point where she would tell him off for making a mess in the kitchen and tease him for getting something wrong in the preparation of a dish. However, during dinner this woman would adopt quite a different role and would be deferential and would not take part in any of the conversation the three of us conducted. In fact, I just remember her coming in and out of the dining room serving food and then clearing away plates. She became a silent waitress. On one occasion Klaus became quite rude to her because she was late bringing in the dessert. At first I thought he was joking, in the way that I had seen him enjoy exchanging banter with the woman when he was in the kitchen with her before dinner started. I thought it was just his strange sense of humour.

However, it was clear that things changed when dinner commenced and he made sarcastic remarks to her which even I had worked out despite the fact that he spoke German. It was the tone of his voice that I didn't like. I couldn't

understand how he could have changed in his attitude towards this woman. I remember that stern look on his face when he sent her away with the food, and the way he banged the table with his fist. There was an awkward silence during which Ophelia took my hand under the table and pressed it hard. Klaus then shouted the woman's name and she appeared at the door to the kitchen. He said something to her and she curtsied towards him. She went back into the kitchen and I noticed that Klaus was now smiling. He poured out more drinks and then took a swig from his glass, announcing that dessert was now to be served. He called for the woman again and she appeared once the sound of his barked command had quietened to a reverberation. She was carrying the pudding on a salver and she walked directly over to Klaus who waited for her to finish lining up the dessert on the table in front of him. She fumbled with the salver and caught her elbow on some cutlery, provoking a loud 'nein' from Klaus, who then shook his head from side to side in an exaggerated fashion, repeating 'no' over and over again. The woman had to take the dish off the table and return to the kitchen. She would have to perform the process again. I looked at Ophelia and expected her to say something, but she didn't. It must have been that she had seen this kind of behaviour from Klaus before and knew better than to interfere. The poor woman came back into the room after she was summoned once more. She achingly genuflected and then attempted to place the salver down without disturbing anything on the table. Fortunately this attempt succeeded and whatever rules Klaus had established for this humiliating spectacle were not infringed. The dish was served and she was told to leave the room. Klaus laughed and instructed us to drink up before we started on the elaborate chocolate confection that had been carefully placed before him.

When we commenced eating, but before we had time to enjoy it, he shouted out a command through puffed cheeks, his food suspended inside his mouth. He shouted again, the chocolate dessert held back from entering his digestive tract. Immediately this time the door to the kitchen opened and the woman appeared, waiting a second before remembering to tilt her head in Klaus's direction. She was rubbing her wet hands behind her back. I watched her doing this as I continued to eat, making the noise of my fork on the plate sound loudly so that I could at least signal my approval of how this woman had served me with the

dessert. I didn't, of course, understand what Klaus said to her, but he spoke more calmly this time. It appeared that there was some concern over the amount of nuts on Klaus's plate, but Ophelia told him that she was quite satisfied with hers and looked at me for support. I nodded and said that I was enjoying the dessert and that it couldn't be bettered in any way. There was a long pause and I remember the woman standing opposite me and a smile suddenly coming across her flushed face. Evidently the game was over and Klaus must have given some signal to the woman because he laughed and returned her smile. He dismissed her and then started a long speech about hazelnuts and how in West Berlin it was sometimes difficult to acquire the type of filberts he particularly liked from a region in northern Italy near his uncle's estate.

And then there appeared another memory. This time it was an image of Klaus taking us on a bicycle tour of the Tiergarten. He rode slowly and when I tried to increase the pace he stopped abruptly and compelled Ophelia to wait with him, so that I had to turn back and re-join them. I can remember him falling to the ground in slow motion, with Ophelia laughing, unaware of what had caused his wheel to wobble, but I had deliberately clipped his back wheel with the front tyre of my bike. He hobbled to a bench, making a scene out of his weak and gentle fall, so that Ophelia had to attend to his damaged body. It wasn't the only time in Berlin, of course, that I caused him to have a fall.

While eating my meal alone in the restaurant in Friedrichshein I saw an image of Klaus playing his violin to entertain us and then taking a bow while we applauded. Klaus hugging Ophelia to keep her warm and then rubbing his fingernail along the inside of her arm, producing an ecstatic grin on her face. Klaus limping out of the bathroom with a hair net on. Klaus stuffing one animal inside another in the kitchen while his serving woman held out a fish in her red hand. Klaus smoking a pipe and telling me that I should try to learn German. Klaus looking up to the sky and noticing a cloud in the shape of a jigsaw puzzle piece. Klaus translating the latin script at the bottom of a canvas in a museum and then leading us both by the hand to another room and another painting by another artist whose work he referred to as a pastiche of the former. Klaus holding my hand. Klaus laughing at my blunder.

When Klaus laughed at my blunder it wasn't long before I hit him and broke his nose.

As well as breaking his nose I bruised his ribs and caused him to twist an ankle as he fell to the ground. He fell to the ground not so much from the force of the blow that I landed in his face, nor from the swift follow up with a punch to the chest, but from slipping on a slice of Parma ham that had been dropped on the kitchen floor. I remember my heart pounding loudly and a struggle to catch my breath as I watched him on the floor, waiting for him to move.

I don't actually remember the sound of his head hitting the red tiles of the kitchen floor, but he had recurring headaches and seizures that started shortly after this incident. It's likely that he did hit his head but I can't be certain. He seemed to take the weight of the fall on his shoulder, and he threw out an arm in an attempt to grab hold of the edge of the table as he went down. I'm sure he broke his own fall and didn't go crashing directly onto the hard floor. Amazingly the bottle of wine he was holding did not break. While he wasn't moving I had to make up my mind quickly whether or not to call for help. The serving woman was in the kitchen with us when it happened and she didn't move from the sink. She had her back to us, only having glanced up to see who it was who had pushed angrily through the door before resuming her task in the sink. I wasn't aware of her while I spoke to Klaus before striking him. I waited for him to move while the woman continued to scrape at a saucepan. It never occurred to me at the time that I should expect her to offer some assistance. I was about to shout out to Ophelia in the dining room when Klaus moved his head, his blond curls randomised over his forehead, a tangle of waxy yellow against the maroon of the tiles. There was blood trickling from his nostril and he touched at it with a finger. That's when I knew he was all right. He began to prop himself up. When he looked up at me I was disappointed that he smiled. Ophelia had never heard any noise from the fight in the kitchen as she had been tapping keys on the piano in the corner of the dining room, singing to herself. I know this because as I went back to join her to tell her about the accident Klaus had suffered she was singing 'Don't Go Breaking My Heart' by Elton John and Kiki Dee.

