

Chapter 1: Leonard

Leonard was raised by his mother alone with cheerfully concealed difficulty, his father having died tragically during childbirth. Though she was not by nature the soldiering type, she taught him to look at life as a daisy chain of small events, each of which could be made manageable in its own way. She was a person for whom kindness was a very ordinary thing, who believed that the only acceptable excuse for not having a bird feeder in the back garden was that you had one in the front garden.

As sometimes happens with boys who prefer games to sports, Leonard had few friends but lots of ideas. His mother understood with intuitive good sense that children like Leonard just need someone to listen to them. They would set off to the shops discussing conger eels and have a deep conversation about Saturn's moons on the way back; they would talk about tidal waves at bath time, and say goodnight with a quick chat about the man with the longest fingernails in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. But Leonard grew up at a time when quiet, imaginative children did not yet enjoy the presumption of innocence. His mother often found herself having to take his side against ornery teachers who complained that they found it impossible to get through to him. With patient maternal endurance she would sit by herself at parent-teacher meetings explaining that, like his late father, he 'just lacked a Eureka face.'

Even into his thirties, Leonard's mother still liked to fuss over him, buying his favourite ham for lunch—the one with fewer veins running through it—leaving tea by the bedside for

when he woke up, and ironing well-meaning creases into his jeans, which Leonard would quietly iron out later. He repaid her thoughtfulness by keeping her company through her later years and generally including her in the uncrowded bandwidth of his life.

Leonard was not exactly sure, but there must have come a point when their relationship grew from a purely filial one into one of partnership. Though an adult son living with his widowed mother is a situation about which society has yet to adopt a formal position, it is clearly seen in second-best terms. In so far as anyone noticed, they might have assumed that she was overbearing or that he lacked initiative and possibly a sex drive. In reality, neither sought to limit or interfere with the other, both being independent people who liked their own space and who, quite simply, got along. Leonard did recall some awkwardness around the suggestion that they go on holidays together, though he was not entirely certain which of them had first proposed it. Mother/daughter holidays are normal of course, and father/son trips are famously storied as a way to come of age. Mother/son holidays, though, have the connotation that one of them must be a burden on the other. But truth be told, they were well suited as travelling companions. She was a keen walker and had good gallery feet, being able to wander around any reasonable exhibition in its entirety without being distracted by the gift shop honey-pot that drew in tired women half her age. They both liked churches and even though Leonard was not religious himself, much of the world's art is. He would enjoy visiting famous paintings and sculptures in European cathedrals, while his mother would busy herself lighting a candle in the side chapel for her fragile, long-departed husband.

She had never really asked Leonard about girls, knowing the delicacy of the subject for him, and also because of her own doubts about whether his apparently celibate life was due to a lack of interest or opportunity. For Leonard, the fact that he still

lived at home with his mother led to a certain self-restraint on practical grounds. He had wondered what would have happened had he brought a girl home only for them to wake up to two cups of tea at the bedside the next morning.

His mother passed away unexpectedly one midweek night in her sleep, tucked into a duvet with her clothes all laid out for the next day, her neatness being a sign of her respect for the small things in her life. The doctor noted the cause of death as a heart attack, but emphasised that there were no signs of suffering or drama. He said that her heart must have simply ‘run out of beats.’

As Leonard was a shy only child of two shy only children, it was a small funeral. The front of the church was practically empty with the exception of Leonard, as people tended to underestimate their relative closeness to the deceased and sit several rows further back than they should. With no extended family to rely on, Leonard had to multi-task at the funeral: reading the prayers of the faithful, bringing up the offertory gifts, and taking care of all the other minor jobs that are usually done by cousins and in-laws. The priest’s sermon was a generic one about death and hope, which was a relief for Leonard, as his mother disliked it when people summarised a dead person’s life in a glib caricature. Had he had the courage, Leonard would have spoken up and said that his mother looked after everyone in her life as though they were her garden birds: that is to say, with unconditional pleasure and generosity.

At the crematorium, her coffin was launched through the red drapes on a set of rails in a slightly halting motion, fittingly reminiscent of the Ghost Train she so enjoyed at the funfair. With her fear of heights and contests, she had often found funfairs a bit of a trial, but went for Leonard’s sake and enjoyed the Ghost Train as it was basically a slow drive through a dark fluorescent art gallery. As the curtains closed over the coffin to the strains of ‘Nothing Rhymed’ by her fa-

avourite singer, Gilbert O'Sullivan, Leonard wiped a tear from his glasses and headed back to the family home, now his home, as an orphan.

When an only child loses their second parent, the calendar of the generations turns a page. There are practicalities and arrangements to take care of, but there is also a more general facing up to things. Ready or not, here they come. The result is an alloy of sadness and bewilderment. It was in this state, with his mood tuned down an octave, that Leonard spent his first few weeks after the funeral: staring at a pie cooking in the oven; lingering over a bag of sunflower hearts at the bird feeder; or pausing sadly with a highlighter over an entry in the TV guide. If, during that period, you were to ask him what was on his mind or otherwise use the commonplace ways of snapping someone out of it—that is to say, interrupting them for no reason—he would have been at a loss to tell you, his mundane consciousness returning like a cat who walks in after being away for a few days without any explanation.

