

The Balcony Scene

There are five photographs in all, held together by an elastic band that winds round itself more than once, the rubber tangled and gristly. Don found them in a shoe box whose original contents are recorded at one end: boy's lace-ups, size two. When he first removed the lid a trapped smell was released that brought to mind the brightness and boredom of shops; the haunches on crouching Saturday girls; a child's breath in his ear as he felt through the leather for a toe.

The day having tired him, he sets the alarm on his phone, then experiments with the perching of a wine glass – the record player, still wearing its bubble wrap, an upended packing case – and begins looking through the photographs. They are rejects, it is clear, ones that did not make the album. All holidays had them in those days: the shot whose point was lost once you got home, the long view with only its foreground in focus. Except these have survived and now, the timing uncanny, they confront him with that moment long ago when, in the presence of gods, he was found wanting.

Photograph one: rear view of a woman and two children looking out of a plate-glass window. Planes are visible, haphazardly parked as if abandoned.

Airports make us caricatures of ourselves, finding a weakness and feeding it with tedium or fear. And this was a transit lounge, the satirical effect intensified. He remembers Lucas, literate only if comics counted, sitting cross-legged on the bookshop floor with magazines on business, fashion, current affairs – anything with pictures. People stepped round him, impeded but impressed, not noticing how quickly the pages were being turned. His sister Harriet, meanwhile, having just turned twelve, upgraded her vows of silence and incivility. She chewed with mouth open, a look popular that year, the gum visible inside like a vest in a tumble drier. Gum: it turned up everywhere over the next few days, the strips with their lightly-stuck sleeves and shiny cuffs of foil, the balls of mastic disposed of like listening devices in hotel drawers or on the underside of restaurant tables.

If his children's characters had been distilled the same could be said of Don, who felt pared down to the worrier within, a string-puller since infancy but lately, he thought, outgrown. He squeezed an arm against his wallet, bulked out by improbable numbers of rupees, or frisked himself for boarding passes. It was hypochondria in reverse, the lumps about his body reassuring, the examination repeated every few minutes.

Only Julia departed from type. Denied a share in his anxiety she drifted around duty free sniffing perfume with film star endorsements, ogling chocolate bars the size of small girders. Luxury in the midst of want disgusted her, but here it was the norm, one's standards toggled subliminally. He remembers feeling confused, one of those moments when a loved one, unknowingly observed, turns into a stranger. For a few seconds the attachment recedes and unused parts of yourself stir.

It was summer 1997 and they were on their way to Nepal. Don had spent the previous year working for Bill Chance, a business recruit to New Labour who turned a safe Conservative seat into a marginal and then won it with scarcely credible ease. The early days of the new government were no less demanding with Bill, appointed a junior minister, hobnobbing with management consultants and privateers, giving rise to a spoof memorandum about toxic levels of aftershave. Alarm bells should have rung, but the scale of their victory, after years out of office, made them all careless and Don wasn't free from the taint of advantage, having coat-tailed his boss into an adviser's role. Now, finally, with Parliament in recess, there was a chance to get away. He was in celebratory mood and intended a surprise, but Julia trumped him with a fully-costed holiday plan, as if already having put a price on his shortcomings.

The photograph was taken during the changeover in Bangkok. They were looking out for their connecting flight which had been delayed, excitement giving way to impatience and fatigue. The picture was discarded presumably because it didn't signify but to Don it resembles a parting, the distance decisive, his family's backs all turned.

Photograph two, badly underexposed: a shelf with a mound of dusty files and what looks like a head on top.

At Kathmandu airport their luggage failed to appear and they were left watching orphaned cases doing laps of the carousel. He normally trusted himself to bully or shame someone into solving this sort of problem, but anger consumed too much energy in that heat. Like the hair drier, packed against his wishes, it would need an adaptor of some kind. Worse, he was beginning to wonder if the bags might be theirs anyway: after so many circuits they were beginning to look familiar. He wished Julia would do something, just to give him a break – this trip was her idea, after all – but she seemed absent or disengaged. Had he sidelined her by assuming control and did she resent the fact? These things happen imperceptibly until, as with the cases, you are not sure you recognise yourselves going round and round.