The blunder that I made was in saying that the author of 'Dracula' was Mary Shelley. It was as simple as that, but Klaus for some reason started laughing. With scorn. He guffawed, and spluttered on his Sancerre.

This was yet another scene at the dinner table with me eating food that I was unfamiliar with and using utensils that I was uncertain about holding.

I felt angry that he was embarrassing me yet again. It was the way he was looking at Ophelia while he was laughing as if to make her enjoy my discomfort and to take pleasure in my ignorance. I remember feeling as if the air had been taken out of my lungs. There was a buzzing inside my head. It was probably symptomatic of what people call a red mist. I had lobster tongs in one hand, which I gripped hard while I waited for my breathing to resume. It was as if holding on to them very very hard would prevent me from drifting where my mind was taking me, over to where Klaus was cavorting in his wing chair, cackling like a mad prince. The tongs were what anchored me so that I didn't drift across the seafood platter between us and take Klaus by the throat and shake him until he stopped laughing. At me. It goes without saying that I have never been able to eat lobster again, and hardly any seafood come to that.

Crustaceans have been absent from the dinner table of Ophelia and me for the past twenty-five years. Our marriage has been sadly devoid of shell food. Food that comes in shells reminds me of a summer night in Berlin, 1988. The night my literary blunder caused so much mirth that I broke the nose of my host.

He went laughing into the kitchen, blurting out "Mary Shelley" again and again. I had a moment to make eye contact with Ophelia who had buried her head in her hands briefly after my blunder had been remarked upon. She then looked at me in what I can only describe as a completely neutral way. Her expression meant nothing. I wanted to find reassurance in her candlelit face but there was nothing. I couldn't tell whether she was on Klaus's side or mine. She got up and walked over to the piano, humming to herself. I have to add that I took all this in quickly because I was on my feet and after Klaus not long after the door to the kitchen had been closed. The red mist of uncontrollable rage had gripped me in the same way that a mad man might shake a geranium, so I can't be sure if any of the above details are accurate.

At first I was puzzled that he wasn't in the kitchen. The serving woman was scraping at something in the sink and dutifully kept at her chore and waited for me to address her. I asked her where Klaus went, in English, but she understood and pointed her knife at another door across the other side of the kitchen. I waited for a moment, uncertain as to whether to go after him, but then he appeared with a bottle of wine. I think I must have given him a chance to apologise because I just stared at him, long enough for him to show me a surprised expression, a cocky expression, and then he came forward and deliberately whispered "Mary Shelley" into my ear.

I heard the name Mary Shelley on the radio this morning and it made me shudder. This was for two reasons. The first was that it seemed like an odd coincidence that I had been thinking about what had happened in that kitchen and was sorting it out in my mind when the name came out of the speaker. Secondly, it just does, it makes me shudder, in the same way that we all associate bad memories with certain words or, more often, images. I have spent my life since I have graduated from university avoiding that name, even to the extent of turning down a lucrative offer to write a series of articles on the travel haunts of the Romantic writers.

Mary Shelley and shellfish are two things I dislike.

So I have stopped to shudder, poked the fire and wandered off to get more logs. I've even looked more than twice at the bottle of malt whisky that has been sitting on the side in the kitchen, thinking that now is the time to treat myself to a serious drink. I have held the bottle carefully and examined the label. An Islay malt, known for its peatiness and faint trace of iodine. Just the drink for a wild and windy night.

I sent the base of my hand, palm facing forward, into the middle of his face. My hand came up as if it didn't belong to me, and without swinging back my shoulder or trying to gain any momentum it found itself hitting Klaus hard on the bridge of his nose. It happened without me thinking about it, a reaction that was provoked in me by his sneering expression and his taunting, bullying whisper of the name of the author of *Frankenstein*. There, I can't even write it again.

He gave a quiet gasp, almost a word that sounded German, but more a mannered, dulcet scream. It was his expression of shock I suppose. He lowered his face into his cupped hands, blond locks obscuring his water filled eyes, the gasp repeated, becoming a steady repetition of “oh, oh, oh, oh....” Then the falling, the sliding to the floor and the bump of the head.

Did I then kick him?

Did I kick Klaus in the stomach, or was it the chest, when he was on the floor? Did I kick him to stop him whimpering? It’s possible that I might have, because although I had hated him in that moment before I struck him in the face I hated him more when he was on the ground, at my feet. He was making too much fuss of being struck. I think I thought he might scream so it must have been an attempt to silence him. A moment of panic rather than aggression, as I was frightened that Ophelia might coming running in to see what I had done. It would have been difficult to explain to her that it was in self-defence, that I was being bullied, but I felt that I had a right to defend myself. If I kicked him it was because I just wanted to shut him up.

A man falls to the floor and another man kicks him in the stomach. It’s not as bad as it sounds. I did kick him. I can see it happening now. But he had started it, so I was entitled to defend myself.

And then about six months later he died.

Alone in the restaurant in Friedrichshain I looked at my empty plate, then stared out at the street where Ophelia and I had stood briefly trying to see what the police were doing on the night of the stabbings. But a scene from a film was playing in my head. It was the one of Klaus on the floor. It cut between a close-up of his head and a mid-shot of the serving woman holding her knife and nodding at me with a satisfied expression on her face. I replayed that scene a few times, just to check her expression. I wanted to go in closer to try to work out what she was thinking. The closer I got to her round face and large eyes the more pixellated she became, so that all I could see was a pattern of blocks of colour, like brush strokes in a painting.

It took me a little while to work out that I was being asked if I wanted to see the dessert menu as I was concentrating on what was inside my head. The waitress was smiling at me with a menu in her hand. I declined her offer. However, when I settled the bill I left the waitress a large tip, to make sure that she was rewarded against the possibility that some day she might fall into the hands of a man like Klaus.