After dinner each evening, he would sit on the couch in that customary way of single men for whom time is something to fill rather than spend. He would open one of the historical biographies waiting patiently on his bookcase, several of which had bookmarks just a few pages in, the subjects yet to get beyond their childhood. He found book shops to be comforting places and book buying a comforting activity, but he was an absent-minded reader these days, the act of reading that much more solitary without his mother pottering around the house in the background. He would sit at the table and try to copy sketches from *A Birdwatcher's Year*—a Sanderling scuttling along the shore, or a Guillemot with its eggs shaped like a pear to stop them from rolling off cliffs—but, with nobody to show the sketches to, he became careless about the details on the feathers and the subtlety of the colours. And of course

there was always the TV: supreme among alternatives, though strangely distant when there is no longer someone else on the couch to talk about it with.

Had Leonard been a different type of person he might have gone to the pub to meet some friends for an evening of darts, dominoes, cards or other prison games, but nothing made him feel lonelier these days than the thought of spending time in the company of extroverts. It is at times like this that we find out who our true friends are, or in Leonard's case, we call upon our only friend. And so, to avoid or fill that stale chapter of the evening, Leonard had made it a habit to take refuge in the company of Hungry Paul.

Chapter 2: 'Parley View'

Hungry Paul still lived with his parents at the family home he had grown up in. He was now more than thirty years through his allotted three score and ten, and to an outside busy-body it might have seemed that he had no 'go' in him, or maybe that he was hoping to outlast his parents en route to easy home ownership. But Hungry Paul was a man whose general obliviousness defied gossip. In truth, he never left home because his family was a happy one, and maybe it's rarer than it ought to be that a person appreciates such things.

His father, Peter, had worked for many years as an economist, but was now retired and living off a pension provided by the invisible hand of the market. He was bald, though it was as if his baldness had been caused by gravity, with the hair drawn from his scalp into his head, now tufting out of his ears, nose and eyebrows. Hungry Paul's mother, Helen, was a nearly-retired teacher, now down to two days a week. Helen had also taught Leonard for two years in primary school and used to praise his drawings, telling him that he had 'brains to burn if he would only use them,' which is the kindest possible way of calling someone lazy. Like any teacher who meets a former pupil as an adult, she always greeted Leonard with a genuine welcoming gladness.

She met Peter after he had stopped one day to give her directions to an art exhibition and then invited himself along. They fell in love effortlessly. Their initial chemistry broadened into physics and then biology, until they were blessed with Hungry Paul's older sister Grace as their first child. They then

had Hungry Paul after two difficult miscarriages and, understandably in the circumstances, they treasured him. As a couple, Helen and Peter continued to share the closeness of two people who have been through a lot together.

On Hungry Paul's suggestion they had named their house 'Parley View' after a French song that he had once heard at a rugby club. Helen had insisted on a bird friendly back garden and bee friendly front garden, while Peter handled what he called 'internal maintenance': hanging pictures, changing light bulbs and doing all the things you can do to a needy house without buying much in the way of proper tools. Grace had long since moved out and was preparing for her impending wedding, a project that was being managed with the help of nightly phone calls to Helen, whose role largely involved lots of listening, punctuated by interjections of 'I know love, I know' every now and again in a soothing maternal voice.

When Leonard arrived that evening, Peter answered the door with his usual smile and his bright happy-to-see-you eyes. 'Come on in Leonard, come on in.'

Leonard entered with a needless drying of his clean shoes on the doormat, a gesture of social respect rather than hygiene. In the front room Helen was doing a jigsaw on a tea tray. It looked like a picture of an impressionist painting but it was hard to tell with just the edges completed so far. Her tea was balanced on the arm of the couch in a way that Leonard's mother would never have allowed. Peter and Helen resumed their habitual couch positions, nestled in like two jigsaw pieces themselves.

'How've you been, Leonard—everything getting back to normal? I'm sure you've a lot to sort out,' said Helen, getting the sensitive subjects out of the way early and gently.

'Getting there,' answered Leonard, not specifically referring to the normality, the grieving or the sorting out.

'It's good to see you—help yourself,' she said, pointing to an Easter egg opened three weeks ahead of schedule, the guilt

neutralised by sharing. Leonard took a big bit, tried to break off a smaller, more respectable portion, but decided just to eat it all once it broke up into his lap. The TV was paused in the middle of *University Challenge*, one of Leonard's favourite programmes.

Peter's style was to sit in readiness and then shout machine-gun guesses once a contestant buzzed: 'Thomas Cromwell, NO, Oliver Cromwell, NO . . .' just ahead of an impossibly well-rounded twenty-year-old answering 'Cardinal Wolsey.' In contrast to Peter's machine gun was Helen's sniper rifle. She liked to work on something else—a crossword, Sudoku puzzle or, like tonight, a jigsaw—pretending she wasn't listening. And then, on some obscure question that had both teams stumped, she would deliver the correct answer from nowhere, hardly looking up. It was usually something unguessable, like an event that had happened in a leap year or that King Someone the Someteenth was a twin. She pretended not to enjoy how one of her coolly delivered correct answers could cancel out half a dozen of Peter's panicked guesses. One time, Peter recorded an episode and learned the first twenty answers just to blow her mind when they watched it later, which he duly did, although we'll never know if Helen truly fell for it, or just enjoyed the lengths to which he was still prepared to go to impress her after all these years. Above all, what held their interest in the programme was that the two of them genuinely believed in young people. They rooted for them and forgave them any overconfidence, seeing something pure and perfect in any bright young person who had made the most of a good education.

