BYRON EASY

JUDE COOK

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About the Book

24 December, 1999. Byron Easy, a poverty-stricken poet – half-cut and suicidal – sits on a stationary train at King's Cross waiting to depart. In his lap is a bag containing his remaining worldly goods: an empty bottle of red wine, a few books, a handful of crumpled banknotes. He is on the run. Not from the usual writer's trouble – money-trouble, soul-trouble – but special trouble, of a type you may have problems identifying with at first.

As the journey commences he conjures memories (painful and comic alike) of the recent past, of his roller-coaster London life, and of Mandy – his Amazonian wife – in an attempt to make sense of his terrible, and ordinary, predicament...

So what has led him to this point? Where are his friends, his family? What happened to his dreams? And what awaits him at the end of his odyssey north?

About the Author

Jude Cook lives in London. He studied English Literature at UCL, and was a musician and songwriter for the band Flamingoes. *Byron Easy* is his first novel.

Byron Easy

A Novel

Jude Cook

WILLIAM HEINEMANN: LONDON

To my mother and father

. . . I am not asleep.
I weep; and walk through endless ways of thought.

Oedipus the King
Sophocles

1

Negative Capability

MY NAME IS Byron Easy and I am sitting – or rather, sardined – in a tight table-constricted booth on a train at King's Cross, and, until a few moments ago, I was alone with my thoughts. I am pointing north, waiting to depart, and already dying for a cigarette. The fuzzy reds of Santa hats out on the bracing concourse remind me dismally that it's Christmas Eve. Oh, and not just any Christmas Eve, but, on a more dramatic level, the last one of the twentieth century; hence the atmosphere of millennial panic inside the carriage, the general feeling that the human race is reaching escape velocity. That it is dealing with last things. I must confess now that I am returning to my mother in Leeds – pathetic really, at this age, this altitude. And I'm trying to remember a lot of facts in order to forget them. Believe me, it's the only way. If you want to close the door on the past, *remember* it all first; otherwise it keeps returning, like the Christmas puppy discarded two streets away, or the breeze-blocked corpse that refuses to sink in the Lea Valley reservoir. Yes, I'm trying to remember it all, while waiting to depart.

You probably won't get much in the way of the train's interior or the wintry English countryside as it flashes unstoppably past, because they constitute the irrelevant details. The unrecallable facts. The minutiae of a journey.

The surface gloss. But I do have a story to tell. And I think it's for the best that I'm out of town over the festive break as I've begun to cut a sad figure in the taverns of north London, what with all the trouble a couple of months back. Not the usual writer's trouble – money-trouble, soul-trouble – but *special* trouble, of a type you may have problems identifying with at first. Anyhow, you can most likely imagine what a non-smoking carriage of a British Rail train resembles on Christmas Eve: the abbreviated space packed with shrieking saliva-mouthed infants; the solitary sons and their gold-brocaded luggage (their inevitable spectacles parked on waxy nose-bridges); the long-married grandparents deep in the tartan seats, sipping lidded styrofoam teas that dangle cotton tags. The tang of whisky. The parps of blown noses. The palpable and depressing sense of anticipation. You've all been here before – in the needling heat, the mince-pie air. Yeah, the faceless cast is all prepared for departure. Present and correct and Christmas hungry, Christmas randy; all with the common purpose of Yuletide repatriation, of being with their loved ones on the twenty-fifth of December.

However, today remains stubbornly the twenty-fourth of December, and there is still the journey to shoulder through; those memories to recall.

My name is Byron Easy. I am a writer sitting on a train; and I think about this shit way too much.

Of course, the following shit you just couldn't make up. Who would want to? This kind of shit is always present in people's lives, waiting to be recorded, dissected, embarked upon. Like a journey, I guess. Like the journey I am about to begin, half drunk and headachy at three-thirty on a winter's afternoon.

If I look onto the concourse, I can see a quick wind making ripples in what could be a puddle of urine. Also, a haggard pigeon spitting a cigarette butt. Further still, an apoplectic

traveller locked into a dispute with a ticket inspector. In other words, the usual troubled waters of the earth, which I fully intend to forsake.

I am trying to bear all this in mind when a human voice wakes me.

‘’Scuse me? Is anyone sitting there?’