27 October

There's a film made in 1927 called *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* by Walther Ruttmann. Eric Leers told me about it when he turned up in the German capital shortly after I arrived from Amsterdam. It is a silent film tribute to the city and it starts with the arrival into Berlin of a train in the early morning.

When Anna phoned and said that Eric Leers wanted to meet me I was surprised that he, too, was in Berlin. She didn't say what it was about and when I explained where I was she laughed and said that she knew.

Eric and Anna had driven directly from Baarle-Hertog. I arranged with Anna for them to meet me at my hotel for breakfast. They were both sitting in the foyer when I came down from my room. When I had enquired of Anna on the telephone what Eric had wanted to see me about she had only said that it was a personal matter. While shaving I had been fantasising about Ophelia turning up to surprise me and had carelessly taken a nick out of my chin with the razor. I was dabbing at the tear in my skin with a piece of tissue when I unwittingly walked past them as soon as the lift doors opened. I felt Anna's hand on my shoulder as I started to look around the foyer. Immediately I knew it was the

hand of a woman. I had a sudden thought that it might be Ophelia's touch as I turned round to face her.

Anna was smiling at me, and in the brief silence that followed I thought it strange that she hadn't yet spoken. I must have come across as surprised and a bit bemused because she told me her name and who she was. I told her that I knew and that I was glad to see her. I held out my hand and she shook it firmly. I think she expected me to kiss her on both cheeks, but I didn't as I wanted to avoid the risk of the cut on my chin imparting blood on her face. Over Anna's shoulder I could see Eric Leers approaching.

When Anna shook my hand and I had looked slightly lost and a bit sheepish, absorbed as I had been in half reverie about meeting my wife for the first time in several weeks, I had no idea that later that day I would be scouting the locations of an Eric Leers film with the director himself. When he joined Anna in the hotel foyer and held out his large hand he was smiling. He said that he wanted to discuss a certain matter with me and I said that I was intrigued. It was later as we cycled around parts of Berlin that Eric told me about Ruttman's film, and how it had inspired him to want to make films about all the cities that he had come to admire during his life.

Coincidences. Sudden changes of plan. The unexpected. A man with a trembling hand and a razor to his throat. Then they appeared, like characters from a ghost story.

I wish now that I had asked him then and there what it was he wanted to discuss, for in all the later commotion Eric's purpose in coming to talk to me was swept aside by the culmination of events. Everything got lost in the confusion. Instead of asking him I felt overawed by meeting the great director for the second time in three days. My reverential politeness and surprise at seeing him and Anna again so soon prevented me from asking what it was he needed to see me about.

To fill in a bit of a pause while Eric scratched at one of his ear lobes and looked down at the ground I invited him to join me on a walk across the city. He asked me what I was looking for and I thought he knew what my current travels involved, but he appeared to have forgotten, or it might have been that he never

really took it in when we had met for the first time. When I told him that I was seeking the locations of one of his films he went quiet. I thought for a moment that I would regret telling him this, but he was obviously deep in some thought and looked up to the ceiling as if to find the beginning of his next sentence. In his perfect English that sounded slightly more Dutch than French he announced that it was all rather funny.

“This is all rather funny,” he said.

As I recall it now, my nose savouring the smell of Bill’s malt whisky and playing this line over and over and picturing him scratching his ear, it is definitely sounding Dutch.

He said it was funny that there were so many coincidences in his life. “Every day there are coincidences.” Eric’s deep voice is combined in this glass with the iodine and tar smell of the whisky. I can hear it very clearly, the sound and the whisky signifying something. That morning in Berlin, and the events of the rest of the day, are trapped in this glass. If I put my hand over the top of the tumbler I can seal it all in. But there’s nothing there, just liquid. I said this was like a ghost story, and here I am clutching at a spirit.

Once I have poked the fire and poured out another wee dram I must return to my thoughts. To an afternoon in August of this year. A fine afternoon for a walk. Except we ended up cycling, Eric and I. It was probably the subject of the phone call Anna made just after we greeted each other. While Eric ruminated about coincidences Anna must have been ordering the bikes because they just appeared after Eric asked me if I’d like to change the walk into a cycling trip. A young man arrived on the step outside the hotel holding the two sturdy roadsters and Anna approached him.

“We have bikes,” announced Eric, “ and later we shall we have beers.”

It turned out that Eric wasn’t much help as he couldn’t remember exactly where he had filmed. When we got to the locations he was able to recall some of the finer details but we were thwarted by the lack of our main reference point, the wall. I had researched the locations and had mapped out a route. Of course, after so much time, and especially in this city, there have been big changes to

the layout of the streets. We hadn't gone far from the hotel before we got into a muddle. Even though I was in the same neighbourhood that I had walked through the evening before, I was confused. Cycling and having to concentrate on the traffic didn't help.

Eric was in a very happy mood and I was waiting for him to ask me the question he had obviously come to Berlin for, but it never came. He seemed to be enjoying just tagging along with me, and I was thrilled and nervous to be in his presence. But when it became apparent that he wasn't in a position to correct me on any of my directions or offer any advice on where exactly a building had stood I grew less nervous. He didn't know where he was and obviously couldn't remember where he had filmed. I didn't feel like I was about to be corrected for any mistakes I might make. With Eric's apparent vagueness and constant smile I was able to concentrate on trying to find the site of the café where Celine and Jean-Marie have their first argument. Then she runs off up a long street and has to turn back into the arms of her advancing lover as she finds her way blocked by the wall.

Eric assured me that he never films in a place and then uses another location for interior shooting. The cafe would have been on the same street Celine had run along. But it was hard to work it all out, even accounting for the fact that the café had been knocked down. We cycled slowly, looking at my map repeatedly, looking like lost tourists on their rental bikes, a father and son on a holiday together. My big Dutch dad, still fit after all these years, his muscles taut under his brown corduroy trousers and jacket, an affable look on his face, a man apparently content with life, an unknown auteur pedalling steadily in an unfamiliar street.