'How's the job going, Leonard?' asked Peter. He still retained a retired man's casual interest in how workplaces in general were getting on since he left it all behind.

'Not bad, not bad. Keeping busy.'

'What's the topic these days—dinosaurs? Ocean creatures? Cavemen? Greeks?'

‘Close—the Romans. And especially their time in Britain and places like that. Pretty interesting actually. The Scots gave them quite a hard time.’

Leonard wrote children’s encyclopaedias and other factual books. While he actually wrote the words, he wasn’t the author as such. That title—and the dust jacket credit—went to the academic charged with overseeing content. Leonard’s role was really about making sure that the main concepts were conveyed in short memorable sentences. Some illustrators liked his way with nutshells and he had slowly built up a reputation as a fact writer with a child’s eye. The job suited him as he was interested in pretty much everything interesting, and he preferred to play a minor part in someone else’s story rather than being his own star. He also liked the underdog credibility that came from being unsung and uncredited, even if the money was a bit less than he would have liked for his stage of life. He worked alone in a big open-plan office shared with people from other companies and the admin people from his own company, who may as well have been from other companies. All this gave him the feeling and appearance of belonging to society, when the reality was that he worked alone and inside his own head most of the time. The illustrators, who were the real breadwinners, added their pictures after he had finished, so he tended not to meet them. His relationships with the overseeing authors were usually businesslike and distant. They gave emailed feedback and tracked comments with formal politeness that was friendly but without warmth. That was okay by Leonard. He wasn’t looking to form professional friendships with the company’s alpha dogs.

‘You should take over the illustrations Leonard—you were always good at that. Then bump off the bossy supervisor and publish books yourself. Move to the Bahamas and write on the beach,’ said Helen, who had spent her career lobbying encouragement in soft little underarm pitches for others to swing at.

‘Maybe someday,’ said Leonard. ‘The problem is that all the factual books have been done over a million times, so it’s hard to say something original. The illustrators are at the cutting edge; I’m just re-boiling the same old factoids. I suppose I’m happy enough—it’s rewarding to think that kids are reading the books and getting excited by them.’

‘There’s nothing nicer than seeing a kid reading,’ said Helen, ‘I remember Grace lying on her belly reading on the rug, oblivious to the TV or the rest of us. I never met a child who didn’t like reading, so long as they’re given a *chance*. I used to have parents coming to the school telling me that their kids wouldn’t read and my advice was always the same: if the parents read, the children will follow. If you want them to do it, do it yourself. I bet *their* parents were readers,’ she added, pointing at the paused *University Challenge* students on screen.

‘Speaking of gifted youths, I don’t suppose there’s any sign of your favourite son?’ asked Leonard.

‘Upstairs—he said to send you up,’ said Peter, reaching for the remote. As Leonard left the room, the TV was unpaused and he heard Peter shout out ‘Magnesium!’ behind him.

Upstairs, Hungry Paul’s room was unoccupied. Unsure of the rules for entering another adult’s bedroom platonically, he paused at the doorway, lingering as comfortably as is possible for a man who can hear his friend emptying his bowels at a distance. He took the opportunity to scan the details of Hungry Paul’s bedroom, a place he hadn’t really ever been in before. Beyond the age of twelve or so, men tend not to see each other’s bedrooms as it can be difficult to contrive a plausible premise for asking. The room was a mix of eras, with a general half-hearted adult gloss undermined by scatterings of boyhood fascination. Action figures stood in action poses on shelves where Hungry Paul’s parents had surely hoped great books would one day sit. A homemade cardboard mobile of a Spitfire dangled from the room’s only light. The walls were painted a pastel green, the

shade you might choose for a nursery if you didn't know the sex of the baby. The curtains and bedspread were of a generic home store type: leaves and whatnot in graduated blues and greys. On the walls were some of Hungry Paul's own artworks, including a wobbly paint-by-numbers portrait of *The Laughing Cavalier* and a *Where's Wally?* jigsaw he had had framed and mounted as a testament to its difficulty. Though not untidy, the room had that random look you sometimes find among the bedrooms of former children who are still in residence.

Hungry Paul emerged from the bathroom wearing a white fluffy bathrobe tied with a white belt, tracksuit bottoms and flip flops with some tissue paper stuck to them. He was shaking his wrists and wore the look of intense concentration that is characteristic of a man with wet hands looking for a towel. The fact that he was in the unlikely position of wearing clothes made from the very material he needed might have tempted a lesser man, but, having already run the risk of doing a sit-down toilet while wearing white, he was not minded to capitulate under a lesser challenge. He resolved his difficulty by retrieving a t-shirt from the linen basket and drying his hands on it, his assessment being that clothes that were clean enough to wear only a short time previously were unlikely to have become too dirty to use in the meantime. There is much pleasure in relief and, as Hungry Paul noticed Leonard, he welcomed him with genuine warmth.

'Hi Leonard. They sent you up. Great, great. How are things?'

'Good thanks. What's with the bathrobe?' asked Leonard.

'Ah, I have begun training in the martial arts—how do I look?'

'You look like the real thing all right. What has brought this on? It's not like you to do something violent.'