A timid young couple, slightly blurred around the edges from all the wine I had to sink to board this train, enters my field of vision. The man, whose reedy Estuary vowels formed the question, is dressed in the dichromatic uniform of the trainee accountant. Maybe he is an accountant. Maybe they both are, and spend their Friday nights in Pizza Hut discussing the small progresses made on their investment portfolios. His avidly defiant eyes gaze down at me: an estate-leer, once learnt never eradicated, like the rude glottal stops. His forehead, a bubbling Icelandic spa of acne, gleams under a hairline itself largely a strip of exposed scalp due to an over-application of wet gel. He stands in prickling anxiety of my reply. I must look drunk, or slightly dangerous. If he were a poet he would adduce that I had not loved the world, nor had the world loved me. But it is unlikely he is a poet, not with hair like that. Maybe it’s my two days of stubble and florid colour that cause him to hover there uncertainly. Maybe it’s my clenched fists, which lie taut-skinned and raw from the cold on the bare Formica. I should mention again that this churl is flanked by his partner, a bony, bloodless woman who wears a crinkled A-line skirt and a complexion as pale as a sheet of writing paper. The man’s face twitches slightly. There is a lengthy silence; his question still poised and resonating. I have faced him down. I note that his expression has modulated into the counterfeit smile reserved for the job interview. My blood-drunk eyes survey his dripping scalp, then meet his stare. I growl, ‘Is it still raining out?’

The couple exchange rapid, nervous glances. He doesn’t get it. He thinks I’m mad. With a strangled timbre, he

repeats his question.

‘I mean, are they taken, mate? The seats?’

A theatrical pause before I relent.

‘Nah, you go ahead.’

There is a tangible gust of relief; a relaxation. They make to sit down opposite me. Rapidly contorting my face into an expressionless mask, defiant of every conversational opener known to man, I allow myself a long sigh through the nostrils.

Oh well, I always was a pushover.

My name is Byron Easy, and I must never get my hands on a gun.

Why? Because I would blow my own head off, that’s why. Not somebody else’s head, but my own horny, just-turned-thirty, drinker’s head, with its retreating hairline that seems to be constantly saying to Time: ‘Okay, brother . . . you win.’

To be frank, just lately this is an action I visualise performing once, twice, three times a day. Oh, and once more before I fall asleep at night, like some kind of morbid nightcap. The unwanted, *unwarranted* vision upon closing the eyes: the clip slammed chunkily into the stock, the hammer coaxed back, the short journey made by the barrel to the back of the mouth, then . . . then blackness, like a suddenly extinguished television screen. Not even a sound to accompany the shot, because there wouldn’t be a sound. You would go before you heard the sound. Like the soldier says, you never hear the bullet that kills you. No, there would be no bang and nothing more to see for ever and ever, amen. Although that, I suppose, depends on what you believe.

Is this unusual, or do you harbour the same reckless, annihilating impulses? They say all great men have been heroes, conquerors and cuckolds in their time, but I can only be certain I belong to one of those categories. That’s not to say I believe I’m great – if I am, it will be of the variety that

is unwillingly thrust upon one. Maybe I am more gravely ill than I at first suspected. But I am not making things up, unlike some I could mention.

My name is . . . A note about the light: the carriage has, predictably, eye-tiring fluorescent strips blinking invisibly at two-hundred frames per second. This will ensure at least a third of the passengers will be nodded-out over sports pages and last-minute Christmas cards by the time we trundle into Doncaster. By then, of course, it will be dark; the white neon tubes will paradoxically appear to originate from the station platform in the rain-dotted, reflective windows. All very misleading. I know it will be dark because it is dusk now. A London dusk of measly rain; hostile and blade-cold, with red stricken clouds clinging low to a black horizon. I know they will be asleep because I will be awake; deep in my own abyss of thought.

Why plumb such an abyss, you may ask? What could precipitate such an urge? Well, the events of last night, for a start. Though it might be some time before I feel ready to share them with you. The plain facts don't do them justice. I spent the majority of the evening drinking champagne at the house of an old friend – my oldest friend, in fact. Sounds great, does it not? I can still picture the jewel-bright bubbles, their inevitable effervescent journey to the meniscus; still hear the soft burr of Rudi's familiar voice above the discordant clanking of metal or tin from outside . . .

Then something occurred that changed everything; that accounts for my current state of disturbed, amped-up intensity; of dangerous melancholy; of near-clairvoyance. This state had its genesis in the small hours, and was still going strong this morning, which for me fell between eleven forty-five and midday. Waking unshaven under my coat, on the sofa of my shared flat, magnesium light penetrating the blinds, I decided to skip breakfast. Grim laughter, a kind of

debauched chagrin, chased me around the room as I gathered my meagre possessions. The gloomy egoist is always at his best in the morning, so I was relishing my strange mood of vindication, achievement, fear. After my second or third glass of lunchtime Rioja (straight from the bottle, so I'm guessing here) I began to pack. Not that I am wealthy in worldly goods, but I managed to strip it down to the bare essentials. All my leather shoulder bag contains – all I have under the sun – is a notebook, a Leeds street-finder, the now empty bottle of red, a toothbrush, a wad of crumpled fivers in a Jiffy bag (both courtesy of Rudi), and a change of socks (why socks and not underwear isn't coherently explicable at the moment).