Or was it there from the start, that potential for division, only ever a matter of time? This thought takes him back to when they first met – a path his memory often treads in a vain quest for explanations. It was at a by-election canvassers' briefing of all places. Every couple they knew had a founding myth of this kind with unpromising circumstances or initial dislike making the outcome improbable. In their case the ill omens included the dismal state of the Party, discouraging all but diehards from turning out, and the other claims on a Wednesday night, invariably wet in the telling. As for being attracted, even that had obstacles to surmount. She came from the leafiest of suburbs and her socialism was a moral stance, the product of campus politics rather than experience or need. His father worked on the railway, his mother in a supermarket, and Don was the first on either side of the family to graduate. Their allegiances felt tribal to him, deep-rooted but unexamined. And the future they worked hard to provide – school trips instead of holidays, the encyclopaedias and classical music LPs, all those trips to museums – asked unintended questions. Could

he become the person they wanted without leaving them behind, do well for himself and not see the world differently? Compared to those dilemmas Julia's radicalism, an easy position that had cost her little, struck him as flimsy and ungrounded. But it came packaged in a dirty laugh of a voice, its register low for a woman and with a note of friction that ruffled his senses, more cello than violin. They argued constantly, the fierceness a giveaway in retrospect, their fellow-doorsteppers smirking; then one night, having run out of words, he tried kissing her and they ended up in bed, each claiming the other surrendered.

Once started upon it is hard not to follow the story step by step but the photograph fast-forwards him back to Nepal. He looks at it trying to remember what happened next. They were directed to the airline office, a password chalked on their bags which got them through security, the guard's eyes half-closed like a predator that has just eaten. The room was lined with manila files, the exposed edges of the contents wilted and yellowing. Here and there the format of a memo showed or the vanity of a letter-head. Don pictured years of correspondence, the dead ends recorded in triplicate, his anger soft-landing in deference and prevarication.

According to the official who received them, their problem was the plane from Bangkok, its hold too cramped for everyone's bags. Anywhere else and the subject of compensation would have come up – at least enough for a change of clothes – but Tom was lulled by the man's accent with its gratuitous little thud of tongue on palate. 'Come back tomorrow,' the lilt said, unopposed. 'Or the next day.'

They took a taxi to their hotel. At last there was a shower, even if the same things had to be put on afterwards. Julia went first then wriggled into her underwear while still wrapped in a towel as if changing on the beach. A degree of openness had passed from their lives, the candour from which sex followed naturally. Now both had to be summoned with an effort that was, as often as not, beyond them.

That was the moment she told him about the photograph. One stack of files on the far wall of the office had been crowned by an upturned jug wearing an old pilot's cap at a jaunty angle, both cap and earthenware skull covered in dust. It had struck her as funny and touching, but she didn't want to cause offence so took the shot from behind Tom's back and without using the flash.

'It won't come out,' she predicted, turning to face him now that all her hatches were battened down, every clasp, zip and button securely fastened.

Photograph three: a square framed by temples with a long line of objects spread out on the ground, over which a boy and girl can be seen bending.

This picture, Don guesses, was rejected on aesthetic grounds, Julia being a stickler for composition. And it is true: the children, too far away and dwarfed by open space, look adrift and unattended. But that might be the point, earning the photograph its rejection: his ex-wife unable to face what she had done.