'Oh, I haven't changed my mind about violence, but the martial arts are more about stillness in action. Calm in the midst of combat. It certainly is physical, but the mind remains still and peaceful. There is no mental violence; no ill will, which is

the worst part of violence. And besides, it's judo, so there's no punching in the face or anything like that.'

'And how do you feel about rolling around with Neanderthals? I thought you didn't like people touching you, never mind twisting your limbs into a figure eight.'

'Well there is that. I actually thought it might help me with my personal space issues. As you say, it is one of the more intimate combat sports, hence we wear sleepover gear rather than, say, black tie. But to be honest, there is also my personal fitness to think of. I can't very well tackle a black belt if I can't even tackle stairs without panting.'

Hungry Paul then dropped to the floor and started a push-up on his knuckles. There was a cracking sound, followed by some oaths, and then he started again, looking like a break dancer doing the caterpillar.

'How many do you have to do?' asked Leonard.

'My sensei says I should keep going until I find my limit, and then go beyond it. To be like water. It was easier in the class with the spongy mats, but my wooden floors are actually quite hard. Maybe I'll try it with grippy socks instead of flip flops.'

'You look good in all the gear though. A white belt – that's pretty impressive. What sort of moves have you learned so far?'

'So far it's steady as she goes. The first thing they teach you is how to sign a waiver form, and then they teach you how to break a fall, so you don't get hurt, although I suspect whether I get hurt or not is as much up to my future opponents as it is up to me. Then we did some drills with the others. Most of them are a bit bigger than me, so I was mainly practising my defence.'

'I suppose it should be good for your mental strength too. The martial arts are known for emphasising oneness of mind and body,' said Leonard, who had actually written something on the martial arts in a children's encyclopaedia about the

Olympics, though the combat sports got only a brief section at the back along with shooting, weightlifting and a fact box about steroids.

‘Funny you should say that—I was actually quite light-headed after the class, which often happens whenever I try new things. Still, it’s only my first lesson. I asked the sensei about my potential and he said that if I upgraded from my bathrobe and tracksuit bottoms to buying a *gi*—that’s what they call the proper judo outfit—it would be a real sign of commitment. I can tell it will take many tournaments to win his respect.’

Leonard admired the way Hungry Paul had immersed himself in something that was so culturally alien, and, on reflection, he agreed that it was best to buy a proper *gi*, as the bathrobe probably looked a little too fluffy to intimidate any experienced judoka.

‘If you’re still practising, maybe I should wait downstairs?’ suggested Leonard.

‘Not at all. I can finish this later. Let’s go down for a while and have a chat.’ Hungry Paul tightened his white fluffy belt, using the same type of knot used for tying shoelaces.

Hungry Paul chose the kitchen rather than the front room, yelling ‘We’re in here’ for the benefit of his parents, with Helen chirping ‘Okay, love’ from the other room. He flipped on the kettle and disappeared into the cubbyhole, an off-shoot from the kitchen which was probably intended to be used as a pantry, but which in this house was used to store board games. He scanned the battered spines of the stacked boxes like a sommelier looking for the right vintage. Within the time it took for the kettle to boil, he stuck out a disembodied arm from the cubbyhole and called ‘This okay?’ from within. He was holding out Yahtzee, a game they hadn’t played in a very long time.

‘Good choice. You’re in a very Eastern mood this evening. Making plans to buy a *gi*, making yourself what looks like green

tea, and now playing Yahtzee. Is this a new direction you are taking in life? Western civilisation no longer inspires you? Oh, and I'll have normal tea by the way please.'

'I think that I need to be a little immersive with regard to the cultural context for judo if I want to avoid getting beaten up by sixteen-year-old girls again next week. I think there was something important missing at my first lesson. I mean apart from things like balance and motor skills, I felt I was missing something of the essence of the judoka,' said Hungry Paul. 'Now, it's been a while since we played this. How does it go again?'

Hungry Paul laid out the bits and pieces: a circular playing area with raised edges, all covered in faux-Vegas red baize; four dice, which meant that one was missing; a black cup for shaking them in before rolling, which lent that characteristic hollow rattling sound to the game; and a set of impossibly complicated score cards, listing what the players should be trying to achieve.

'It doesn't look very Eastern' observed Leonard about the game, which was invented by Canadians and commercialised by Americans.

'Probably a prisoner of war game in Japanese camps during World War II. Do you recall how to play this? I'm starting to remember why we haven't taken this out in so long. I think the last time we tried this we gave up and ended up playing something less complicated like Risk, which is saying something.' Hungry Paul lived on a knife edge between a passion for board games and an aversion to instruction booklets.

Leonard explained the basics insofar as he could recall them. Hungry Paul, who himself lacked a Eureka face, nodded in false understanding.

'Why don't you just go first and then I'll see how it works. I'm sure it will come back to me. It's just the rules are all a bit like card games, which I can never understand. Oh, I had

better get an extra die.’ Hungry Paul disappeared back into the cubby hole and removed a die from another set, the board game equivalent of cannibalism.

The game got under way with Leonard rattling the dice cup, which is used two-handed as if the player were shaking cocktails in it. His first attempt was at a full house but he rolled five different numbers. Hungry Paul decided to try for a full house also and quickly popped a digestive biscuit into his mouth in order to free up his hands, having already dropped several crumbs on his judo bathrobe, which was opening at the chest under the pressure of the moment. He rolled two twos, a three, a five and six. He had no idea what that meant.