Time for just a small sip of this rather lovely malt whisky. I have to pause here, because it's coming up to the moment when I saw them again.

Bill and Corrie have a great house and I have enjoyed being able to be alone here and to dip into the books and look closely at the pictures. There are reproductions of images from all over the world. There is nothing original hanging on the walls, so there is nothing that I have had to form an opinion on, no local scenes by local artists, no brush-in-mouth, no paint by numbers, no

moody photographs of the sea crashing against the rocks, not even a colony of dolphins. What I see on these walls are pictures that confirm my opinion that Bill and Corrie have a varied taste in art. They have done the selecting for me, so that I have discovered things I might not have looked at closely before. Even now I spot things I hadn't noticed when I first arrived at the beginning of the month. It's also like being in a library. It's not just the fiction but the medical books that belong to Corrie. I have enjoyed looking at diagrams of internal organs and following the meanderings of the alimentary canal, in much the same way that I derive pleasure from looking at maps of cities. I like to pick up books at random and flick through them. Every page that falls open is of interest. I am far away from where I live, with time on my hands.

I raise my glass to my dear friends, Bill and Corrie. Dear old sight impaired Bill and cuddly Corrie. Both of them I would like to have with me here to hug right now, to snuggle up with in front of this fire. I can smell the tobacco from Bill's pipe that is present in every room of this house. I could rest my head on Corrie's soft shoulder and feel her heart beating next to mine, draw comfort from her steady pulse. Better still, I could lie at their feet like a dog and shout out possible answers to cryptic crossword clues. A talking dog.

It's now almost the witching hour, the wind has calmed and I have sunk into a pocket of warmth up close to the fire and have entered a state of inertia. Fortunately my hands are still working and my mind is racing. My heart feels like it might have stopped. I'm pausing for a moment to check.

I'm still alive. The lack of air and the whisky have induced in me an altered state of being. I'm too long out of my tale of Berlin. I'm messing around with the events now. I'm wittering and wasting time, for it's soon they come to take me away. The hours in which to unfold my story are almost up. I must get us back to Berlin. I sense that there is a race against time to be had, so I'll get my metaphorical skates on and slide along a glissade of memory, interrupted by slithers of cliché or crochet or Clichy, which is in Paris where I saw them for the first time, or rather the second time. What does it matter, because I've pushed off from the side with my arms out to maintain balance. I'm skating.

I play two roles in the bit that I'm about to describe. I am as I was a few months ago and also myself from twenty odd years before that. That's a tricky one for any actor to pull off, but I'll do my best. There's also a performance from Ophelia and the baddie, Klaus. Eric Leers has a cameo appearance.

It was while Eric had cycled off to look for a landmark late in the afternoon, a church I think it was, that I stood alone, working out my position on the map against a sketch I had made in my notebook of where the wall was in relation to the current streets. In parts of the city there are marker studs on some of the pavements and roads but here in Kreuzberg there was nothing to indicate its course. There was nothing to help us locate where Eric had filmed a key moment from *Briser puis reparer*.

Where Paris and Amsterdam had been a piece of cake to research, Berlin was proving to be a tough cookie to crack. Or a nut. Berlin was a tough nut when it came to revealing the identities of its past. With Eric off on his bike, probably using this break in our journey to give rein to his amazing reserves of near-octogenarian energy by pushing out the revs in some high cadence circuits of Kreuzberg, I became aware of the time, as the sun had left the street where I was standing and I was in shadow, and my eyes found it more difficult to focus on the street names on the city plan.

Then I saw them. Then I realised.

There I was in my thin semi-transparent plastic raincoat, creased to buggery and scrunched up at the back as if part of it was tucked into my shorts. I had the camera out and I was taking photos. At first I was on my own, across the street from where I was standing. I saw myself in profile, standing still, looking down at the dials on the top of the old East German Praktica SLR I had carted around Europe with me. I watched as I took off the lens and replaced it with a longer one from the rucksack I was carrying. My hair was drenched from an earlier downpour and I looked a lot thinner than I am now, my legs like spindles. My ears stuck out. I hadn't noticed that my ears were so big and that they were so noticeable. Why had no one ever told me this before, or had they just quietly sniggered about it behind my back? From the side I looked awkward, unbalanced and badly dressed. And those canvas shoes with the striped socks.

Were they fashionable then? Why hadn't Ophelia ever pointed out that I looked like a misfit?

I watched myself as I fiddled with the lens, just a few metres away from where I was standing. And then the camera was pointed directly at me. My heart did that skipping thing and the whatever it is the blood does to create that sudden rush of tingliness. The fear reflex kicked in. I was in the lens of my former self, in the former West Berlin. I couldn't turn and move to see what it was that I was photographing, but it must have been the building I was standing directly in front of. Or was it the wall? I heard the heavy shutter click and release slowly and the winding on of the film. I heard myself sniff. Just one shot in my direction. No looking down at an LCD display to check the shot. Just one chance, and then that wait for the film to be developed to see how it had come out. Just one chance.

When I get back home I'll go and find those photographs from that trip, to see what was in the shot, at the place where I was standing. It would be strange if there was someone in that photograph who looks like I do now.

My younger self looked back across the street, as if framing the shot again, perhaps considering giving it a second go. We were staring at each other. The awkward looking young man in the plastic mac was looking at me holding my map. He spoke to me, or at least in my direction. It sounded like he said, "Where in the world is Carmen San Diego?" It was too muffled to make out clearly. I was so shocked that I couldn't form an answer. I wasn't even sure that he had spoken, for I was not even convinced that he could see that I was there. I wasn't sure. Perhaps I had imagined it. I couldn't move a muscle. Then he walked on, the me that I was watching, the me that had spoken in a voice that sounded too deep. The me that was doing the watching was too frightened to move. He walked on, holding the camera, looking for another shot, looking up above my head, forward from where I remained standing, too frightened to move. I didn't understand what he meant about San Diego, or was it German I was hearing? "Wo in der Welt ist Carmen Sandiego?"

Then Ophelia and Klaus appeared to my left, at the far end of the street. I realised two things: The first was that they were arm in arm and the second was

that I could try to change things if they could see me. I felt sure that they would see me.

