



SHARDS

I used to collect old coins. Very old coins. I discovered places and dead people, vainglories, I bet you've never heard of.

'SONIA'S THERAPY'

Across the desk – she wears ... all I can see: a turtleneck. It hides her sag – the jowls, the throat. Turtle. What a misnomer: the armoured turtle evoked to name the shapeless wool, the empty skin. Whoever thinks up what we need as common knowledge, words to keep us marching, sometimes in step, on and on – they don't know anything ... no eyes, no fancy: no respect.

'What do you mean? Signify?' Sonia asks: 'Where are you, along the road? Or are you jumping off the roof? Don't you wish there was a session where you could say exactly where you are, what you've discovered? ...? No? So, what are you?'

The envelope beneath her hand says: 'Test.'

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'You make jottings,' she continues. 'Important – but just ignore the questions, and your answers too. I'm here to make you better, not quiz you. Think of me as – a curer. My body, my status – remember? Below, a saint: above, a doctor.'

'I ask you – 'what do you want to say?' Then, we have to test what you mean, not what you say. There's no punishment, it's not that kind of test. The test is the test of the test, not of you. I believe the test works; runs on from subject to subject – straightens out your skeleton. As you age, you collapse into yourself, get smaller, and distort. Bone crunches into bone, pinches the muscles and the nerves: – the brain – my! How it runs on, even when your instructions aren't obeyed. The system's choked and blocked....'

'The random, the crazy – it's become their time ... Are you senile? We know you are, your age tells everything. Hurry, hurry, with the answers – if you're dead, there are none. How does your mind work? How does anyone's? Reality: do you separate it from all that's not real ...? How? Is that the same for everyone? How do we know – we know you lie, all of you. Why find if you're senile, what you did before senility – we might have to imprison you, execute

you, or many others instead of you ... A can of worms, that's what your brain looks like.

'Climb on this low bed. I know it hurts. Lying down? – you've forgotten how. You fear you might fall off, go straight down, the floor won't stop you, nor the earth.

'It's real, the pain – everything is real, just like you say. We all live in the real: we know we do. We think we do: – cross fingers!

'Stretch out. The pain takes over – you're aged, pain is all that matters – hoping to end the pain without also being dead. An impasse. But there's the past! Try stepping back into it, avail yourself of it: – it's languages that no longer have a speaker. It's art. Original.

'The wheel was spun for you – you lost, like everybody. You got old age, and disappointment. You're reactionary.

'I'll sort you out. You're right to summon me.'

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Not many people seem to have an interest in you, your body, and your quirks. Whoever does – instantly becomes a friend, as well as therapist.

Here I am, on the bed – a special bed, denying sex and sleep. I think of writing about it all. That's my defence, my 'second thoughts'. Does it work? I doubt it.

WRITING SOMETHING DOWN

My notebook:

What do we mean by 'every abstraction'? Isn't there just one abstraction – like 'every height': things must have one, a height. Things have abstractions – so, do abstractions have things? Am I right – abstract and abstraction: – the same? Who to ask?

Does every abstract-abstraction produce an incarnation, a solid ghost, and can those be sloughed off, to die; those realities incarnate? – observe their diaphanous skins, the prancing devils! Look in the pit – those corpses don't exist? Only as their ghosts? Are they abstractions? Oh no! Or – oh, yes, that too!

And yet.... we stalk the abstraction, the abstract, flag the journey to those who plod after us, and then we come to see that everything we see is nullity, the incarnations, the journey, the demons, all intercourse: – no Other, and no Others. All we want – is the meaning, the hope, of abstractions. We clutch at butterflies, the abstractions in which we strive to live and understand: – to catch?

We surmise that we're on a journey where each stage has a post-inn, pre-mapped, on post-cards.... a travel, travail, which negates itself – a post-modernity, post-realism. A piece of track which can't be revisited, re-traversed. Everything is something, and is nothing, abstract and concrete. Is

something and becomes nothing. Nothing and something. Fleeting and real, the concrete: or empty and permanent, the abstract.

Every panorama is also the fog that obscures it. Hear the post-horn sounding through the gloom....

Abstract – a special kind of nothing. Concrete? Slick as a frozen pond. Watch it as it melts.

The flesh beguiles, deceives ... Try it – it's a dare, a short-cut. Find a partner – look into your partner's eyes unceasing.

But – don't be taken in by slippery reality. It's here today, quite different tomorrow. Exalts you, casts you down – indifferent, malicious.

Socialism – there's an abstract. I gave – it took – my life.

SELF-ABSORPTION

I think: – I have always been a genius. Like 'always a pheasant' if you are one. Not like 'always a hero': – you couldn't last.

Some people are malign, unpleasant. 'Your opinion', of course, but it's to you it matters. How do you deal with them? You find often one such is married to you, sleeps beside you, commands you if you are a soldier, bosses you anyway if you are not. Your best friend stealing things you value – money too ... how do you react? Maybe it's the nature of relationships, that all, or almost all, are with unpleasant people, and maybe to them *you* are one of those, the horde of malignant individuals – who send them to war, corrupt their values, torment, insult them ... give them a medal.