‘Oh, I remember—do I call out “Yahtzee”?’ he asked, for want of any better ideas.

‘Not quite. You might be thinking of Bingo or Snap,’ Leonard answered, before interpreting what Hungry Paul’s roll meant and talking him through his next few goes.

As they both played board games regularly, and switched between them often, it was not unusual for games to start slowly whenever they changed to something new. It was perfectly normal to have a warm-up period, like the way a polyglot who has just arrived at the airport needs to hear the local language spoken around him before he can regain his own fluency in speaking it. Before long, the game settled into a steady rhythm of clacking dice and turn-taking, interspersed with uninhibited rallies of conversation between the two friends, both of whom were free thinkers with a broad range of interests.

Hungry Paul had always been fascinated by the world around him, viewing it as something fantastical. It was as if he saw the body of scientific understanding as an anthology of legends, something so wonderful and impenetrable that it might as well be a myth. He liked borrowing copies of *National*

Geographic from the library, sometimes months in arrears, not that it mattered when he was reading articles about carbon dating or the Persians. In this way he maintained a lively interest in the wider world, while staying above and apart from what is generally described as current affairs. Leonard, very much the autodidact, held a subscription to *New Scientist*, which had been his annual Christmas present from his mother for many years. He also liked to read *Yesterday Today*, for all the latest developments in ancient history. For the two friends, the bleaching of the coral reefs was as current as the latest general election; the discovery of new dwarf planets was as relevant as last night's penalty shoot-out; and Marco Polo was discussed as others might gossip about the latest red carpet ingénue. Their conversations combined the yin of Leonard's love of facts with the yang of Hungry Paul's chaotic curiosity.

'Do you remember the Edvard Munch exhibition we went to last year, with all those haunting paintings of sick children?' asked Hungry Paul.

'Indeed I do. I see you still have the fridge magnet of *The Scream* you bought afterwards as a memento. It's not just any artist that makes it on to that fridge.'

'Well, I was reading an article about that very painting today and guess what? Do you want to know what the most fascinating thing about it is?' tantalised Hungry Paul.

'Okay, let me think. The orange background is related to the eruption of Krakatoa isn't it? Is that it?'

'Interesting but that's not it.' Hungry Paul was rattling his dice in the cup the whole time, adding to the sense of suspense.

'Okay, I give up.'

'The figure in the painting isn't actually screaming!' Hungry Paul spilled his dice on the board as he revealed this; a little too enthusiastically, as one of them had to be retrieved from under the table—a four, which did him no good.

'Really, are you sure?'

‘Absolutely. That’s the whole thing. The figure is actually closing his ears to *block out* a scream. Isn’t that amazing? A painting can be so misunderstood and still become so famous.’

‘Really? I must confess that I think I have made that mistake myself in several encyclopaedias. Never mind. It will be an interesting thing to include the next time we do a revised edition.’

Leonard rolled his go and completed his four-of-a-kind. He drank from his mug, but the tea had gone cold without him realising, leaving him to swallow a mouthful of nauseating leftovers.

‘I don’t suppose you saw the documentary about Edwin Hubble last night?’ asked Hungry Paul, now entering a state of flow. ‘Dad and I watched it after judo while Mam was on the phone to Grace. I must confess that, without television, I would never understand anything about space. Thank heavens for those enthusiastic Oxford dons doing all those BBC documentaries on the side—earning a bit of egg money I suppose. TV and space were made for each other. Dad and I were so absorbed that we ate a whole Toblerone between us—one of the big ones that you get at the airport.’

‘I’m sorry I missed it. One thing I could never quite get right in my encyclopaedias, even after reading about it many times over the years, is the expansion and contraction of the universe,’ Leonard confessed. ‘I mean I couldn’t begin to understand the physics of it, but the idea that the universe is surrounded by something that is not the universe, and which it expands into, or is it that the universe isn’t expanding but space is expanding? How do you explain that to children without leaving them with a million unanswered questions? Never mind the idea that it will snap back like an elastic into a small little pinhead again, which would terrify any sensible child. How can we just walk around leading normal lives when we know that that sort of thing is going on above our heads? We’d all be a little less precious about our lot if we truly appreciated that the whole thing

was going to end up as some sort of tiny full stop eventually. I suppose you just have to trust the science, but it is blind faith really beyond a certain point, at least as far as I'm concerned.'

Hungry Paul's brow became corrugated. 'I find the whole expansion of the universe disheartening to be honest. It's as though Mother Nature is trying to push everything away from everything else. Hardly maternal. The universe might well be expanding, but it's expanding to get away from *us*, leaving us more alone, and our world feeling smaller.'

The two friends then settled into one of the long pauses that characterised their comfort in each other's company. They could sit quietly for extended periods without the need to hurry back to whatever it was they were doing, allowing the silence to melt away in its own time. However, on this occasion, Hungry Paul's extemporising on astrophysics had struck a melancholy note inside Leonard. In the weeks since his mother had passed on, Leonard had noticed a distinct shrinking of his own personal universe. His evenings were less occupied, his social options had become more limited, and his mind seemed diverted inwards towards a vague, dreamy melancholy. As Hungry Paul got up to boil the kettle again and rinse the mugs, Leonard broached the subject.