Oh, and a single pamphlet of poetry. Its author? Me, actually.

Well, I did declare that I was a writer. And one has to cite proof for one's assertions. The story of my *succès d'estime* is too circuitous to discuss here, suffice to say that I have a single copy of it left, the one I carry with me now – like a talisman of dormant talent. Taking it from my bag, I hold it to my nostrils. It smells faintly of cat litter. The very sight of it troubles my heart. They say train journeys often precipitate poetry, and, before one knows it, the past. Both require time to do them justice. Well, for once I have time on my hands: the nasal announcement that disturbed my thoughts a moment ago informed us that, due to a person under a train at Stevenage, we were subject to 'a substantial delay'. So for the foreseeable future I'm going nowhere. And I plan to do a fair amount of writing, along with the obsessive acts of recollection – the industrial amount of thinking I intend to do before my inevitable end; my long-anticipated *felo de se* . . .

Don't believe me? Just watch me now, as Bowie muttered at the end of 'Star'.

The celebrity psychologists state that pain only lasts a second – that it's up to us to decide whether we want to

perpetuate it by morbid reflection. But the pain of the last two months, caused by the *special* trouble I mentioned, has begun to feel chronic. I have decided, at last, to put an end to it. I just haven't settled – in the manner of famous cowards – on the best method yet.

Think I'll take a quick look around.

Hey, I was wrong. My company isn't faceless in the least. I am surrounded by more arresting physiognomy than you would encounter on a tier of a football ground. A Hogarthian mob in catalogue clothes. And all so purposeful, so alert . . . There's always a moment during a good afternoon drunk when you become vividly aware that, all around you, people are operating *life* soberly. They're conducting phone conversations without speaking into the wrong end of their mobiles, or gangwaying to the Gents without tripping over, or turning the pages of a newspaper without blacking adjacent eyes. It's a great moment, like putting your contact lenses back in.

A door hisses open to the rear of me, allowing in a blast of fridge-cold air, dust and the smell of fried onions. The hair in my nostrils prickles, my eyes weep from their corners . . . then the warmth is mercifully restored. If I were a philosopher I would ruminate upon the idea that the cold is now the past moment, the dead moment; whereas this is the present moment, the living one. That 'now' seems to hold me transfixed in the glare of its paradoxical headlights – how can anything past be happening 'now'? But there is too much stimulation for such inquiries. A passenger shuffles by, his toilet-cleaner cologne smarting like a smack in the face. Well, that's certainly woken me up.

Newly and thrillingly aware of the teeming variety inside the carriage, I take out my black notebook, one of many that I never leave the house without. It falls open to reveal the skeleton of a poem, in spidery longhand, on the facing

page. The Accountant Couple glance away as if I've just produced pornography. Verse? Scandalous! What did they expect, a ledger? I uncork my favourite fountain pen only to witness their ears virtually humming with embarrassment. Fuck 'em – I've always written in these things, especially on trains. And one day I will throw them all on the bonfire, like all good writers should. I commence with a short, if adjectivally challenged, description of my fellow inmates.

Fat, thin, tall, short . . .

Ah, it's no good. There's too much to take in – an overwhelming tidal wave of diversity in search of a seat; an anthropologist's gang-bang. Pascal said only stupid people thought everybody was fundamentally alike; referring of course to the interior, not the deceptive carapace we spend our lives lugging around. Giving up, I let the pen drop and simply stare. The man who just bustled past, letting in the cold air, turns out to be a priest; the egregious white band like a pure strip of snow between his black cassock and triple chin. Beyond him there are frowning fathers and slickly hipped girls (all undoubtedly younger than me); patrolling lads in knee-length Saturday night pulling-shirts; giggling sari'd Bengalis; a pair of Upper-Street Sapphic sisters; a septuagenarian dressed entirely in blue denim; a supermarket-shoed fashion-catastrophe bending under the logged and straining luggage racks (O, the varieties of luggage!). Then there are the cuff-linked ex-aviators; the desperate frauds and baldies; trophy wives next to unspeakably smeared infants; faded neckerchiefed blondes, their crisp-packet faces trowelled with slap; Suit-and-Ties reeking from work; growling misfits; teenagers with heads square as televisions; girls with intelligent continental mouths who will incongruously disembark at Grantham; cheeky mites with gurning fissogs; wind-blasted aunts; solemn-jawed Christians smelling of new laundry; hippy mums in earth-brown rollnecks; acne-beasts; sunlamp

survivors; once-successful Lotharios chinking under bazaars of catalogue-bought gold . . .