He tries to place the occasion. Harriet wears the same dress as at the airport, which suggests it was the day after they arrived, before their cases caught up with them. The shock to the senses of being in Kathmandu comes back to him. There were no road markings and the sidewalk was more like an inside lane to be shared with rickshaws and motorbikes carrying whole families. The air stank of two-stroke petrol and then, when they found an alley to walk down, wood smoke and hashish. A man was having his hair cut by the side of the road, a tarnished mirror nailed to a telegraph pole. Another, his back half turned, was absorbed in having a pee, the rope of bright water snaking into the bushes. There were cows everywhere, pale angular beasts with folds of loose skin hanging from their necks. And a procession had lined up behind someone on a stretcher. 'It's a body!' Lucas cried, instinctively looking at Don. How tawdry that first glimpse of death must have seemed, the ragtag funeral fighting for space on the road. He blamed Julia at the time, the boy too young for such realities, although it is his botched attempt to pass it off that haunts him now, one's own failures always worse. But at least their son took notice of his surroundings. Harriet's head was buried in a teen magazine with its advice columns and photo stories about snogging. Had she said anything since they left home? He worried they were losing her for good, but Julia was inclined to think it normal – or just disposed to take a different point of view. 'I was like that at twelve,' she said, sounding offended. 'There's worse to come, believe me.'

It might have been then he noticed the change in her voice, its tone exasperated, the finish less tickly than abrasive. When did that happen and why did he not hear it coming? The question see-saws him back to the older story, left a few moments ago at their quarrelsome consummation. The timbre that enslaved him then survived a number of years despite all the lost causes – or because of them, the erotic windfall of disappointment. They got married after Thatcher's second victory, partly as a means of cheering everyone up, and the child they lost was going to be called Neil if the man himself had won in '92.

Then Don had a chance to work for their local branch, its prospects better at last, the policies more to his liking. Julia made up for the dip in pay by returning to social work, on a part-time basis but she saw enough to renew her sense of injustice, dormant through the nappy-changing years. He remembers a lot of railing against the Party's direction and being made to feel he was somehow responsible. That must be when things began to change, her disappointment not just political, the voice acquiring sharper edges, the point being that he was too enthralled with his own life to notice. The last straw came when 'comrade' gave way to 'colleague' in meetings and conference speeches. Socialism, she said, not intending to make him laugh, had left the shop floor and become an office with strip lights and air conditioning.

Perhaps that is why she chose Nepal, its poverty intended as a reminder or provocation. She had a seamless vision of the world which recognised the same struggle at work everywhere. But that was another difference between them. The backwardness he saw had no parallels back home and as for the insurgency no one believed in Maoism any more. Anyway he wanted a break from politics and was heard to mutter, when faced with some new abjectness: 'Remind me, what is so

wrong with a beach holiday?' In protest he went in search of some rude carvings recommended by the guide book, its street plan clumsily unfolded. The others attended a market spread out on the cobbles where he joined them later, mind knotted with writhing limbs. Together they browsed the copper bowls, trinkets, tea boxes, incense, coarse-haired blankets and roughly-made clothes. A pile of stiff nylon bras, stacked inside each other like crockery, was hard to reconcile with the images of wantonness he had just seen. A woman squatting nearby held a rope in one hand, the frayed end smouldering, its purpose unclear until someone stopped for a light. The memory surfaces of Harriet and Julia choosing a bracelet, their unity a hopeful sign. Of Don wanting to haggle. And of Julia taking the trader's side in the interests of Third World development.

Photograph four: a foreground of rice fields, terraces and low hills, all intensely green, and along the horizon a bank of low, dense cloud.

This was Dhulikhel, where they went in search of the Himalaya. The hotel was lovely, a four-storey building fronted by white balustrades and windows, with a threadbare lawn from which to view the mountains. Except there weren't any, the cloud impenetrable. The shot was taken from their balcony as dusk began to fall, its dimness reason enough for being discarded, although what happened there is more likely to blame. Yellow-capped egrets bobbed past them like dinghies. Crows mustered in the trees. A long ridge, its flanks gashed by dry river beds, sheltered terraces and paddies. In the foreground a man was breaking stones, the rhythm of heaved and swung mallet detached from its sound which reached them as a hollow crack, stronger or fainter each time. Nearer still, in the hotel garden, a dark shape could be seen in the bushes.

'A mongoose,' Julia said, breaking the silence. 'Do they have them here?'