'Maybe it's not just the universe that expands and contracts,' he said. 'Perhaps the same applies to us—you know, that as we get older, our lives start shrinking.'

'How do you mean?'

'The thing is, as a child the world looked huge, intimidatingly so. School looked big. Adults looked big. The future looked big. But I am starting to feel that over time I have retreated into a smaller world. I see people rushing around and I wonder—where are they going to? Who are they meeting? Their lives are so full. I've been trying to remember if my life was ever like that.'

Hungry Paul paused a moment. 'I think I know what you

mean; but for me, the bigness of life was always the problem. I have spent over three decades hacking a safe path through the wilderness, as have you to some extent. The path may be a little narrow in places, but is that really so bad?

‘It’s not just external circumstances,’ answered Leonard. ‘I feel *myself* getting smaller. I feel quieter and more, I don’t know, invisible. There is this palpable sense of physics; that my life is being pulled inwards. One thing has led to another and now I feel that if I don’t do something, I’ll just carry on some minor harmless existence.’

‘There is a lot to be said for that. As you know, I have always been modestly Hippocratic in my instincts: I wish to do no harm. My preference has always been to stand back from the world. Much like the Green Cross Code, I like to stop, look and listen before getting involved in things. It has stood me well and kept me on peaceful terms with my fellow man. It’s certainly better than trying to make my mark on the world, only to end up defacing it,’ said Hungry Paul.

‘I am not about to start chaining myself to railings or throwing bras at policemen, if that’s what you mean. There is no shortage of people willing to take that path. But I just can’t help feeling that I need to open the doors and windows of my life a little.’

Hungry Paul hesitated, holding his biscuit over his tea just a fraction too long and despairing as a half-moon of digestive sank to the bottom of his mug. ‘That may be so,’ he said, ‘but the trick is to know how much of the world to let in, without becoming overwhelmed. The universe, as Edwin Hubble taught us, is a hostile place.’

‘Indeed. And sometimes it’s difficult to know whether you want to scream or block out a scream,’ said Leonard.

It was hard to say whether it was the Yahtzee talking, but both men had found themselves in one of those flowering conversations where one thought opens another. Perhaps they

could have discussed the subject all evening, if only it had been hypothetical. Things being otherwise, the natural pause in the conversation gave them a moment to check themselves. Even among close friends, there are still some thoughts that ought to be allowed to ripen in private.

They finished their tea and reached an unspoken decision that, after a pleasant evening's play, and with both their score cards looking a mess, they would call it a night.

Leonard popped his head into the sitting room to say goodbye. Helen had finished the jigsaw—Monet's *Lilies*, a painting Leonard had written about in the *World of Art* encyclopaedia—and was on the phone to Hungry Paul's sister Grace, discussing wedding DJs. Peter, with saintly patience, had the TV on pause again and said goodbye with a thumbs-up.

Hungry Paul saw Leonard off at the door.

'G'night then,' said Leonard.

'G'night Leonard,' said Hungry Paul, closing his judo bathrobe at the throat to keep his chest from getting a chill.

Without thinking, they both looked up at the inky universe they had just been talking about, as the big torchlight moon shone down on the snails criss-crossing the driveway. Leonard stepped over them and made his way home, carrying with him the things he had said over the course of the evening; things he hardly knew he knew.

Chapter 3: The Romans

The next day at work, Leonard was trying to rescue a chapter about the Romans in Britain. The first batch of tracked changes had come back from the overseeing author as an assault of red and strikeout. When he accepted all her changes just to see what they looked like, his word count shrank so much that he could have fitted the whole thing inside a fortune cookie.

In one comment box she had written ‘could we say something original here?’ and in another she posed the question ‘would someone really say this?’ This kind of vaguely disappointed feedback was the norm from overseeing authors who were subject matter experts but who knew little about how kids’ minds or writers’ feelings worked. A game of tracked changes ping-pong required the ability to put up with a lot more than you should. Leonard often felt he was being paid for his patience. It was hard to do his best work when he knew that all his good ideas would be either rejected without being understood, or appropriated and credited to someone else. He tried to keep in mind the advice his mother had once given him, that he should take his work seriously but not personally.

In general, children’s encyclopaedias about history weren’t as popular or good as other factual books. The best illustrators wanted to work on dinosaurs (if they liked hand drawing) or books about space (if they preferred computer graphics). History encyclopaedias seemed to attract illustrators with more mixed talents. One guy could only draw people facing out from the page, staring at the reader, which made for farcical battle scenes.

Another couldn't draw different nationalities and so depicted everyone looking slightly cross, reasoning, not without insight, that angry people were the same the world over.

The Romans themselves were a particular problem. Anything that goes from BC to AD is practically impossible to explain to kids. It sounds like you're going backwards in time to zero and then forwards, which is confusing for children who mark time by counting from birthday to birthday. Also, the Romans' long names made them hard to relate to, especially as Asterix and Monty Python had used up all the decent joke names, which was really the only way to get over that problem. Yes, there were the usual factoids about Latin, aqueducts, straight roads and slaves, but they had been over-used and couldn't possibly compete with a Tyrannosaurus attack or a supernova explosion.