I pick up my pen.

Waistcoated wankers, passage-staggerers, nippers and grippers, seal-bark coughers, self-pitying snifflers, hawkers, tutters, scratchers, groaners, verbal diarrhoeics, carol-hummers, dribblers, tongue-lollers (the proximity of all this hot blood!), balls-rearrangers, piles sufferers, dye-jobs, stroke victims, syrup-apologists, recently suntanned showoffs, cold sores, frowners and debt-drowners, blackheads and smackheads, sad Jacks and six-packs, Johnny-no-mates and fashion plates, cancelled beefcake, vacuum-eyed jailbait, bitter-guts, sweating gluttons, pee-desperate ten-year-olds, furtive scribblers, diddlers, con-men, strongmen and me.

Bosh! The cornice of a suitcase on its way to the angled luggage racks scores a direct hit on my right temple. A gross lardball in a rippling, seething tracksuit is leaning monstrously into my personal space; sharing his body odour – like an olfactory festive gift – with seats thirty-seven to forty-two. He looks oddly familiar. He looks gross. And he certainly hasn't noticed that he's injured a fellow human. Pain, like thumb-pressure to the actual brain itself, enters the right side of my face and vibrates along the lines of my jaw and skull. In clinical close-up I watch the man's T-shirt reveal a vast, pubicly forested space-hopper belly as he berths his case. Then, with a burp, he rejoins his two incredibly bolshy and stupid-looking children further down the aisle, pausing only to clip one of them over the crown.

I huff and I puff and feel a prickling in my nuts. Oh, you shithouse! Oh you clumsy— If it wasn't Christmas (and he wasn't bigger, badder, exponentially *more* than me) I would've definitely called him a . . .

'Kant!'

The man turns in full movie slow-mo to face me. Again that familiar snarl. Oh dear. I've done it now. The word, as a

word so often will when you're drunk, just slipped out.

'What did you call me?'

I see at once that his face – lopsided with venom and ovoid under a lawn of bristle – has murder written across it. As he advances, I become aware of the Accountant Couple, now crimson with shame and stress, physically diminishing in their seats; probably wishing they'd cabbed it or chartered a helicopter to Leeds instead. With a burger-waft of bad armpits, the big man is once again back in my personal force field, closer (if that were humanly possible without him actually *penetrating* me) than before. His deceptive height really is something of a phenomenon: taller at a distance, up close he is Danny DeVito as Napoleon. I see that his eyes are deranged with afternoon alcohol. I note the mottled blue of a swift tattooed on his grilled neck. Then my voice appears from nowhere.

'I didn't call you anything. I said *don't*.'

The man's children watch this terrible, thrilling scene like two orphans on a sinking ship. It is surely something they have witnessed before. Just daddy doing his stuff.

'That's not what you said . . .' The big man's voice is graphically deep, an Essex gravel pit of menace and harm. Our stares are now locked like antlers.

'I meant don't hit him. The kid. I was hit when I was a child . . .' (I think the pale woman opposite coughs at this sentence, shifting her weight to the other bony buttock) '. . . and look how I turned out.' He remains impassive. For some reason he doesn't seem impressed by this. I try another tack. 'Okay, I'm lying. I've got Tourette's, which makes me shout out the names of dead German philosophers.'

Hopeless, I know.

An electric pause. Then he leans forward, the tracksuit scrunching in the bends of his limbs. Poking an oil-stained finger at my third eye (almost touching it) he says this to me:

‘You – fuck nuts – *you*, I never want to see again. *Capiche*?’

I nod vigorously, hypnotised by how long these moments always seem to take. Then he’s off, down the carriage to corral his children; a thousand eyes feasting on my face. Glancing up at the Accountant Couple, I give them my best, my largest smile. They look down instantly at the scratched Formica, as if it held information of great importance.

Ah, well. At least it’s taken my mind off the past for a moment and forced me to focus on the journey. And that can only be a good thing. As with any journey, one begins at Point A, things occur (and the really significant things are always thoughts, memories, insights, terrors – not the quotidian narrative of events), and eventually one arrives, some time later, at Point B; usually with fizzing limbs and hospitalising indigestion. The mental journey is always richer, for it contains recollection, fascination; though not much tranquillity in which to contemplate them. Despite the much-vaunted psychopathic state known as ‘living in the present’, one doesn’t want to lose the precious stones of the past. One doesn’t want to forget them, to see them drop away through the mind’s vast sieve of worthy and unworthy keepsakes. There they go: the good and the bad; the treasured and the negligible; the love and the hate. One becomes a loving curator of a self-important myth. A hero in one’s own epic drama. An uncommon desire, maybe, but then these are uncommon times. Above all, one wants to remember before one forgets, before one jumps to faulty conclusions. To remember in order to comprehensively understand all one has undergone, or endured. Quick now! Remember, record, embark. Quick now, before they go; before it’s too late.