This was what I had planned the night before in that Friedrichsheim restaurant so I was ready for what happened next.

Thinking about it now the twilight street I was standing on was remarkably empty. I can't remember seeing many other people or hearing vehicles going past, as if when Eric left me the rest of the city wheeled away as well. I don't know what was happening but for the first time in all the sightings that I had had I felt that there was a possibility to actually make contact. And here were Klaus and Ophelia coming into the shot, right on cue. I felt, in a moment of obvious insanity, yes insanity, that I could change something. It was an insane idea, an inane idea, an idea I wish I had never had, the night before while eating alone. I couldn't stop myself.

At one end of the street I was vanishing out of shot, with my former East German camera cocked like a harmless weapon, mock-predatory, confident and looking for images, obviously overawed by the presence of living history, a young Englishman abroad for whom anything foreign was worthy of composition in his viewfinder, for whom barbed wire and cement and posters with those peculiarly written letters on them (straße) had the potential to be captured on a roll of Agfachrome. At the other end of the street, to my left, came Ophelia and Klaus. All it took was a slight move of my head, a panning of my neck to pick up the entrance of two new characters. They were laughing. Klaus was talking as he always did, with Ophelia's arm being brushed by his shoulder as he involuntarily dipped to his right owing to his limping gait, his long hair mingling with the ends of her long hair.

Two blondes, arm in arm, entering the shot slowly. I waited for them to look in my direction. I wanted them to look in my direction. I couldn't hear what he was saying. There were no cars passing. It was quiet, a deserted lot. I wanted to hear what he was saying. I wanted to hear what Ophelia was saying. I wanted to hear what she was laughing about. I knew that it hadn't happened yet, that was obvious. After I had hit him the three of us never went out together again. We never saw him again.

After the incident, after I had knocked him to the ground and kicked him, we took the night train to Zurich and drank red wine in sporadic silence, until I was sick and then slept and then we toured the city as if we were in a hurry, all the time making preparations to head home to England, holding hands, fucking for England in cheap hotels, sometimes fucking for France or Belgium or Luxembourg, but never fucking for fucking Germany. And never once mentioning fucking Klaus or what I had done to him. That, I now know, was the problem. I had allowed myself to forget him too easily. All those days and nights of being in his company and then it ended just like that. It ended in Berlin. We just switched him off, as if he had never happened. It was only when Ophelia told me the news of his death, in a telephone call, that he returned to us. But I don't think he ever went away. I thought he had, but he hadn't, not for Ophelia.

How could I be so stupid to think that if she was not talking about him then she was not thinking about him?

I cross the street and go off to the right and they come in to the shot from the left. Are they talking about me? Are they laughing about me? But it was before it happened anyway, so it doesn't matter now.

So did she ever stop thinking about Klaus? Is she thinking about him right now as it's round about the anniversary of his death? Oh my God, it's the anniversary.

They came into view, from the left of the frame, the camera fixed on the corbelled facade of an apartment block, not moving from when I had walked on, the pause signifying that all three of us were together but also that we were apart. The camera waiting while fixed on the building, signifying the space between me and them. The camera picks out a faded sign of a leather merchant. There is no break in the action. The viewer remains looking at the building. For a while, an uncomfortably long while, there is no action, only what the viewer starts to create in their own mind. We know that Ophelia and Klaus are somewhere on the left and I am on the right but the camera refuses to move down to reveal the three characters about to meet.

In my mind I created a chance to change things because I saw that Klaus had one arm tucked through the crook of Ophelia's arm but in his other arm he held

a shopping bag with giant lilies protruding from its top. They had to be the flowers he bought for that meal, that evening. It had to be the same day, it had to be a few hours before we had that meal, even though I was almost certain we were in the wrong part of the city. We were miles away from Klaus' family home in Charlottenburg. But the location didn't matter because I was convinced it was the same day, the same build up to that evening and what was going to happen between Klaus and that woman who worked for him and then Klaus and me and later Ophelia and me. Ophelia and me.

I thought I could prevent what had happened between Ophelia and me. If I could change one thing back then I could influence our lives ever after. Everything would have worked out differently.

What a fucking stupid idea. As if I was responsible for Klaus' death. Responsible for what happened to Ophelia and me. For all the sins of the fucking world. I brought all this upon the world, my world, and I should suffer as a consequence. That I could change all that in one moment, in the growing gloom, that glorious twilight, that one moment that could change the world. Forget when the wall came down and all the other politically decisive moments in the history of modern Europe, my moment was in front of me. I was looking at my moment in the face. I had never felt any remorse for what I had done. Perhaps I should. The thought had never occurred to me. But how could I say that I was sorry that I had done what I did and that it had probably contributed to the demise of Klaus? How would Ophelia ever know that I had hated him? And if I was responsible for what had happened in Berlin, had set the ball rolling on a course of events that led to me having committed a sin, then I might just as well be held responsible for any other sin you'd care to mention. Pin the death of Klaus upon me damn you and you might as well pin the donkey on the tail of genocide, injustice, industrial pollution, global fucking warming and paedophile priests. Pin the catherine wheel on the donkey and watch me spin uncontrollably for ever and ever. I am taking a donkey ride into oblivion.

Or so I thought. To prevent this from happening, to prevent me from ending up living in a house by myself, in Southampton, the city that never wakes, to prevent me from the charity of others, Bill and Corrie and Sophie, to prevent me wandering about like a detached spectator of the lives of others, to write about

places so that others can enjoy them on their budget breaks, to pluck crass descriptions from my mind and cobbled-together-easy-to-skim paragraphs of information, to put boring words on boring virtual pages, to stop me from going off the rails, being kicked to death by a donkey - which, incidentally, is more likely to be the cause of your death than being in an air crash - or stretched out on a big wooden wheel and have pins stuck in me by voodoo-loving, donkey jacket wearing binmen only too happy to give some slack citizen a good kicking for not sorting out his recyclables properly, or being lured by a woman called Catherine who turns out to be a man and then eats me, to prevent all these possibilities turning into reality then I had to cross that road in Berlin and intervene.

