

Breaktime & Dance on My Grave

Aidan Chambers

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ABOUT THE BOOK

In *Breaktime* Morgan thinks literature is crap but Ditto doesn't agree and sets out to prove his cynical friend wrong by writing an account of what happens to him over half term - his father has a heart attack, he gets involved in a drunken brawl with a couple of burglars and has a life-changing encounter with the girl of his dreams.

But is it true or is Ditto just playing a game with words? It's not for Morgan alone to decide ...

Dance on My Grave is Hal Robinson's own story of love and obsession during one extraordinary summer in his seaside town. From Hal's first meeting with Barry to the relationship that follows and its devastating end, Hal tells of feelings so intense, experiences so bizarre and happenings so dramatic that they leave him changed for ever.

The first and second in a sequence of six ground-breaking and provocative novels that explore different aspects of teenage love and self-discovery. This new edition includes an Afterword by the author.

breaktime

Aidan Chambers

dance on my grave

DEFINITIONS

breaktime

*For
Nancy*

CHALLENGE

Coffeetalk

'I TELL YOU no lie,' said Morgan, slopping his coin-machine coffee on to the scuffed woodblock floor of the sixth-form common-room. 'Maureen Pinfold is a dream.'

Ditto stared at him in what he hoped was an enigmatic fashion. Since term began he had been perfecting this cool exterior manner, an attitude of unshakable intellectual poise.

Morgan licked dribbling coffee from the side of his plastic mug.

'She's ripe for dissection,' he said, affecting his medical style. 'I plan to operate as soon as the patient is prepared. And a theatre found, of course.' He laughed. 'It might have to be a field trip.'

'God, the mixed metaphors,' said Ditto.

'I do not believe in purity.' Morgan laughed again. He always preferred his own witticisms to anyone else's. His laughter shook another expectoration of coffee on to the abused floor. Surveying the morning-break crowd that filled the room, he said, 'You know the trouble with half this lot?'

'Tell me,' said Ditto indulgently.

'And with you too, I might add.'

'Say on.'

'They talk a lot ...'

'So do you.'

'... but they've done nothing. They talk very knowledgeably about Life and Sex and Politics and Religion and all that guff. But they've got it out of books.'

He lobbed his empty mug like a shuttlecock half across the room, into the metal wastebin by the coffee machine. A

group standing by the bin turned and applauded. (Why did he have to be so insufferably gifted, hand and mind, Ditto wondered.)

‘What’s worst,’ Morgan went on as if unimpressed by his skill or the applause, ‘they get it out of stories. Out of lit-er-arr-tewer.’

Ditto remained studiously unmoved.

‘And what’s so bad about literature?’

‘Literature is crap,’ Morgan said. ‘Fiction is, anyway. Novels and stories. It’s like that coffee they make us buy. A pretence. Ersatz.’

‘They ought to let us make our own,’ said Ditto, draining his mug.

‘You might say the same about the literature they force on us,’ said Morgan and chuckled.

‘Midgely says literature offers us images to think with. That its unreality has nothing to do with untruth.’

‘Cods,’ Morgan said. ‘Images out of a book make you think like a book. And old Midge can be a pompous ass. He should have retired years ago.’

‘That doesn’t diminish the truth of what he’s saying.’

‘No, but it does make it a lot less attractive.’

‘Get back to literature.’

‘I’d rather get back to Maureen Pinfold.’

Ditto conceded a smile.

‘You’re spoiling for a fight,’ he said. ‘Okay. I challenge you to prove literature is crap.’

‘You’re on,’ said Morgan, rubbing his hands with relish.

The klaxon sounded the end of break.

‘Damn it,’ said Ditto. ‘Can’t stay. Got a double period with Midge and Jane Austen.’

‘Pity. I’m free. But I’ll tell you what. I’ll jot down my Charges Against Literature—I mean fiction—and serve them on you at lunch.’

‘A subpoena I’ll enjoy discharging,’ Ditto said. ‘But why bother? Just tell me.’

'Innocent!' Morgan said. 'My Charges will give me just the excuse I need to trap Maureen Pinfold behind her typewriter in the commercial room. While she does me the favour of typing my Charges, I'll prepare the patient for dissection.'

'If this was a story,' Ditto said, 'you'd call that typecasting.'