Leonard's real problem though was that the Romans were bullies. The Romans picked on everybody for four hundred years and were only eliminated when they got outbullied themselves by the Goths and Barbarians. To a kid, this is a worrying storyline. You like to think that a bully's upper hand is short-lived and his fall precipitous and permanent. The true tale of history was worryingly short of comeuppance.

Running out of ideas, Leonard took off his noise-cancelling/society-repelling headphones and went to the kitchenette for a mid-morning cup, even though he always disliked the awkward wait for the water to boil and the prospect of kettle-related time-killing small talk.

He checked his mobile and saw that he had a missed call from a private number, which was surely Hungry Paul's home phone. Hungry Paul didn't have a mobile and often left epic voicemails, spread over several messages, which at times sounded like one-man radio plays:

Leonard, hello. It seems that in a world where people compete with numbers, it is the numbers that always win.

Hungry Paul began cryptically and epigrammatically, like a first-time novelist.

Ordinarily, I like to discuss delicate matters face-to-face, but I think it best that I leave you a voice message rather than wait until I see you next.

Leonard noted Hungry Paul's typically impeccable manners.

*My mother and Grace have talked things through about the wedding, at some length and in some detail, and the thing is, the numbers are tight. I mean if it's a wedding of 'about a hundred,' which is how they have put it to me, though I have no idea— *beep**

Leonard was used to Hungry Paul's lines over-running, with most messages being delivered in series format.

Apologies, I must get better at spitting it all out, so I hope this doesn't sound too brusque.

He delivered the last word with a lingering pronunciation, and in doing so ended a lengthy era during which he had pronounced it as 'brusk.'

A hundred is really just fifty each for the bride and groom, which is really just twenty-five for each of them plus the partners for each of those twenty-five. While it is perfectly acceptable for those on

*the outer orbits of the family to miss the cut, they, I mean, 'we'—I was specifically told to say 'we'—need to make the numbers work, as it were. *beep**

As the next voicemail loaded Leonard braced himself for a demotion to an afters invitation, which meant missing all the nice parts of the wedding and attending only the late, drunken bits he disliked. It was unlikely that there would be scope for a commensurate downgrading of the wedding gift, at least not without creating the impression of hard feelings.

*So I, or we, were wondering whether you had any plans for a plus one, because I have already confirmed that I will be unaccompanied on the night concerned owing to a confluence of factors, and if you were in a similar position then perhaps we could be each other's plus ones, thereby freeing up two spots which I am assured would be made available to guests without whom the whole wedding would be, I think the word Grace used was 'tense.' In the circumstances, and given that Grace has never asked me for anything, I'm inclined not to be difficult, so maybe you could think it over and call me back whenever you get the chance. I don't want you to think— *beep**

There were no further messages.

It was an easy non-decision to make. It had been quite some time since Leonard had been a plus one. In fact, these days he was decidedly not himself, so 'minus one' was closer to the mark. It had been something of a formality that they had him down for plus one at all.

Leonard rang back and got Helen, who was slightly embarrassed about the whole thing, but who made no effort to

talk him out of agreeing to be Hungry Paul's plus one. 'So long as I don't have to wear a dress and dance with him—you never know, I could be your new daughter-in-law!' he chipped in.

'Thanks for understanding, Leonard. We weren't sure how to ask, so I'm glad you're okay about it.'

'Not at all, not at all. Give my best to Gracie—hope she's not too stressed. We're all on her side.'

Leonard hung up and took off the mask of easy conviviality. Standing there in the kitchenette, there was something about the sincerity of Helen's awkwardness that had brought it home to him. The 'plus one' on his invite, received several weeks ago, must have been intended for his poor mother. The thought stunned him gently for a moment as a man in chinos walked in and made disapproving noises at finding mugs left to soak. In a hurry to get back to his noise-cancelling headphones, Leonard put away the tea caddy and finished stirring his own palpable milky loneliness.

Chapter 4: Grace

If there is one incident which best captures the relationship between Grace and Hungry Paul, it was when he received a fiver in a birthday card for the first time as a young boy. He stuffed it into that strange pocket-within-a-pocket that denim jeans have: a narrow, impractical feature barely wide enough for a finger. Grace, who was three years older, took him off to the shops to spend it on E numbers and comics. On the way, Hungry Paul spotted one of the neighbourhood boys, probably one of the football-playing jocks who normally ignored him or worse, and called him over, excited to have something to show off for once. In fishing out the note from his ridiculous pocket he tore it in half. The other boy gave a short derisive snort then kicked the ball ahead of him and chased it down the hill, leaving Hungry Paul standing there, frozen with baffled disappointment. Before he had time to compute this latest failure, Grace handed him a new fiver and took the old torn one. He ran after the boy with the ball, delighted with himself and forgetting to thank Grace, who hurried after him in case he went onto the road without looking.

Like all eldest children, Grace had been an only child for a time, and thrived under the warm lamp of undivided parental attention; but when Hungry Paul was brought home from the hospital after some delays for tests, she welcomed him with open sisterly enthusiasm. By the time he was a toddler, she was old enough to help look after him in little unsupervised ways, which usually involved rescuing him from himself, as he was a boy who tended to lean with his fingers in the hinges of doors,

stick his head into railings and swallow wine gums without chewing them first.