I had a very strong urge to do something. This is what I'm trying to say.

When they came into shot I would cross the road and, like a mad man shaking a red geranium, I would startle them, then reassure them that this was only a device to grab their attention as I was not really a madman and if they looked closely they would see that I bore an uncanny resemblance to someone they knew and that I wasn't holding a geranium but a map and I was lost and somehow I would persuade them to come and eat with me and I would tell them some freaky things about their futures and ruin Klaus's pudding by announcing that in a few months he would be dead. I had this in my mind as they drew level with me. I didn't really know what I would say, but it didn't matter. I was about to change everything.

28 October

Eric came back and called out to me that he had found the location and that we were completely in the wrong place. He appeared out of the semi-darkness to my right, bringing his bike to a squeaky halt. "Time for a beer," said Eric. Time for bed said Zebedee, he might have said. But I kept my eyes fixed on Ophelia and Klaus who were now walking past me, talking and laughing, not distracted by the noise of Eric's brakes. I acknowledged Eric's greeting by giving him a peremptory wave, keen to keep my eyes fixed on the couple across the street. I was just about to walk out into the road at the same time that Eric came into the shot. The director had chosen his cameo part at just the wrong moment.

They were getting away. Eric had arrived with his squeaky brakes like he had come in right on cue and I was some half-arsed rom com hero frustrated yet again by the ratcheting turn of circumstance. The wheel of fortune, in this case symbolised by the bicycle wheel of Eric Leers, had come full circle. I was here. They were over there, getting away, moving and laughing, the outrageously large and funereal lilies a marker for my comedy eyes. I suppose they were like saucers. I had to catch them up but Eric was in the way, talking about beer. The funny foreigner, my revered companion, my once in a lifetime opportunity to be in the presence of the reclusive auteur, was in the way of my date with destiny. Turn back the clocks. Now is the witching hour. Turn back the clocks, go back to 1988 and electro pop. Eric looked so happy, wanted me to go with him to the place he had found, like a child despite his seventy-nine years. And they were getting away. Oh what a comedy moment.

"I've got to go after them." I said.

"Who?" asked Eric.

He was right. Who was I going after? I knew who I was going after but I couldn't tell him. I changed my plea quickly, realising my mistake as soon as the words had entered the Berlin twilight. I changed it to, "I need to go that way." But, in the true spirit of tragi-comedy with a modern spin, Eric wanted to take me the other way. Oh what a dilemma! I could see them so they were real and I was convinced that I could talk to them. What's so funny about that? Which way to go? And then.

And then, just at the moment I was to make the decision - should I go after Ophelia and Klaus to correct something bad in my past or should I follow Eric to visit the exact location I needed to allow me to write the article for Bill on Eric's film locations - both our phones went off at exactly the same time. What are the chances of that happening? We fumbled in our pockets for a few seconds, both embarked on an unofficial race to retrieve our handsets, both ring tones melding into a tinny, discordant chime, a campanology catastrophe. Carry On in the Campana. For whom the bell tolls.

I got to mine first and read the name Sophie on the screen. I couldn't, in that moment of near panic, register the significance of this call, my eyes only barely glossing her name before they were back on what was going on across the street. Who was Sophie? Eric looked myopically at his screen and then put the phone to his big Dutch ear, leaning his big Dutch neck to his shoulder. He mouthed the name Anna to me. Big Latvian Anna, with those long legs and long eye lashes.

Anna with those mysterious ways, her indubitable efficiency, her air of disdain mixed with respect. A potent mix, a mixture of contradictions, a paradoxical personal assistant. Her almond shaped eyes that didn't mind being stared at. Eric was listening to her speak and was nodding, nodding at me, replying to her in French, then breaking into English - something about a minimum deposit and a going rate - while I thought about returning the call to Sophie. It didn't take me long to remember who she was. Of course, I knew who she was, it's just that I couldn't think straight in that moment and it took me a few seconds to picture her. But they were about to turn the corner. I had to decide. There were potential pratfalls ahead of the protagonist. I could get tangled up in Eric's bike or suddenly find the road full of passing cars so that I would have to risk my life dodging a taxi. I could be faced with a line of window fitters holding a large piece of glass, preventing me from moving ahead. Whatever happened I would only just catch up with them in time. There was no time to reply to Sophie, even though she was the one who had made it all happen, my meeting up with Eric Leers. I owed her a lot. A lot had happened in just a few days since we had dined together in her house in Amsterdam. But I didn't have time to take her call.

If only I had.

If I had it wouldn't have worked out the way it did. I probably wouldn't be here now sitting by the fire drinking whisky and conjuring up ghost stories. I wouldn't have chased after ghosts through the streets of Kreuzberg, causing havoc, tormented by spirits, driving me to some unnatural act. I wouldn't have felt the urge to purge. I wouldn't have gone running after them and those enormous lilies and him with his arm hooked into her arm and her leaning against his frail German neck and them bobbing along like children in a nursery rhyme. Grimm's fairy tale. I wouldn't have lost sight of them and then felt panic. I wouldn't have left Eric holding my bike. If only I had taken that call from Sophie.

I used to think that ghosts were the dead come back to visit us. I didn't know that ghosts could be alive. I didn't know that we could be haunted by the living. I didn't know that it was possible to haunt yourself. I can see Manfred on the edge of that mountain. I can make him out in the gloom from where I am sitting. I was like him once. Thank you, Bill, and thank you Corrie, for helping me to realise this, for providing all the images to help describe my recent past. And thank you all for the part that you have played, Sophie, Anna and Eric. Especially Sophie, my dear dear Sophie.

You were trying to bring me some good news, Sophie, and I ignored you. I wanted to do it my way. My big Frank Sinatra moment. Eric with his big Sinatra face, like a moon. I wanted to run off in the streets of Berlin and chase after those ghosts. If only I had taken that call from Sophie. When I think of her now, which obviously I am doing because I am talking about her, I can smell her perfume, the one she always wears. When I am released from here I'll tour the perfume counters of a department store and try to find that fragrance. I want to buy her a litre of her favourite perfume. Sophie might have been my saviour, and I'm beginning to think that she might be yet. Sophie is the closest I can get to Ophelia. I want to buy the volume of her mind in perfume.