Morgan laughed.

'Thanks for the compliment,' said Ditto, and left.

Gauntlet

CHARGES AGAINST LITERATURE

(I Mean Fiction)

Morgan v Ditto

I charge that:

1. Literature as a way of telling stories is out-moded. Done. Finished. Dead. Stories as entertainment are easier got from film and TV these days. (And what was Fiction ever about except telling entertaining stories?)

2. Literature is, by definition, a lie. Literature is a fiction. Fiction is opposite to fact. Fact is truth. I am only concerned with truth.

3. Novels, plays, poetry make life appear neat and tidy. Life is not neat and tidy. It is untidy, chaotic, always changing. Critics even complain if a story is not well plotted or 'logical'. (Life, logical!) They dismiss characters for being inconsistent. (How consistent are you, Ditto? Or me?) And they admire 'the literary convention', by which they mean obeying rules, as in ludo or chess. SO:

4. Literature is a GAME, played for FUN, in which the reader pretends that he is playing at life. But it is not life. It is a pretence. When you read a story you are pretending a lie.

THEREFORE:

5. Literature is a sham, no longer useful, effluent, CRAP.
As I said.
Q.E.D.

Morgan

Lunch Date

The morning over, Ditto joined Morgan in the dining hall.

An aftertaste of Jane Austen lingered in his mind as he sat down opposite his friend. Often he went only half-heartedly to Mr Midgely's literature class. (Morgan was right: Midge could be unbearably pompous.) But somehow the man always riveted his attention. Uncomfortably sometimes; he was never easy, never made concessions and could, when marking an essay, be ruthlessly cruel. Yet he brought to life every writer, every book he dealt with. He seemed to devour them, making them part of himself, and then he regurgitated them like spirits, alive, out of his mouth, by what he said and the way he read aloud. As though he were a magician, a medium even. No doubt about it, a great talker was Midge. Had the gift of the gab, Ditto's father said—all too often these days.

While Ditto pored over the Charges and inattentively ate his lunch, Morgan prattled on. Ditto only half listened. And Morgan's voice, in any case, was almost drowned in the cacophony of three hundred people all talking too loudly as they chomped their way in concert through lumpy mashed potato, soya bean protein disguised as hamburger, and watery cabbage swimming in instant gravy.

Ditto felt sustained against Morgan's diatribe by the lingering pleasure of his morning's work. Wasn't that very pleasure itself proof that Morgan's Charges were false? Could literature really be dead, finished, if it gave him, alive, such enjoyment?

But how, he wondered, could he unsettle Morgan's entrenched prejudice? Not by argument, that was sure. Morgan was bound to win, right or wrong. How then? By demonstrating his error? Perhaps. Be scientific, pragmatic. Morgan would certainly be moved by that. *Show* Morgan he was wrong.

But how?

'You're saying nothing,' Morgan complained when the pudding was served—mushy stewed apple resurrected from dehydration and soured in the customary glutinous custard. 'Here I am, hungry for argument to distract me from the offensiveness of lunch, and you've said nothing since arriving.'

'This menu of your Charges must be digested,' Ditto replied, jabbing his spoon at Maureen's immaculately typed page. 'And your comments on each savoury item have left me no room to say anything.'

'Then ruminate privately,' said Morgan, standing up and clattering his empty dishes into a pile. 'I've a first team practice now, a full afternoon of chemistry, and I've just fixed an evening mixing it with Maureen. So the Charges found their target. See you tomorrow. So long.'

Ditto Goes Home

After school, Morgan's *Charges Against Literature* tucked into his breast pocket, Ditto sets off for home. Mode of transport: a dilapidated bicycle once used by his father to carry him to work. The sprockets squeak at every third turn of the pedals.

Ditto's legs push him on rapidly, for the weather is grey, damp, cold. But his mind is tardy. Home is not an attraction, school a livelier, friendlier place these days. The principal cause of this unhappy state of affairs—so Ditto complains—is his father.

For two years an illness has stalled the man from working. Other afflictions have resulted. A depressed and moody atmosphere in the house. Irritability. A pinching of the family's income. (Ditto's mother has had to take a part-time job behind a grocery counter to supplement their income. She will not be at home when Ditto arrives. Ditto has had his pocket-money cut, he relying on windfalls from relatives and weekend work as a window-cleaner's mate in the streets round his own to provide his private needs.)