At this point an opinion either way, even a confession of ignorance, might have saved his marriage. But he was slow to emerge from a dream-like state in which thoughts connected with work had attached themselves to the landscape, moored to the vastness like units of cloud.

'This isn't working, is it?' she said, her voice flat with resignation and indifferent to being overheard. The children were inside, sprawled on put-up beds that only just met the definition of a family room. He imagined Harriet, finely tuned to dissent, cupping an ear.

'What do you mean?'

'You're not really with us. Your mind is back home, with Bill, the party, the job. I thought this would bring you back to us but it hasn't. Maybe nothing will.'

'You can't expect me to switch off just like that. And don't you feel the excitement too? I mean, this is what we've waited for. This is how we started.'

They had been round this track before, the old realism-versus-belief wrangle. But this time the charge seemed graver with something more than ideas betrayed. He tried defending himself but she was too good at arguing – or simply better prepared, the showdown rehearsed, the grievance long nurtured. His feeling of detachment returned, of greater interest in the world beyond the balcony. Night had crept up on the hotel garden, trees losing definition, insects trilling like phones. He made one more attempt to stand his ground.

‘This is what we’ve dreamed of,’ he pleaded. ‘Our hands on power.’

‘Not power,’ she said, ‘it was never about that, not for me at least. Ideas, principles – that’s what we were supposed to stand for. And we seem to have given up on those. Look at Bill. I mean, what’s he doing in the Party?’

‘Is that what all this is about?’

‘No. What all this is about is missed bedtimes, missed parents’ evenings, missed weekends. It’s about you, Don, missing.’

So that was it, the offence overwork rather than heresy. Part of his problem had been not knowing what he was guilty of, the point of her attack always shifting. And put so baldly the charge of neglect felt overstated. After all, he missed them too, even if that thought had only just occurred. At least now, out in the open, the rift might be capable of being healed. But that had to happen immediately, in the heat of the moment – ideally with making up to follow, those sparks lighting the older fire. He had already scouted the bathroom with sex in mind, the beds next door too close for privacy.

Instead, fate intervening, Lucas put an end to the argument by throwing up. Julia responded immediately, as if glad of the excuse, leaving Don with mixed feelings: hurt that it was never him the children summoned, relief at being spared the foulness, the smell. After a few minutes he followed inside to find the invalid pale and shamefaced while his sister wafted a comic in front of her nose and looked disgusted. The bed needed changing and he offered to help but was useless with sheets, the way they flapped and billowed. It was hard not to think Julia’s point had been proved.

There was no chance to resume the conversation, still less ratify the hoped-for peace on a bathroom floor embowered by towels. And they left Dhulikhel in the morning, a day earlier than planned. This was hard on the place but for them it was already associated with the scene on the balcony, the stench and black humour of a sickroom and the nickname ‘pukey Lukey’ which Harriet came up with in a moment of inspiration and teased her brother with for years.

Photograph five: two painted figures smile and wave from the first floor of a temple. The picture is well composed although the tip of a finger obscures one corner.

It must have been the finger, magnified and out of focus, that got this view excluded from the album. Needless to say it is Don's, a blurry relic of his former self encroaching onto the lens. In his own defence, it was easier to make this mistake with the old cameras – sometimes even the carrying case got in the way. On the other hand there is always the Freudian position, that everything is deliberate if not consciously willed.

The atmosphere seemed better back in Kathmandu, as if the air had been cleared. In fact, he realised later, she had made up her mind and was just being adult about it. Then, shortly before they reached this shrine, he noticed a shop selling foreign newspapers and flicking through the rack discovered the *Sunday Times*, a trafficked airline copy indelibly creased as if sat on for hours and filleted of supplements. He stopped to read under the guise of looking at postcards but Julia wasn't fooled. An argument followed, although not serious or loud: she was only going through the motions by now. Still he can remember feeling aggrieved which might explain the finger, an act of dissent from the temple's display of harmony.