It always takes something like this – present pain, present smell, present occurrence – to fix one firmly in the horrific Now. Of course, Now is not where I’d want to be if I had the

choice. If I could be anywhere in time I'd be anywhere but Now, with its tiresome demands and shrieking infants and blade-cold dusks and suitcase-strikes – that stuff that masquerades as real life but isn't really; that great battalion of distraction ranged against one with its weapons drawn at any given moment of the day. Real life always seems to occur in the past, qualified by perspective. Existence is a mosaic of moments. And one wants to pin down those moments, those memories, like fat-torsoed moths under milky glass, as if one were the soul's lepidopterist. The present, meanwhile, is still too hot to the touch, too raw, too *evolving* for us to call it real. Can you honestly say, gentle reader, that what's going on around you now is real? Or is it the projection of some giant celestial panopticon; God's dream. Perhaps, come New Year's Eve, we will all find out. Overrated, to say the least, is the Now. Living in the present? For people with too much time on their hands, if you ask me. But, for a split-second, being whacked in the face took my mind off her (thank you, Tracksuit Man, and Happy Christmas).

Oh yeah, *her*. In case I forget to mention it later, this half-drunk writer has recently separated from his wife. From his half-Spanish wife of three years. That was the special trouble I was telling you about earlier. The exploding of lawful, awful wedlock. Not unusual for a modern marriage, I suppose. We met when the present century was in its staggering, senile nineties (and it still is, of course, for a couple of high-anxiety days). Yes, we met, fell in love, got hitched, and somewhere along the line became separated. Some vital component was lost. The wife should really understand this better than me, what with her career of bereavement following her mother's death, but something tells me she doesn't understand any of it; not one little bit. Christ, three years of marriage! Three years of microscopic London flats, of shouting and ducking airborne crockery, of sitting opposite each other during a million sweltering

meals. All those carrots, those carbohydrates, those trawler-nets of spaghetti, paddy fields of rice, lakes of gravy, Thameses of tea . . . Where did those evenings disappear to? What did we talk about during them? And then there are the friends and family, people who I will never see again, people she is probably scornfully indoctrinating with lies as I sit here, gassy and humiliated on this bristling train seat. People such as her father, vertiginous and patrician Ian Haste with his air of past financial indiscretion, who never thought much of me anyway and had me fingered as a penniless loser from the start. Or her dizzy old bat of a grandmother – Montserrat, monstrous Montserrat – with her beaked Castilian nose; her melanotic skin the texture of beige silk, a result of going to bed every night with her face slicked in olive oil. I can still hear her haranguing voice in our many kitchens: '*Ay, ay, ay! Qué pasa? Qué pasa?*' The outrageous pronouncements that needed delicate translation: '*No hay coño que no está en venta*.' Her! Still going strong at eighty-four; still amoral, manipulative and selectively deaf at that indecent age! And then there's Leocadia, the long-suffering aunt who had to look after the old war-horse. Leocadia, Leo for short; withdrawn, subjugated, meek; the veins on her hands distended and liquorice-coloured from years of domestic service. Leo with her spick-and-span stone-floored apartment by the aromatic Mediterranean where we spent our honeymoon. Yes, they're all hating me now, in that uniquely proud Spanish way. Hating me for that zenith of sin, that ultimate deviation of being a husband who couldn't provide financially, who didn't sire grandchildren . . . As for the others, the others were my friends too, but I suppose they'll cross the street or jump behind parked cars to avoid me now. Antonia and Nick, for instance, the swinging scenesters who were our closest friends; a pair of sixties throwbacks with the finery of their buckled clothes; their amnesiac, sybaritic lifestyle. Nick with his gracious limbs and foppish cuffs, who tried so hard to

interest me in the names of footballers over pints of his beloved Guinness. Or Antonia, who grew up on a farm; a heavy-chested *naif* with her intensely nurturing nature; her rustic hands and lactic, silk-screen complexion . . . And then there's the wife herself: tall and physically intimidating, with her charcoal brows and centrifugal radiance (and who, according to her osteopath, could have grown to over six feet if a curvature of the spine hadn't lowered her shoulders into a witch-like arch before the age of ten). Yeah, the wife – another ghost I will never see again, unless it's within the dusty cell of the divorce court. I can picture her now if I close my tired eyes: the wife with her white plastic-rimmed shades, her showy snakeskin knee-boots, her cobalt ring. Her unforgettable pupils, like droplets of ink on a chestnut. The wife with her many coats, her many cats. The wife and her many ailments that mysteriously came and went when it suited her. The wife at full throttle with her Pearl Harbors of vitriol, her dictionaries of prejudice. The wife. *Her*.