29 October

It is now the next day. I haven't moved. It is well past midnight. I've been thinking about Sophie when I should be thinking about Ophelia.

I left Eric. I mumbled something about needing to find someone and said that he should hang on there and I would be back. I didn't turn around to look at him. I abandoned him in possession of two rental bikes. I walked quickly to the corner, fearing that Ophelia and Klaus had vanished like they had done before. At the same time I was hoping that they would still be there, and I remember begging them to be on the next street arm in arm, him limping along and her sliding her shoulder against his thin frame. And they were, doing just that. Limping and sliding, limping and sliding like it was still 1988.

And I had to do something. There they were, looking like each other, both with blonde hair, bob bob bobbing along. And I felt enraged. I had turned a corner and there they were, just as they had left me, still there, only farther away, much farther than they could have travelled in the time it had taken me to abandon Eric and glance apologetically at his forlorn and puzzled look and run after them. I had turned a corner, knowing this was probably my last chance to do anything to change things. They were a long way ahead and the street we were on was busy, so unlike the street I had come from. It was Ritter Strasse. I could pick them out easily even though they were in the distance, having travelled ahead of me so quickly in that way that only ghosts can. If only I had taken that call from Sophie.

Sophie who looked like Ophelia who looked like Klaus. But I fixed my eyes, my enraged eyes, on his blast beruffled plume of hair as he limped off into to the distance with the love of my life, stealing her like a disabled, crippled, fascist Pied Piper. Him with his fifteen languages and his knowledge of food and drink, a right old bon viveur, raconteur and mittel European wanker. I had the singing, ringing tree of anger ringing and a-singing in my ears as I hurried after them, in depeche mode, speed function, seeing red, oblivious to everything around me. I ran like the wind, knocking into Berliners, angering my fellow Europeans, hitting against café tables, not once looking back to see if Eric had come after me.

He had. But I didn't know this at the time. I couldn't hear anything, least of all the warning ringing of the bell on the handlebars of his thick framed rental roadster. I hadn't thought about his ability to sprint along the dead flat, straight Ritter Strasse. I had forgotten his Merckx-like turn of speed.

Klaus and Ophelia were closer to me, still rubbing shoulders, still slightly ahead, but I was gaining on them, able to ease off the pace. I had them in my sights. They were like lovers, a matched pair, him with his bag of over-sized lilies on his way back to his apartment in Charlottenburg, to organise that meal, to get me angry, to wind me up, to get me drunk again, to run rings round my every sentence so that whatever I said was not as I had intended it, my words trapped in coils of Klaus's critical barbed wire. All my carefully planned sentences would be cut to shreds and what I meant to say would be meaningless entrails, left to rot on his barbs.

If I could stop this from happening, stop that meal from ever taking place, I thought, as I eased down to a trot, dodging traffic in the road as I left the pavement to get past meandering pedestrians, if I could stop this from happening, from me having to hit him, to teach him a lesson, to slap his chops, to give him a right good kicking, to go over the top of that wire, then I could not in any way whatsoever be connected to his premature death.

It couldn't have been me and then for Ophelia there would be no harbouring of dark and bitter feelings.

This is exactly as I remember it.

I must have known that I couldn't really interfere with the past but I reached out for them all the same. And besides, Klaus was dead wasn't he? Ophelia had been to the funeral and had come back looking strangely refreshed. Or did I remember that rightly? Did I remember anything rightly? I reached out for them, playing tag with spectres, with the illusionary bodies of the 1980s, fully expecting for my hand to pass through them. But in the blink of an eye they had lurched forward, were gone ahead of me again, so that I had to get a move on, barge past mere mortals who were in my way.

This whisky is the nicest thing I have ever tasted. The more I drink, the more the past becomes clearer. The waning fire still spits. I am looking into that fire now, at the events of the summer, at the past, the very past past and the very recent past, the present and the past all present together. I think I could put my hand into the fire and it would not burn. I could walk on the hot ashes and roll naked on the hot coals. I feel as if I am impervious to pain. If I could only move my body. My eyes have seen the glory.

I thought they were ghosts when I ran down into that U-Bahn station after them. When I ran into Moritzplatz station I thought they were ghosts.



Cut to the station entrance. I had lost sight of them for a moment, but then I saw them going into the station, the two blondes. Only this time it wasn't a bag of lilies but a great big pink carnation. Why had they changed into another type of flower? Like lovers do. Like the Eurythmics sang back then. Like we sang when it rained. Here comes the rain again. Like lovers do. They descended into the station, the pink carnation bob bob bobbing along. Eric would be outside waiting for me when I got taken out, his bike thwarted by the steps. And it had been raining that day. We were wearing raincoats. It was all coming together.

So this is what happened. When I reached out to touch them they were not ghosts at all. They were young Germans, very surprised young Germans who were still alive and not ghosts at all. My ghosts had gone, vanished, had led me to these people. Just as they were getting on the train I almost had a change of heart. I wish I had. I hesitated for just enough time for them to board. Then I grabbed at Klaus who wasn't Klaus. I took him from behind. I grabbed him by the back of the neck that wasn't the neck of Klaus.

And for some reason I didn't let go. Even though I knew it wasn't him. Or her. She shouted at me, then again in English. But I was convinced I was holding Klaus even though it couldn't have been him. Just like I feel I can reach out and touch that charred log and not feel any pain, I held on to the young German until we both fell to the floor of the train. I possessed incredible strength. I could hold off the pain of fire. We fell to the ground, with me on top of him. It was a strange way to get him to abandon his plans for a sumptuous dinner in which he would bully his housekeeper and create in me the most unpleasant of tensions. I held an iron grip on his neck like a savage released from the clutches of dark incarceration. I must have looked like a madman or a beast, a creature imbued with strange powers, a creature with incredible powers, with the potential to destroy mankind and innocent young Germans. His girlfriend shouted and other voices in the compartment reached screaming point, but still I maintained my manic grip. Before they overpowered me I let out an almighty roar, an inhuman cry that filled the station platforms with a rush of noise that could be heard - so Eric told me later - from street level. I roared like lovers do. I don't know why. I still don't know why. But after the effort of such lung punishing exhalation I succumbed to my captors and felt my head being held down and my arms being pushed out of place behind me.