Truth? Art, invention ...? Here's a start –

'You're not honest with me,' he says: 'Your relative's due, you didn't say.'

'You don't respect women,' she says. 'Why should I be straight with you?'

'The station-master said the sleigh was ordered, to meet the morning train.'

'My brother will take me back with him,' she says: 'To the great city: he won't meet with you.'

She leaves at once, but I have him living in the house with me, until the soldiers come and burn it down.'

It needs background, something not trivial.... We're in the mist: the wars, the droughts, the floods.

Every idea – a universal lesson, if you're in school that day. Next day – another diatribe, a new emergency.

Where are the lessons of the day before? Socialism? 'If you're quite with it, it'll kill you, to show it's real.' 'They'll conscript you to fight it, and if you don't destroy it, it'll have you die, die in a ditch....' 'It's your life, your hope – what would you do without it?'

What won the patriotic war?

Sacrifice.

Socialism? Why the fuss? 'It's just another way of doing economics....' It used to be a big hope. Now – not a hope, not a threat, and there are no more promises.

It became like Buddhism: – the destination is consciousness: a journey to itself.

In 1970 – the motor stalled. Science was running away from it, the USSR. It couldn't keep up with the technology. A limit had been reached – never superseded; never since. Even the words became no longer current; 'Soviet'. 'Union'. 'Fusion'.

Everything new happened, goes on. No longer new. Old new, new past.

It's all past, all changed, the players and the text. Forgotten, erased – all the fuss, the forbidden dream faded, soured: that all could change, we'd make it change. Only the fear, the hostility, remains. Hostility – to what? To everything? Other people? What's left is an indifference to each of the many pretexts to end the world ... Or fear. Suspicion?

Carrying that long rifle with you all that time – its length should make it super-accurate ... At night it lies beside you, tall, getting taller. Keep it loaded? Don't exaggerate! Prudence. But, your unexpected erection sneaks inside the trigger-guard and – "Fire! Bang! Off with your head!"

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All gone by, all ridden out and exhausted, like the diligence, the black horses.

To make a spiritual journey, a pilgrimage, touching the bright spots – you need a body. Can you manage it, if that's all you have, a body?

Trivial, alas. I haven't hit a target. Haven't aimed off for wind, the wind that wafts the concrete.

NEGATIVE ASSESSMENT

The test continues. She looks over what I've written, deflates it, and me.

'Hmmm,' she says: 'Bits. Not even pieces. You're not at home in this stuff. The mystic tongue – won't wag for you. The ordinary people – they don't live and talk like that. Catastrophe bursts in, it hasn't been discussed and parsed, analysed, not like you believe. Besides – it's gone, wheeee! Another calamity bounds in, off and away; and disappears. There's always other things to fear, mustered ready to assault you, to bear you off.

'You forgot your relatives – they were Russians, long ago, but all they remember now is civil war. How it lasted, lasts, will last forever. And see how staid and stodgy they all are; *pirozhki*. Enemies of civilisation? Of yours, maybe? Try to be serious! You, I know – you have no country.

You've something else? What? A joust with time, with probabilities?

'We were lovers, if you recall. Now, I'm here to straighten you out – no rancour, and no secrets. You've lost the atlas, and the compass.

‘More supplies! Pills! Smoke! Beer! You need another six-pack of commonplace to help you step out again ... proud as a Mughal prince!’

*

I write down – ‘I’m interested in limits. Limits of our powers and intentions – of the species, and then of the earth – it’s not a stable object, not even round ... a curate’s egg, indeed – sometimes temperate and fruitful, more often rough and raging red.

‘Then – I’m intrigued by consequences. How to plot a line between something and the something quite different it’s produced, as it goes percolating through time. Some things, we say, are foreseeable, others not only unpredictable, but – metamorphoses.

‘That’s it! Metamorphoses. What are the limits to a something that changes into another thing? The butterfly – who’d have guessed? The infant – its silent set of unused bones, waiting for the undertaker. Origins incredible!

‘Consequences, causes, effects. What inventions! As if creation could make links, a chain – when everything flies apart in our imagination. Games – to find the logic, order – one thing following another ... “thing”?’

‘No – we are Creation now. Creation was once the wind. Everything that is. The huge wind, the universe, that’s there for nothing save itself, making space, time: – unfathomable, incalculable. Certainly “unliveable” and “inconceivable”. Now, we’re the only Creators – the rest was done – “for us”, “to us”. We Create: eddies, swirls, marsh-gas. We bodge.

‘We’ve done badly, now we want to ride the windy void – and that’s a big mistake.

‘Think of the starlings, who can make a pattern on the wind. We can’t. It means? Nothing. It’s “what we are is what we do”. Starlings: – Stalins, my mother thought the word must be.

‘If we could paint what *we* are – what a horror! I suppose we have – with help – painted the world; a dun colour, linked by canals of slime, discharge – and tiny tin ships, up and down.’

‘I thought you were interested in abstraction,’ she says, briskly: ‘In reaching the highest state of consciousness – the inside; or “yourself”. And not yourself. Being, truth, enlightenment. The outside, in short. Both.’