The figures in the picture are probably Shiva and Parvati. He read up on Nepal before the holiday, including Foreign Office papers with limited circulation, one of those perks with which power corrupts even the least powerful. Not much stuck, however, when it came to religion. There were too many gods and they all had multiple incarnations or personalities. It made the Trinity he gave up on at Sunday School look straightforward. One thing strikes him now, however: the male and female deities scrapping, making up, then falling out again, not lofty abstractions but more vivid and potent versions of ourselves. It follows that the couple on the balcony resemble parents, their unity binding the heavens, the fights when they happen shaking the sky. And this image, with its royal wave and dutiful smiles, recalls the colluding sweetness of a holiday snap, a brave face put on the reverberating rows. Here is the test which Julia and he failed: Shiva and Parvati holding it together, household gods of a broken home.

The alarm rings on his mobile. He has forgotten setting it and the shrillness startles him. There is no time to change out of his dusty clothes and anyway making an effort risks sending the wrong signal. On the way to the car he does a bit of wallet-patting as if rousing his heart. The membership card is on the other side, in the boarding pass pocket, its stiffness and sharp edges a hidden shield. He parks at the supermarket like everyone else and walks the short distance to the union social club, venue recently of his father's wake, where the local branch scrapes a quorum these days.

Except this time, his memory racked for a precedent, the room is full. Julia has already arrived and is talking to the membership secretary, a woman with the eyes of someone out of her depth. There has never been such a rush to join the Party, its motives questioned by some, the onus on old hands like this who are used to an

easier ride. Julia touches her shoulder as if in sympathy then, seeing Don, makes him the excuse for breaking away. An afterthought passes between them – to do with ex-husbands or men in general, perhaps. They collapse against each other, laughing and clutching arms. Whatever that is – sisterhood, the in-joke of biology – it runs deeper than the trumped-up closeness of politics or love.

It is three days since her email about the leadership hustings. Has she got others to rally round as well, his now a supporting role? If so it is the culmination of what started in Nepal, the memory of which intrudes again like a remembered snatch of song that must be followed to the end or chewed on maddeningly.

On returning from Kathmandu he waited a few weeks in case something changed. But it was no good, they had brought Nepal home with them. A decision reached, he finished a policy review, nursing regret like a symptomless cold, then handed in his resignation. The press release said he wished to spend more time with his family. For once this explanation was true, but under the previous government its use as a fig leaf for schisms and sackings had ceased even be funny. Instead word got round that Tom was unwell, the word pronounced as if in italics. Not much of a story, it was entered onto a scorecard in Westminster as something to open the debit column for the new regime.

A firm of lobbyists snapped him up, paying well for his supposed connections. He became one of the life forms, lowly but abundant, which cluster round the outlets of government feeding on leaks, filtering the dirty water. It was well-rewarded and the hours had improved – particularly at weekends, freed at last from Bill's constituency catch-ups, the losing at golf to party donors. But the work lacked even the pretence of serving some larger purpose and Julia left him anyway, citing loss of respect – a first, their lawyers agreed, taking bets on what the judge would say. She was the one for conscience and first principles, the high policy of the soul. His was a lower case view of the world, centred on opinion polls and boarding passes. He once believed these differences made a good fit: between them they had all the angles covered. Now he found himself in a solicitor's office being told they were irreconcilable. Marriages were breaking up all around him, being made of some brittle stuff which snapped under the slightest pressure. Even now he has no idea if they were seeing too little of each other or too much.

At least it was civilised. They passed the children back and forth, getting them to like their new partners before explaining why they were no longer around. Along the way an extended family of half-connections developed whose relationship to himself was hard to define. An ex-lover's child, fleetingly bonded with. The longest-lasting of Julia's other halves, kept on in an emeritus capacity, his call-out charge an old-boy chumminess with Don, an assumption of parity.

Perhaps because of this confusion – or maybe that corpse in Kathmandu – Lucas grew into one of those reclusive young men who prefer screens of various kinds to human company. A father's absence was part of the picture but Julia – aware of her own part in the disruption – declined to twist the knife. Don has tried interacting

with him online but it feels like talking to someone else. His one attempt to make Julia intercede ended predictably. She accused him of not understanding the young – the same knife or a different one, but twisted anyway.