Most unsettling of all has been the souring relations between his father and himself. They have reached that pitch where neither can speak civilly to the other for more than a minute or two; more usually, sharp words and barely controlled insults serve as their daily discourse. It pains Ditto; he is certain it pains his father. But the hurt is apparently incorrigible.

Pedalling steadily towards his next parental encounter, Ditto's thoughts travel in another direction. He remembers a time before his father's illness, before, even, he himself had left primary school.

A photograph in Mother's box of family pictures, me thin as a lamp-post on the sprout, ten years old, holding a fishing rod and grinning triumphant at the camera, a dace the size of a stunted sardine hanging from the end of my rod, the dace wriggling still when the picture was snapped by a nearby fisherman who obliged so that Dad could be in the picture too and he is there behind me and to one side, my left side I think, right as you look at the picture ... Dressed in his work suit, grey and a bit baggy, but a starched white shirt collar and neat black tie, always neat your dad they used to say always just right, his hair still black then, grey now since his illness, and his face full still, moon round still, and used to shine blood-orange red after he'd had a few at the local in the evening or before dinner on Sundays, doesn't bother now, can't I suppose ... After the picture was

snapped he rubbed his hands together as though trying to crack the finger bones, and smiled to himself in the way he does, did, when pleased or proud, he was pleased and proud that day because I'd caught that dace my first and he had been there to see it and have the moment recorded, the capture captured, memorialized by the obliging fisherman.

That same day, yes that's right, just after slaughtering the dace with a sharp blow on its head we saw a snake swimming down the river its head above the surface like a submarine periscope. It turned just below us and writhed ashore entirely confident, not a jot of notice paid us who were standing there aghast agog me, my father, the nearby obliging fisherman, my camera still in his hands. An excited shouting boy came downriver with the snake, skipping along the bank crabwise, pointing at the riverborne reptile and bellowing Look, look, a snake, see, a snake. The minute the snake got ashore this boy and me we fell upon it hurtling stones and beating it to death in the end savagely—were we scared or were we hunting—and while we were assaulting it Dad said You shouldn't kill it. It's only a grass snake you know not poisonous ... Afterwards he was silent did not celebrate the occasion with wringing of hands and did not join this stranger boy and myself who persuaded the obliging fisherman to take another snap of the pair of us each with a finger and thumb in tentative apprehension holding the snake by its tail end dangling dead between us as we had been big game hunters in safari Africa and our grins are wide and fevered.

If not the snake why the dace? ... Next day I was disappointed, the snake was like a deflated balloon after a party, but a wrinkled memory of itself not exciting or fearsome any more nor wondrous neither, just empty, and pungent ... Dad reverently wrapped it in old newspaper and carefully placed it in the rubbish bin.

And said nothing.

Home

Now, thought Ditto, he'll still say nothing. Can he still?

The front door sneaked behind him, its phony pane of stained glass window trembling in the concussion. He hoped the glass would shatter one day and was experimenting with various forces of slam to find breaking point. At least when the window splintered the superfluous lead would serve at last some honest purpose and save the pieces from scattering.

Coughing from the livingroom, rich, liquid, gurgling.

A deadly liquefaction, Ditto thought. He's gargling in his own sputum.

He would have liked to climb the stairs at once to the seclusion of his room; but a sense of duty he was trying so far without success to corrupt forced him towards the livingroom. Inside, the air was greenhouse stuffy, smelt of rancid snot, stockinged feet and overheated television set. He tried not to breathe, but the only result was that finally he had to breathe more deeply still and savour the tangy odour. He sat down on the edge of the sofa, prayer-placed hands gripped between pressing knees.

'Home then,' the inevitable conversation began.

Ditto nodded, eyed his father for signs of prevailing mood, slumped there in his bulky armchair with its rubbed-to-the-skin arm ends, his feet resting on a footstool. At the other side of the fireplace the TV flicked its images but the sound was turned off. His father disliked TV sound; said it gave him palpitations, and that anyway he could imagine what was being said because nobody ever said much worth hearing.

'What you done today?'

Ditto resisted the impulse to reply not much. He knew too well the fractious talk that would follow.

'Jane Austen,' he said, his throat stiff from restraint.