'Welcome to Great North Eastern Railways. The restaurant car will be serving hot tea and coffee, fresh soup, gourmet sandwiches and a range of crisps and snack products.'

The nasal, infiltrating whine snaps me out of my lamentable meditation. All around people are hoisting travel bags; marshalling wallets of Christmas cash. Then a nauseating list: *'Hot baguettes with fillings of roast beef, roast chicken, roast turkey and stuffing; toasted bacon and tomato sandwiches plus a wide range of home-made cakes, biscuits, pastries, hot drinks as well as a fully licensed bar. The buffet trolley will also be passing through Standard Accommodation. Thank you – we look forward to seeing you and hope you have a pleasant journey.'*

Standard Accommodation. That must be me.

I close my notebook, re-cap my pen and turn to the rain-sullied window. We are still stationary. Outside, under the cathedral-dome of an umbrella, a woman is kissing her lover

goodbye. I notice immediately that she is crying; her generously lashed lids blinking every time the wind sends a gust of drizzle her way; the long runnels forming kohl-black roads in her foundation. She looks small, forlorn, sinister even, among the equidistant lamp posts and agoraphobia-inducing concrete walkways of the platform. A dark, gale-blasted survivor of some terrible saga of love; one purse-like hand pursuing the folds of her lover's overcoat. Why do women cry so much? The world must hurt women more than it hurts men for them to cry so much. Her face turns upwards now to receive the last kiss, the important kiss, the one that needs to hold the correct note of gravity, of poised farewell, of future intent. Then her man turns rapidly and walks towards the glowing interior of the train. In close-up, his face is creased and orange; reflecting the sad ambers of the dusk lights, the bullying wind. He's hunched, swarthy, slick-haired and dry-eyed – just the type, I note abysmally, that the wife used to go for.

Enough! Enough about *her*. I had better tell you about me first while there's still time, while it's still light. We'll get to *her* later. To understand me you'd better know something about my mum and dad. Yes, that David Copperfield crap. Because these are confessions, right? You might have already identified the slightly hysterical tone, rich with grievances. St Augustine, Rousseau, Philip Roth – those whinging bastards all had a record to set straight. It will come as no surprise, then, to learn that I am an only child, the only child of Sinead and Desmond Easy (Des for short). I have a half-sister, born when I was eleven, but she can wait. My father, who also suffered the trauma of early baldness always – to my mind at least – had a strange way of looking at me. He would stare under the heavy, shrouded lids of his eyes, as if squinting, or trying to figure out a particularly tricky equation. Apparently, I just didn't add up. Or balance out. In fact, he had a brilliant mathematical, or rather scientific, mind. Unfortunately, he instilled in me a hatred of

the sciences by his very proselytising of them as academic subjects. ‘God is dead,’ he would proclaim while burning lamb chops under the grill in the white house where I grew up. ‘And science will prove it – probably in your lifetime. So stop wasting your eyesight on poetry.’ Precociously, I would answer that, for God to be dead, he must once have been alive. My father’s squint would then become even warier. His path in life, his golden route to the threadbare carpet of *his* early thirties and beyond, was as unsystematic, as unscientific, as could be. Evacuated from the blighted terraces and V2 craters of Barnet during the war, he grew up on the Isle of Wight. I’ve often wondered whether those years on an island, surrounded by incurious sheep and paedophiles, weren’t the crucible for his strangely insular and reactionary views later in life. I can still hear his pedagogic voice holding forth to a schoolfriend who had just discovered Marxism: ‘There are either winners or losers in this life, and giving your money away is the sure route to becoming the latter!’ I remember asking him whether he considered Gandhi a loser, only for him to reply that Gandhi didn’t count on the Isle of Wight after the war: the only things that did were the price of butter and the availability of primitive condoms. He certainly made me never want to visit the place, the Isle of off-White – a chunk of Great Britain that, once detached, should have just sunk quietly into the Channel, volunteering, as it were, its own superfluousness. At seventeen, and very pleased with himself (with an ingenuous self-confidence that never left him his whole life), he won a scholarship to Cambridge to study chemistry. The old grammar-school boy-at-sea-in-an-ocean-of-toffs scenario. From this pinnacle, it was downhill all the way – on graduating he found a post as a rank-and-file research chemist for a French laxative and cosmetics company based in Bedfordshire called Diatrix, where he remained until . . . You may have noticed I’m talking about my father in the past tense, as if he had already joined the

Dead, those watchers and hand-wringers on their plinths of stone. But he's not dead. I just haven't spoken to him for ten years. Or rather, we haven't spoken to *each other* for ten years. The feeling, and it makes me short of breath and bewildered to admit it here, is woundingly mutual. I know where to find him. He knows where to find me. But neither of us *have* found the other, for over a decade.