I know this is a trick – she wants to take me where I don’t want: another inexistent place, that makes me feel like someone else. I say –

‘You’re wrong: I don’t think it’s fruitful, all that stuff. A self-delusion, a rhetoric of nothingness.’

I’m old, but I feel concrete. In a week, a day, an hour – I die. ‘I become an abstract ...’ It isn’t so, I know. But that’s how it feels. I’m fascinated, terrified. Oh, to be both, abstract and concrete, for always ... or settle for the concrete, forget the abstract. Or the compromise? No, you can’t! No immortality. But ... being abstract means being nothing, I’m convinced.

DON'T DESPAIR....

Sonia says –

‘And yet – you made a start: a sketch for a story about “revolution”, set in a Russia, somewhere.

‘Then, a criticism, as you say, of exploration. Seeking some place, just off the map, but you’ve been told where it is – Nirvana, or at least a better reincarnation ... an “after-you”, re-born with two legs, not four or six.

‘All not original, and not revealing. A tough spot, where you’ve often been, and hope not to return.’

*

I want to speak, tell her – ‘let’s end it here, I’ll pay in cash, forget the tax.’

Never tell an acquaintance you have a little problem – they know already, everybody does.

No notebook. No test. Start again, the slate is clean. ‘Your peccadilloes – all forgiven – you didn’t make good with any one of them....’

*

This is what I think...

They’re the originals. Dogs. They adapt, grow bigger, and they’ll come and get you all and eat your bones. Wolves – they know how to deal with space, and trot right through it. They don’t have resentments, don’t make vendetta.

You’ll be surprised – you won’t expect it, though you’ll fear it: rage. It comes and hits you, scratches off your face. Only humans feel so angry, so much fury....

If you imprison people, kill them, steal their land, lord it over them, call them names and deride their history, their existence – they’ll come for you! It happens, and the jailers – are always shocked, always surprised. Perhaps – it’s what happened here.

Like in the nightmare – they’ll come and throw you down the holes, all of you. Did you like them in the past, love them? – too late! Down you go, and if you run, there’s machetes for you and all your clan, your ancients and the babies and sweet people befriended who seemed beautiful, and they’ll decapitate your kids and rape you, it’s orgiastic, unstoppable and not regretted unless you decide on vengeance in your turn ... but at the moment, it’s pay-back fun, and justice, and right to be completed: to the last trace ... A dream – don’t be surprised if it becomes real.

So much for meditation.

*

I know. I trashed a garden once. The gardener, my teacher – she'd oppressed me, systematically – I pulled up all her flowers and broke off the branches of the fruit-trees that promised much. The blossom, I remember its scent ... And they caught me, put me on show, and I didn't give a fuck, it was to be done, and I did it.

SHRIVEN AND BALD

I'm much younger now. I don't need to invent lives I've had. Battles won, observed, escaped. I don't answer questions from the test, don't then take refuge in the notebook.

'Live once, but live it full.' Print that on your shirt?

The cure-giver. Other people? – she doesn't understand. Can't follow a tight argument. She doesn't know that everything she is – her being free and true and just and empathic – excludes everything I, everybody else, can be ... our freedom must be independent of hers, quite incommunicable, indifferent to what she is. I'm free – it doesn't mean she is. We're independent, but not fixed within ourselves, our destinies. She could be free, but in her way ... free, and me her slave. Or turn about. Me – a slave, she free – she's never seen me, heard of me. I'm there, unfree. And lucky her: just, in her individual way, free.

My justice must stay far from hers, her justice can't be mine – the quality might be universal, but it's fragmented and particular, exists uniquely in, for, each one of us.

Think differently? – wow! Different from what? Reality? What a clash! What terror, and what terrorism. Think how reality could be changed, and go on, different. Just try it and you'll be in the shoot-out and then the prison ... forget those spacious German cells, with TV and the music stand – you're in a fetid space, the floor is carpeted with you, your lookalikes – if you could see them ... and you can't stand up, lie down, or walk around – you're meat in a small can.

Now! You know what being individual must mean. *You* know, and it doesn't matter, not a bit – the cell's too small except to hold too many guys, so many you can't see their face but what's of interest to you is *yours*, your face, it being different, invisible, unviewable, indifferent in that little space, and everybody with a face knows which is theirs and that it isn't yours.

Think differently? You'll bring it all down! We must all think the same, or it all melts.

'You don't understand?' I ask: 'Don't understand everything? If you understand anything, you understand it all, everything. No? You have no clue? It's all to do! Start – anywhere, at any age. Mostly, it's a slog, and even when and if you understand it all, everything – what does it do for you? All this is true, but it doesn't lead anywhere. That's a paradox. Truth should be valuable; knowing everything is not.'

'As if...? As if we're free and equal, know who we all are? You must pretend, in fact. Shape-change, shuffle the cards, dethrone the kings – adopt

more one-eyed jacks ... Surmise, suppose, hypothesise. It must be done that way. That's how the law gets written.'

She has no answer.

And yet: – 'as if'. It moves, all moves. The real's 'as if'. Turbulent and indecisive. It takes us anywhere, to anywhere at all.

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