I roared like an animal.

I was taken away, not offering any resistance, feeling calm, wondering if this was my first ever time inside a police car. Then I had to wait in a room with a female police officer who spoke excellent English. At one point she told me that her sister lives in Godalming, but then she had to keep quiet when someone more superior came in. I liked that policewoman, who reminded me of the BBC newsreader Fiona Bruce. I was questioned, forms were filled in, then Eric appeared with Anna. They took me back to my hotel. Apparently I later fell into a deep sleep and I couldn't be woken even though they rang my telephone and banged on the door. When I eventually woke up they were looking down at me, having got the door opened by a member of the hotel staff. For a moment I didn't know where I was and I asked Anna if she was Ophelia and I thought Eric was my father. I had been into the deepest sleep I can ever remember.

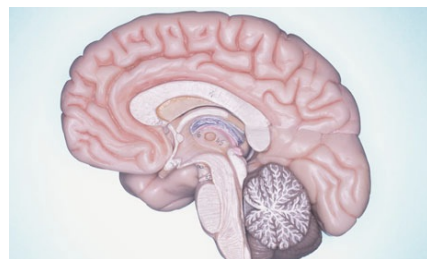
I remember the look on your face when you came for me to take me home.
Did I ever say thank you properly for that journey back to London, Bill?

30 October

And then I arrived here, on a train to Glasgow, another train to Wemyss Bay, the ferry and then a taxi to the house. Bill, you had wanted Corrie to drive me up here but I said that a train journey would be the perfect start to my month of recuperation. The day after tomorrow you are both coming to take me back to London. We will drive down together and I shall begin another journey.

I must get in touch with Sophie as soon as I get back. I have deliberately cut myself off from the outside world. Apart from meeting a few people on the streets of Rothesay and in the Co-Op I have spoken to no one. I have held no meaningful conversations with anyone. I have resisted the temptation to send emails even though there has always been an internet connection. I know this sounds hard to believe, when I am someone who relies on hourly email contact. I have read them all, but I have not replied. I was only interested in seeing if a message from Ophelia was in my inbox. I have only used the internet to keep a brief update with the news and mostly to check a few facts as I write. I have also been able to find pictures. This is what I have spent a long time doing. This has been both my distraction and my consolation.

I have spent almost a month now looking at pictures. I have revisited all the art museums online that I can ever remember visiting. I have looked at the books about art that sit on the shelves in this house. I have looked at photographs of places that I have never visited and at diagrams of parts of the human body. One day I spent a long time staring at a cross section of the human brain. I have also



looked at maps, starting with the area I am in now and then moving out. I have walked streets in European cities on Google Street View. I have walked for miles through Europe and beyond. Yesterday I reached North Africa, trying to find out what was in that vast country called Algeria.

I need to get in touch with Eric and Anna. The more I think about it the more I realise there's more to know about him. I think I might have got some things wrong, so I need to go back and ask him more questions.

I have told you a ghost story. I have tried to explain what happened. But I haven't explained why Sophie called me while I was in Berlin. There's always tomorrow.

31 October

My last day here. The last time I get to put logs on this fire. The wind has abated. It is very still. There has been a light frost to let us know that winter is approaching. All is very calm. The house has its distinctive smell, which I have grown to like and find comforting.

I will contact Sophie when I am back in Southampton. Strangely, I can let this wait. It's so important that I talk to her but I have been able to resist the temptation to call her for this last month. I weighed it up the first day I arrived. I realised that the deferred gratification was what I needed. It was what made me continue, kept me going. And now it's almost time.

When Sophie called me in Berlin it was about something I had left behind at her house in Amsterdam. She had found my wedding ring in her bathroom. When I didn't return her call she sent a text message. I hadn't noticed that the ring was missing. This is also strange because it has hardly been off my finger in the last twenty-five years. You'd think I would have noticed that it wasn't there.

For some reason I had taken it off and placed it on a shelf in her bathroom at some point during the evening. I can't believe that I didn't miss wearing it. I suppose if I had noticed its absence the next morning I might have assumed that it had been taken from me during that struggle with my potential muggers on the way home from her house.

It is a very expensive antique gold signet ring that Ophelia gave me. It has been in her family for generations and was worn by members of minor European aristocratic families. There is a rich story behind that ring which would take me a long time to relate. All I need to say is that it was worn by a German army officer who was killed in Stuttgart when his horse was startled by one of the first motor cars and he was thrown to the ground. I can't believe that I didn't know that it had gone.

I need to be honest now. I have a plan. I know that Ophelia will be visiting Sophie soon. I lied earlier when I said that I have not been in touch with the outside world. I have contacted Sophie and I have asked her look after the ring until I can pick it up in person. It is far too valuable to send in the post. I have also asked her to let me know when Ophelia will be visiting her and I shall time my arrival to coincide.

I'm not now sure what else it is I have been lying about. I have written it all down Bill, but I need to check it through. I'll probably need to make some changes. I've just had some more ideas.

I'm beginning to see things differently now. I'm going to help myself to another drink and spend my last day here reading through everything I have written.

I've decided to go to Belgium. I want to go back there and see Monique. I want to ask her a few things. I'm not sure what they are but I have this compulsion just to get on a train and go to Liege. If for nothing else it will give me the pleasure of seeing *Any Belgian* printed on my ticket. All stations in Belgium are the same price. I can go as far as I like and see any Belgian I like. It's important that I have a new journey to look forward to.

You're right Corrie, it has helped me to write it all down. But I just need to put a few things straight before I hand it in for you to mark.

I am about to read it all over from the start. I thought this would be a good way to finish. Thank you both for this opportunity for me to write down a version of the events. I am sure it will be different the next time I tell it.

I feel bad about the many half-truths that seem to be in what I have written. I have not been honest with myself. When I read it through I should be able to make corrections. This time I hope to get it right. By the time you get here some of this might be written differently.

I have to end somewhere Bill, so it might as well be here.

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