'What did she have to say for herself?'

Ditto squinted for hint of jest behind his father's deadpan. None was intended, sadly.

'She's an author,' he said.

'O, aye?'

'A dead one.'

'Is she now? So you've been reading all day.'

'For exams.'

'What's she write about, this dead woman?'

'It would take too long to explain.'

A long glance; a smile, sour. 'You mean, you think I'm too thick to understand.'

Ditto knew better than to bite on that bait.

'How've you been?' he asked.

'Fairish. Cough's bad.'

'Had some tea?'

'Couldn't be bothered.'

'Like a cup now?'

A nod; small boy ashamed. 'If you're making one.'

While the kettle boiled, he standing over it, Ditto remembered another day.

He gave me a book that time, how old was I? About twelve, well I must have been twelve because it was my birthday and I had just started at sec school and was getting good reports. He was hand-wringing pleased, his lad was learning French and stuff that would help him get on in life. A proper snot I must have been. Am I still? ... And he gave me this book, who was it by? I don't even remember. Anyhow I thought it was some god-awful person, not to be seen reading it, and I said, I remember what I said if not who the book was written by, I said, not thinking, you don't when you're a kid like that, I said haughty, Thanks, Dad, but I can't read this. Why not? he said his face fallen. Well at school they tell us what's best to read and Mr Midgely, he said this writer wasn't very good, so I don't think I can read it you see, I said, right little snot ... And he just looked

and went out of the room, my room, my bedroom it was, I remember now, where they'd brought my presents early to please me and see me open them ... Mother looked daggers, one of those looks she used to promise me in shops when I was very little and not behaving, If you don't behave yourself I'll give you *such a look*, she'd say, well she gave me such a look then, that day, my birthday, and went after Dad. I don't remember feeling I'd said anything rotten.

Was that the start of it?

Ditto took the cup of tea to his father.

'Ta,' his father said. 'And I forgot. There's a letter for you. On the mantelpiece. Come after you'd gone this morning.'

Ditto took it. The handwriting he knew at once; knew too that he could not read this letter here, in front of his father.

'If you're all right then I'll go upstairs and do some homework.'

'Right-o,' his father said, an agreement heavy with accusation.

Ditto's Room

Upstairs. Front room of three-bedroom, semi-detached, late 1930s speculation-built house, half limey brick, half crumbling pebble-dash with bay-window on ground floor front room, the room below Ditto's.

Inside Ditto's room. Single bed with blue candlewick coverlet. Wardrobe, laminated dark oak on chipboard. Bookcase crammed with books, mainly paperbacks, case made by Ditto himself in woodwork lessons during first two years at secondary school, painted white and looking now to him a hamfisted construction for which, nevertheless, he felt a nostalgic affection. Old, real oak kitchen table, four feet by two, sanded to the bare wood (having once been

stained dark in days when virgin wood was vulgar) and sealed with varnish; now used as desk; found by Ditto languishing on a rubbish tip.

On desk: blotting pad, pocked with surreal ink stains, doodles composed mainly of abstract combinations of squares, triangles and hachured shading: product of many hours of brooding contemplation. Portable Olympia typewriter, present from parents last Christmas. Pot, unglazed, red-fired clay bought for five pence at summer fête at school, profits in aid of Oxfam, serving now as pen and pencil holder. Seventy-second scale model of Mark V Spitfire on perspex stand. Rubber pencil eraser; chipped wooden ruler; small calendar cut from last year's pocket diary and Sellotaped to a piece of stiffening cardboard.

The room walls: painted mat sand-brown, the ceiling mat white, the door and other woodwork gloss white. On the walls: pictures, clippings from magazines, posters, record sleeves, bookjackets. Ephemera in profusion. Mostly browned from age and sunlight (which achieved some sort of penetration between the hours of two-thirty and six, *post meridiem*).

The flat-faced window, two-sectioned. One section opening outwards gives view and vent on to arterial road leading to town (or, from, depending upon one's need), centre of town two miles distant, edge of town one mile. His father cannot tolerate noise of traffic, preferring duller, but larger and quieter back bedroom, hence this front room Ditto's. Window veiled by crisply starched net curtains, insisted upon by his mother (you never know what people outside might see inside). For night-time privacy, heavy chocolate-brown curtains drape the windows, floor to ceiling.