A psychiatrist could probably make much of this, along with the head-blowing-off daydream (which isn't my only persistent hallucination, I should stress. I have another – of solvency and spiritual calm – involving a spacious timber-floored flat, its bookshelves rich in reference works, its walls punctuated by framed charcoal sketches; a piano, upright or grand, I don't have a preference; and the faint smell of lavender pot-pourri in the immaculate, startling can). Although psychoanalysis, it has to be said, so often misses the point – the subtext to many of its questions about parents seems to go something like: *What were you doing hanging around with a father like that in the first place?* As if anyone ever had a choice.

But my father was, is, an intelligent man. After his emigration to Sydney, Australia, with a new wife, I began to miss the stimulation of his bookshelves (not him, you note, but his bookshelves – why, why, why? What am I that I can be so frigidly monstrous when it comes to the central relationship of my life?). My formative memory is of an entire ranged wall in our living room bearing texts on at least twenty runnered shelves. An odyssey, a magical orange-grove for a child; a gift. As I grew older I could see that some of the erudite works looked suspiciously unread, their spines pristine and uncreased; also that his taste, in his fifties, had come to rest on dry historical accounts, political philosophy, along with biographies of prominent chemists and right-wing politicians. The roman candles of literature (the Lawrence, the Joyce, the Kerouac, the Yeats) had been consigned to the dustbin marked 'deluded youth'.

(Though you had to search for this dustbin. The exciting books were often hidden *behind* the volumes of European history, in piles or stacks – concealed like pornography.) But he *did* have books. Books that are probably the cause of all my present heartache and pain; though one doesn't choose the inviolable facts of one's upbringing, good or bad.

Yes, an intelligent man, and sure proof that you can read all the great works of literature and still be as confused about your moral and spiritual life as the dustman who devours the *Sun* every day as if it were *The Book of Common Prayer*. And maybe this is at the core, the rotten root, of why we haven't communicated since I ceased to be a teenager. You see, at that age, Desmond Easy personified the perils, the folly, of the man who has made firm metaphysical conclusions one way or the other (there being no persuasive evidence in either direction, as any fule kno). A lot depends on what you believe, of course; where you stand vis-à-vis the afterlife. In his case, two thousand years of philosophical debate could be distilled into a simple sentence: there was no God. A committed atheist probably from before birth, I would feel corroded, soul-contaminated, every time I endured another spleen-filled rant about how our only destination was the avid soil and its gleeful worms; or about getting and spending and the greasy world of commerce; or the importance of chemistry as an A-level subject. That's not where my head was at, not in the least. I was all for keeping my options open. When the bullet enters my brain (as it most certainly will), I'd like to believe in the slimmest possibility that the Big Man Upstairs will be there, shaking his fist, cursing that I'd arrived too early. And when I engaged my father in argument, I would witness his divorce-injured spirit cowering as I expounded (ludicrously, at that age!) the doctrines of Platonic transmigration, of Lawrence's soaring and solipsistic life-belief and the lyric (largely stolen from the French Symbolists, I was later disappointed to discover) to The Doors' 'Break on Through to the Other

Side’. So we agreed to leave it. We agreed to differ. For ten years thus far. The bond cracked twixt son and father.

My mother, however, was a different kettle of ballgames – a free spirit, but most tangibly different in her physical characteristics. While my altitudinally challenged father was always fighting a tendency to flab in the upper arms and was bald as an acorn by the time he reached thirty-five, Sinead Mary Maguire (to use her stunningly beautiful and evocative maiden name) was an elegant raven-haired head above the crowd. Literally. By seventeen she was a giraffe-like five foot eleven. The daughter of an Irish miner displaced to Leeds in the 1930s scramble for work; early photographs demonstrate just why half of male North Yorkshire spent much of its spare time in garages repairing cars they’d crashed while straining to catch a glimpse of her on the street. In one, taken when she was just eighteen, her mathematically perfect legs curl from under a pleated schoolgirl skirt and end in those juvenilely-buckled court shoes that young women wore in the fifties. Atop this, her tiny waist is overfolded by thin but capable hands, which for some time now have tragically borne the distorting tree-branch knobbles of arthritis. Then her face: an oval of health and intuition divided by a long fluted nose; bearing a mouth so heavily lipsticked that it appears black in the creased monochrome of the picture. The only disappointment, in the photo, are her grey eyes – smudged and indistinct, in real life they were the colour of rain. Finally, her hair: a straight burnished cascade of witch-like ebony, mirroring the hue of her permanently raised, questioning eyebrows. A dark beauty, then: someone in whom life’s vital appetites vibrated strongly – one of those rare Southern Irish women who seemed to have bypassed the gene pool of freckles and carroty hair and been awarded the full set of night-black attributes reserved for Gothic heroines.