Harriet, in contrast, flourished having been older when the split occurred. She inherited her mother's voice which, judging by an observed raptness among men, not all of them young, still tantalises the male nervous system. Julia's values, too, leading to a degree in development studies followed by postings overseas. To Don's surprise she attributes this choice of career to what she saw in Nepal. At first he thought she might be making a point about the divorce, that being the last holiday they all took together. But no, it was the poverty that lodged in her mind and what it said about their own good fortune. Even allowing for distractions, he cannot recall her looking up from those teen magazines or from the rituals associated with gum. There must be another way of seeing things which he lacks, a third eye like on the statues in Kathmandu.

It was at dinner to mark one of Harriet's returns home that Don and Julia last spoke. He talked about his new career, having recently qualified as a teacher, and wondered afterwards if his vocation was real or aimed at pleasing her. But then ideals, like love, are never the same a second time round, with more calculation involved and part of you withheld in case of disappointment. Both single again, an air of permanence attaching to their situations, they found some common ground in a liking for solitude. He was lying, of course, but could not be sure about her. Photographs were taken as they left the restaurant, including one of them together, her shoulder wary under his arm but not actively resisting.

Today, having moved to be near his first school, he finally opened some crates still sealed from the time of the separation. It was this which led to the shoebox in a lucky dip from the past that also included course work from university, posters, old cricket gear. He has brought with him the shot of Shiva and Parvati without knowing if he dares play that card. She might find it awkward and suspect his motives – or see the funny side and grant him a laugh, head thrown back, face turned away, eyes tightly closed. No woman he has known is so transfigured by pleasure but feels in that moment so distant from him, so removed.

It has taken longer than expected to tear herself away, the crowd sticky with friendship and questions. 'Quite a throng,' she says, finally arriving at his side. Then, like a regular member of the congregation: 'I don't recognise half of them.'

His mind, still emerging from its thoughts, is slow to respond. The same thing happened on the balcony and cost him everything.

'I've joined again,' he blurts. 'Thought there would be a blacklist but I must have slipped through.'

This misreads what she said, her expression tells him that, but his inattentiveness has been downgraded to a mannerism, a foible.

'Every sinner who repents,' she says, moving closer to let someone squeeze past. There are lines at the corner of her eyes and slight flaws on her skin, sun damage perhaps, neither of which she has attempted to hide. That courage to be herself interests and excites him equally, an effect missing with younger women. He is done with the pursuit of youth – the Westminster groupies that Harriet (something else he did not notice her noticing) called his Saturday girls – and wonders what it would be like to hold someone his own age again. No, not someone. Her. She has filled out, as if thriving on separation, whereas he has grown scrawny fending for himself. It might be awkward between them at first, some adjustment needed for different angles and expectations.

'Who are you going to vote for?' she asks, blushing slightly at her boldness – or sensing his thoughts. He tells her and spots the hoped-for surprise.

'And you?'

She looks uncomfortable and says something about learning lessons and being electable. Can it be that in moving to the left he will pass her heading the other way? It is not unknown for radicals to balk at the prospect of victory, the easy option of opposing things preferred; and her background was bound to show through in the end, helped by the inheritance he used to imagine spending. Or perhaps without him to contradict all those stances and positions are unnecessary. But his own change of heart may be no less self-serving – a chat-up line prepared in advance, an act of piety towards his father. Either way, they belong on opposite sides of the argument, an irritant or asymmetry that is part of the appeal. Does she also miss the itch of contention, the sex that was better angry?

'Colleagues,' a voice says, calling them to order. 'Or comrades, if you prefer.' Someone cheers and Julia turns away from Don towards the sound. The effect is excluding but part of her brushes against him, the sensation hard to locate, its meaning, like everything else, inscrutable. Laughter breaks out and people known to differ strongly observe the truce of a joke about themselves. He is ready to be called anything, Brother even, so long as this continues.