In primary school she was clever, hardworking and well behaved, all of the things a teacher's child should be, though her natural charm and sense of fun largely protected her from the pitfalls of that role. It wasn't all easy. In the early years at school her best friend was a gentle, imaginative boy called Frederick, who devised fantastical games and babbled with inspirational enthusiasm about dinosaurs and outer space. (He pointed out that we didn't need to go to space as that's where we live: 'Where do you think the Earth is, dummy?') After a couple of years Frederick changed school even though his parents weren't moving house. Grace was bereft. Even worse, everyone else in the class had settled into little groups in the meantime, and Grace was left friendless. She dreaded lunchtimes, hoping to delay as long as possible eating her sandwich and fairy bun so that she had less time alone in the schoolyard. It is not hard to see how Grace became the family's slow eater—every family has one.

Loneliness begets loneliness. As an unattached kid she was not an exciting prospect for other children and so, without anyone doing anything in particular, it became a 'thing' that she was just someone who had no friends. She contrasted herself with Hungry Paul who she could see in his junior yard, alone as usual and wandering around inside his own head, except that he seemed at peace with his situation, protected by his own obliviousness.

During that period, which lasted almost a year but felt as long as the Ottoman Empire, Grace wandered around the yard on her own and at times, out of sheer frustration, she would run around as if to create the illusion of being chased. Once she slipped and fell on the stony old tarmac and grazed the width of her palm, the cut becoming a mix of light blood and small stones that would be painful to clean. Too embarrassed to be asked why she was running by herself, she hid it from the

teacher and cleaned it later on at home herself, inexpertly. Helen asked her about it at bedtime but was deflected with vagueness, a pattern that would play out more regularly later, during the teenage years.

Grace's position turned on a tragic event. Gary Crowe, a nine-year-old wannabe fireman who sat at Grace's table in school, died in an accident at home. His father was a mechanic and had been working on an engine on a hoist in his garage when he went off to buy some spare parts. Gary had swung from the chain on the hoist and pulled the engine down on top of himself. Gary's death stunned the whole class. The shock of the story found resonance in the nightmares of the children who knew him, where it was all too readily reimagined at bedtime after lights out. Two dozen sets of parents spent the next month calmly explaining that there was nothing to worry about and that it was just an accident and that beds and houses and garages were perfectly safe places. For now, the kids were spared the true horror of imagining what Gary's parents were going through.

The tragedy galvanised the class and reset its social structure. The playground rules and cliques were shattered, as everybody played with everybody else, barely conscious of the survival instincts that were driving them to disregard their differences. Grace, who felt socially thawed by this change, immersed herself in what she felt might be a short-lived opportunity and laughed at other people's jokes, played their games and suppressed her own minor preferences in favour of her major preference for being included.

Those friends that Grace made at primary school were 'survival friends' rather than real friendships—none of them would be at the wedding—but they helped her to steady herself and begin to like herself again. They lasted her through secondary school during which time she started to individuate by immersing herself in student communism, Inspector Morse novels,

Judee Sill albums, and by taking long, long, long walks that would have any conscientious parent checking news bulletins. Her teenage years were exploratory and, broadly speaking, mild tempered. While there were some mood swings and a bit of door slamming, it seemed she was just trying all that out of curiosity, sensing that she had some wild cards that it would be a shame to leave unplayed.

Her relationship with Helen was at its most difficult during those years. Grace and Helen had always been close and had an intuitive communication channel through which they shared jokes, looks, hints and understandings, like a vaudeville double act that had learned each other's side of the routine to a transcendental level. During her teenage years, and without any identifiable starting point, Grace tuned out from Helen and instead turned inwards. She became hard to reach and connect with. Though not unhappy or sullen, she sought nourishment from within herself, in her nascent ideas and emerging preferences—it was simply not something Helen could share in. As the eldest child, everything new to Grace was new to her parents, and Helen perhaps suffered from the classic teacher's mistake of thinking that, when it came to children, she had seen it all. The more she tried to reach Grace the more she compounded her lack of understanding of her.

As is so often the case, when one parent struggles the other steps forward, parenting being a team sport played by individuals. Peter, who could be deep and introspective himself, became closer to Grace during that period. He had always been a friendly and warm presence in her life—biting the bruises off her bananas or letting her pluck the hair in his ears—but at times he had been guilty of acting as a deputy parent, aping Helen's approach rather than finding his own groove. He was naturally and happily introverted. Silences, solitary moments and stillness energised him. Loneliness was not something to overcome, but something to befriend and look into. And so,

Grace switched her connection from Helen to Peter during those years, as they were happy to share long silent car journeys together or read books at the kitchen table without feeling the need to have or share views about what they were reading.

Though Grace wouldn't necessarily have agreed, it was generally said of her that she had turned out well. It had something to do with her talents being offset by being down-to-earth, and her achievements being the result of hard work rather than advantage. The compliment was part of a mentality found in people who believed in praise only when it didn't imply elevation. Had Grace been asked at the time, she probably would have said that she was neither happy nor unhappy, like everyone else, and that she was still trying to feel her way through life. One night at a friend's birthday party, during the college years when they were all still getting used to drinking, she was asked, while being recorded on a camcorder, what she would wish for if she could have anything in the world. Without taking time to think or be funny, she gave an answer which her friends said was 'pure Grace.' She looked straight into the lens of the now-obsolete camcorder and said 'I would like . . . whatever is good for me.'