The seats. One kitchen chair, uncomfortable, at desk. One old, small, poorly stuffed armchair covered in synthetic fabric stretch-cover, bile-green, bought in Co-op sale and

looking it, with bright red loose cushion for highlight. If you slouched across the thing, sitting was bearable.

Letter

He laid the letter on his desk blotter, stood staring at it a moment, savouring its possibilities. Its arrival was entirely unexpected; not even hoped for.

Then, anticipation weakening him so much his hands trembled, he took off his school jacket and tie, heeled his shoes from his feet, unhitched his trousers and stepped out of them, took up the letter again carefully, threw the candlewick coverlet aside, and lay down on his bed.

While calming his breath, he gazed closely at his name and address in the unmistakable handwriting: fluent, firm, yet still echoing a child's awkwardnesses.

The letter, when he slit open the envelope with his right forefinger and eased the page out, was written on one side of a single sheet of school exercise paper. As he unfolded the page, a photograph fell like an autumn leaf on to his chest, picture side down. Deliberately he left it lying there while he read the letter.

Sibena
Wednesday

Hi!

This place is a DUMP - a hole,
a DEAD END. Why my crazy
parents had to move here I shall
never understand. There is one
main street about as exciting as
Noddyland, no cinema, no caff. As for
BOYS - I saw one yesterday. I said

Hello, he said Arrr

The scenery is quite nice.
But who wants lovely country
without a lovely boy to share it
with?

Which brings me to - **You!**
How art? And everyone at
the factory? Has Midge recovered
yet from the pleasure of my
leaving? And Morgan?

WRITE, please, soon

The enclosed is to remind
you what I look like.

Hugs -
Helen xxx

Picture

Her of course, the picture is of her, of course, in colour and my god it's her in swimsuit strip but not stripped enough, must have been taken last summer before she left while she was still here and I was lusting after her then and didn't attain what I dreamt of feeling too cloddish when face to face with her but she must have known ... mustn't she ... Morgan wouldn't have dithered the sod not he and she would have aided and abetted him I'll bet ... would she me ... those legs what legs what tits and a face to go with them a bit knowing though and maybe that's what held me back though it doesn't now you brute ... but this letter now maybe all the time she was waiting was wanting was after

it me me her after it was she me her me her legs breasts
skin face legs legs o legs her her her there there there ...
there ... there ... there ...

and it's gone all over my frigging shirt and my hanky's
in my pocket in me trousers on the frigging floor ... should
have thought ... prepared ... but didn't think ... didn't
expect her to send such a provocative picture the slut

But she is okay, could almost shoot off again just looking
at her, certainly could in the instant flesh instead of the
instant Kodak, and that's what I'd like, what I need, her in
the flesh and willing.

Does Morgan succeed in all he claims?

I bet he doesn't, most of it plain rodomontade. Randy he
may be but a rodomont he is too by nature. Though even if
he has had only one or even two of the adventures he
claims, his rodomontades are but decoration to the truth,
cos then he's had it, with his willy or nilly, and I haven't.

What a thing to have to admit at seventeen years plus.

Afterbath

Ditto rose from his rumpled bed, straightened the cover,
examined the scene for clues of his concupiscence, pulled
on his trousers, replaced his damply soiled handkerchief in
his hip pocket to dry in his fleshheat before discarding it in
the laundry basket, and sat at his desk, the better to frizzle
his eyes on the tormenting photograph while musing on his
unexpected letter and the inexperienced nature of his
being.

Suddenly, in the afterbath of his self-abuse, his room
seemed tediously dull, embarrassingly naive. There he was
for all to see who had gump to perceive. The inside Ditto.
Himself, as he would hide himself.

The furniture was all his parents' except for the rickety bookcase, rudely cobbled product of boyhood, and his desk-table, throwaway acquisition from a rubbish dump. The pictures on the walls, like his bookcase, were stuck there three, even five years ago: expressions of crazes and passions now vestigial only: birds from his nature-spotting days (circa 11 yrs), planes from his flying period (circa 12+), authors and singers going back into primary school years, and finishing up lately with Orwell, Lawrence, Joyce and Richard Brautigan (the authors), Fineguts, Razor, Towlake and Prinwell (the singers).

Even his books were half boyhood favourites, half recent purchases mostly inspired by Midge and bought more—could it really be the truth?—because he believed they were what he should read and possess rather than simply to please himself.

And that damned Spitfire arrested there mid swoop on its transparent stand, motion miniaturized and simulated and made safe for childish hands: another pubic hangover.

All toys, the whole lot, or received possessions of other people. Where among it all was he? Where was the present Ditto, the real, bloodflushed Ditto? WHO was the present Ditto? Was this he? This neatly precise collection of outgrown junk and second-hand propositions? Loads of it crammed into this little box of a room, yet featureless somehow. Absent in its presence.

Was that what Morgan was getting at?

Remembering Morgan, he took from his jacket the *Charges Against Literature* and laid the page out, open on his blotter. By its side he placed Helen's letter and her photograph.

They lay silent there. Together.

Words on paper cheek by jowl with colours in a pattern (a reflexion of light and shadow captured months ago).

Mute. Yet eloquent.

Witnesses come to accuse him.

Opponents in some unlooked-for battle.
Challengers.

Perturbed in the face of his documentary friends, Ditto went to the window, pushed aside the obscuring veil, and glared out at the street.

People and vehicles programmed for home ignored him.

Ditto's Mother Returns

Hello, love.

Hi.

You all right?

Sure. You?

Tired.

Course.

Been home long?

About an hour.

Your dad seems a bit low.

O?

Did you give him his tea?

A cup. All he wanted.

Have a chat with him?

A few words.

You haven't been rowing, have you?

No, not yet anyway.

You should talk to him more.

I had something to do.

He likes a chat with you.

Yes? You wouldn't think so sometimes.

It's his illness.

School all right?

The usual.

I wish you'd spend a bit more time with him.

Ma, you know how it is.

But you could try.

I do.

You know how ill he is.

I know.

It's the illness makes him ...

It's more than that.

Did you change your shirt this morning?

Can't remember. Think so.

Looks filthy.

Well, I'd better go down and get supper.

Anything I can do?

Lay the table, love, in a minute, eh?

Sure.

I'm worn out.

You do too much, Ma.

Somebody has to, love. But I'll manage.

Set-to at Supper

Father and I had had fights before. And frequently at meals because that was when we spent longest together. At other times, to save the conversation from turning fierce, I could leave the room, or he would feign occupation in a newspaper or the television, or, in desperation, in reading a book. But round the table at meals we were both trapped, literally facing one another, with Mother between, referee, judge, wearied peacemaker.

This evening the conversation began with the topic of my day, a sure-fire success for Father's satiric irony and my tetchiest self-defence.

I had, said Father with a sour chuckle, been lounging around all day talking about a dead writer. I think he intended only to be playful: to tease, not to wound. I sensed

the danger, of course; my antennae were by now well trained, and Father's chuckle not exactly deceptive. Mother sensed it too, and her quick glance as she handed me my plate pleaded for neutrality.

I wished no combat; my reply was likewise intended simply as a jest returned in kind. Was apparently received so. Father smiled; Mother laughed (too gustily however; hers was not a response to my wit but an attempt to ensure the conversation was taken at its lighthearted face value).

And now we reach that significant truth which detailed description would only obscure. Despite our mutual intentions, we—Father and I—were soon spilling emotional blood. Even as I snapped pert replies to his gutsy blows, I regretted—more, resented—doing so. But could not restrain myself. I did not mean what I said. I did not hate the man I said it to. I knew what I said to be clever but hurtful, witty but churlish. I knew this even as I spoke the wounding words. Nor did saying them give me any release. Unlike an explosion of temper, or an unlooked-for row, or some final show-down in which the event brings satisfaction, there was no easing of tension. Just the opposite. The longer we continued, the greater the tension became.

Father was bulged and red of face, squared to me and by the end near speechless with rage.

I felt like a twisted elastic unable to stretch any more.

Mother sat slumped, head bowed, defeated.

We reach this point every time we argue without interruption and it is this I resent more than anything, that the tension is a separating wall between us, Father imprisoned on one side and me on the other, and our only means of communication to shout insults at each other across the unyielding density. At least by that one exhausting means we each know that the other is still there.

Of all my father's assaults that evening, only one requires record. I was, he told me, not just lazy, not just ungrateful, not just loutish and arrogant. No. I was far worse: a twit. I knew nothing except from books, had learned nothing of life from living it. I was a ponce, a parasite. Clever, I might be, but, he concluded, using a favourite phrase of disparagement, if I were faced with a real life problem, I wouldn't know whether to have a shit or a haircut.

Perhaps this evening matters went further than usual; or perhaps I reached the edge of hysteria. Whatever the explanation, I suddenly saw what seemed to me the comic stupidity of this fruitless exchange. Here were a father and son, for no explicit reason, lashing out with sharpened words at each other across a table of neglected food, spectated by a tearful wife-mother. Is that funny, comical? Not so presented. That is why I so present it. But through my eyes at the time it appeared quite bizarre.

And I laughed. Laughed as I used to do when a boy and watching some slapstick farce on television. Laughed uproariously. Side-achingly. Uncontrollably.

Father, finding not unnaturally nothing whatever to laugh at, nothing in the remotest funny, glared across the burdened table at me a moment and then collapsed, unconscious, burying his face in his untouched sausage and mash.

Morning After

'You mean,' said Morgan, 'he flaked out, right there in his mash?'

'Indubitably,' said Ditto, passing off his slopping coffee as nothing worse than yet another accident of the inadequate plastic mugs.

'Where is he now?'

'Memorial Hospital. Mother in evidence and playing at nurse—of course.'

'Christ!'

'He had not arrived when I left.'

'You are tasteless, not to say unoriginal this morning.'

'Put it down to the coffee.'

'Or the shock.'

'Let's walk the perimeter.'

The day was a wrung-out dishcloth.

We stalked the fence that bounded the school playing-field for some yards before either of us spoke again.

Then, 'Is he very ill?' asked Morgan.

'Doctor says he'll be all right in a few days,' I said. 'But that we must realize this collapse is another of the inevitable steps in the deterioration of his health and an added complication.'

'You use language like a civil servant.'

'I use the medic's words exactly.'

'Whatever could have possessed the man?'

'A desire to avoid the words *disease* and *death*, I suppose. They aren't fashionable. Besides, nowadays doctors are civil servants.'

We had reached the sports shed where are stocked grass cutters (various) and equipment (assorted) used by the plodding groundsman. Against the south-facing wall of the shed (which happened also to be the wall hidden from view of the school buildings) was set a wooden bench upon which the groundsman himself usually lazed. Today he was not there.

Morgan and I sat.

'Do you want to talk about it any more?' asked Morgan.

Ditto glanced at his friend stretched at his side, back to shed, hands buried deep in trouser pockets, legs stuck straight out in front, feet crossed, and had a sudden intuition that explained something of Morgan's success

with others. Girls especially. He was unafraid to ask questions, to touch on raw nerves, but to ask and touch gently. It was a quality Ditto had not recognized in Morgan before and admired the more for wishing he possessed it himself while knowing he did not.

Morgan caught his glance and smiled.

'There is little to say,' said Ditto, turning his gaze on to the backs of the houses whose gardens ran along the other side of the wire-mesh perimeter fence. Were they being spied, he wondered, as others had been before, by one of the unoccupied occupants who would report to the Headmaster by telephone that two of his pupils were lurking behind the sports shed and why weren't they engaged more fruitfully in scholastic activity. 'I do know though that home is claustrophobic.'

'The suffocating womb.'

'Maybe.'

'There's an answer to that.'

Ditto took from his inside pocket a twice-folded page from a school exercise book. 'Which brings me to the business of your *Charges Against Literature*.'

'By what unlikely route?'

'I'll tell you,' said Ditto.

Ditto's Progress from Collapse of Father to Moment of Previous Conversation

Course of Events: Collapse of father. Summoning of ambulance. Father, accompanied by Mother and Ditto, rushed to hospital, where treated for heart attack. Ditto and Mother remain until Father reported 'out of danger', when, at 10.30 p.m., persuaded to return home. Mother sits up all night, unable to lie down or to sleep. Ditto goes to bed, sleeps fitfully, but wakes finally at 4.45 a.m. and cannot sleep again. So gets dressed, has tea with Mother, then sits in own room coping with Emotional State (see

below). During this time sees possibilities explained in *Some Truths about Ditto*, para 6, below. Writes *Replies to Charges*. Has breakfast, 8 a.m. Leaves for school. Sits through first two lessons distractedly. Meets Morgan for coffee during break.

Emotional State: From supper at 6.30 the previous evening till conversation with Morgan, suffers succession of assaults:

- SHOCK at father's sudden collapse;
- PANIC while waiting for ambulance;
- HORROR at sight of emergency treatment—efficient, fast, crypto-violent—leaving no doubt that father in danger or of prospect of father's imminent death;
- GUILT at his part in bringing on the attack;
- SORROW for same;
- RESIGNATION: What could he do now? What would be would be, etc;
- DESIRE to amend;
- RESOLUTION to effect amendment;
- RELIEF when told by telephone that father likely to recover, even if in no better state (and, so implied, perhaps even worse state) than before;
- NEED to talk to someone about it all: thus conversation with Morgan.

Physical Effects: Intense activity, followed by trembling debility, succeeded by aching coldness. Sleep, fitful. Early waking, feeling washed out, listless, discordant, nervy. Remained thus throughout morning, with aching tiredness slowly drowning the discordance till afternoon when body felt hot inside, cold out, and filleted.

Intellectual Effects: Mind at first unable to cope. A tumble-drier of pictorial images passing chaotically before inner eye. Psychedelic derangement. But after early waking,

begins to reassert some semblance of control. During this period, physically cold and uncomfortable, begins to see connections in clear-minded strobe, which become by breakfast a coherent rationale. In other words, understood matters before obscure to him. As if the events of the night have somehow 'blown off' meaning in his head. This understanding he composes into *Some Truths About Ditto* and *Document: Replies to Morgan's Charges*, in order to focus and record his thoughts, and give his hand some displacement activity, thus diverting himself from the horrors of the memory of the last twelve hours.

Some Truths About Ditto

In the past few hours a number of things have become clear to me. Reaching this understanding has been painful. It is not comfortable being honest with oneself. I have no intention of reliving the painful self-examination, nor of plodging about in a self-pitiful discussion about the things I have come to realize. Instead I shall simply enumerate the Truths.

1. I find myself both loving and hating my father. This appals me and I wish to do something about it. Yet I know that tonight's catastrophe is likely to be repeated—with even more terrible results—because neither of us can cross the barrier of our self-created antagonisms. We cannot, to be plain, talk to each other openly and honestly. And we both fear to show the love we have for each other. Why, I do not know. But struggling to know has decided me about:

2. I must somehow get away from home, for a few days at least. The distance is necessary to help me sort out where I am. More: what I am. I feel this as a bird, perhaps, feels the need to migrate. A compulsion. Do it, or die. It is as though home were making me impotent.

3. Which brings me to Helen. I know now, looking back, that the frustrations bred by her letter, my randy desire

unsatisfied, spawned the irritation which spoke at supper and consummated Dad's anger. I want to have it off with Helen, I know. But do I fear the act? If not, why have I not? Starkly, the truth: yes. A truth not easily told.

4. And here around me as I scribble this laundry list of emotional dirty linen are the symbols of my rag-bag being. Last year's toys, other people's gimcrack. What is mine? Me? My own? I feel like a caterpillar chrysalised and about ready to slough off the carapace, that imprisoning lumber from a former life. I will not be so contained. I will not hide among the detritus of other people's beings, or settle for childhood's pleasures. I want more than that. And now I know I must work my muscles to get free.

5. But I have been too cautious. Perhaps that is why I feel so constrained now, when Morgan (so it seems to me) does not. I have not experienced enough for myself. I must set about looking for new moments. Must widen my repertoire of living.

6. So I have devised a plan: Next week is half term, seven days in convenient gift. I shall go camping. That will get me away from home, give me the distance I need to begin sorting out myself and my father. And I shall look for experience, welcoming what comes—pure sensation if that is all that's going—for action, event, drama. I shall test my caution a little. And the main event shall be:

7. The sexy Helen. I shall invite her to go camping (ho ho) too, meet her half way, at mid-point, pointing at her mid, no doubt too, for an encounter with but one goal, one eye to bull. In short—though at pleasant length, I hope—I shall lay her, the first that ever shall be.

And all this shall be raw material to my other purpose: an answer to Morgan's mis-minded Charges.

Document

Reply to Morgan's Charges