So why did she end up with Des Easy? Well, that’s simple. My mother was, for a long while, a terrible judge of men.

After the dismal, rationed privations of her teenage years (bananas something seen only in films until the age of sixteen), and a tragic accident in which a faulty gas main killed her mother and much-younger brother at a Butlin's holiday camp, she found herself teaching nursery-school children the alphabet using colourful wooden representations of letters. A brief affair later with the married headmaster, which scandalised the entire Leeds suburb where the school was undistinguishedly situated, and she found herself with the same primary-hued wooden letters at a school in Lewisham, with slightly older, but infinitely more vicious, more worldly, more feral children. She stayed for ten years.

It was in this demolition-scarred no-man's-land of south London that, one night, she attended a party thrown by graduate teachers in a Habitat-infested flat. That providential evening she arrived late, finding the hashish-demented revelry in full swing. Twenty minutes in, and her gaze fell on a shortish, balding man wearing square clothes, grappling with a 45 rpm single held by the host, himself resplendent in beatnik black. The two were face to face, eyes bulging.

'I don't care if they're the latest thing,' the shortish, balding man protested, 'it's those unbearable voices and that thud, thud, thud – the tyranny of the beat!'

A foreign female voice (of the erotic type always present at parties) offered, 'It ish only rocks schmoosic. Don't ve so anal!'

'Yes, Des,' said the host, now slightly calmer, 'this ain't your party – and we'll have the bastard Beatles if I say so.'

A cheer went up from the few interested souls who had overheard this deeply embarrassing exchange between two men in their late twenties.

'Here. Vivaldi. *The Four Seasons*!' said Des, desperately. 'I'm sure if we did a quick poll of the room, if we put it to the vote, then Vivaldi would come out on top.' A sweat – for it

was a broiling summer night in the mid 1960s, with all the sash windows thrown open to the static, dust-flavoured air – had appeared on the unappetising dome of Desmond Easy's head. 'Think of your neighbours! You've come close to being slung out already . . .'

At this point, the single over which the two men were still tussling snapped crisply down the middle and a disapproving groan could be heard around the room. This seemed to decide the matter. And so the old Venetian had his way. Soon the cramped quarters swelled with the rarefied pizzicatos and tiptoeing melodies of 'Summer'. The cackles and chatter resumed, escaping out to the bewildered street below.

It also decided something in the vertiginous Goyaesque beauty holding a lonely glass of Cinzano that was Sinead Mary Maguire. Here was a man, she mused, with whom she could fall in love; a man of sensibility, intellect ('slung out' – she loved that! And, over the years, it would become a phrase she would grow to hate more than any other on earth). Here was a man not afraid to give his opinion, to fight for it (again, a quality that would eventually drive her to paroxysms of Irish distraction). Above all, he sported leather patches on the elbows of his diseasedly brown corduroy jacket. This, for her, denoted adulthood. She had finally arrived. Sure, he was almost shoulder-height to her and she had seen newborn babies possessed of more hair, but in that split-second . . . (that manful struggle over the record, representing the battle between two extremes; of high culture with low, of black rollnecks with professorial corduroy, of Ringo Starr with Vivaldi – plus the sexy 'snap!' made by the vinyl in the stultifying night) . . . in that split-second something had been decided: here was the man who would father her child.

And that child was me.

They married within the year and moved first to the blighted satellite town of Luton, then to neighbouring

Hamford on realising that a concrete post-nuclear wasteland of piss-filled underpasses (and where, indeed, most of the buildings resembled public urinals) was no place to bring up a child. Hamford, with its broad avenues of deciduous trees, placid, murky river and Norman church, its outlying estates that promised (and delivered) unimaginable violence, would soon become a mythical place for me; but for newly-wed regular hardworking Desmond and his attractive wife it was just a place to send a kid to nursery school that wasn't Lewisham. Things were good in Hamford for a couple of years. After I appeared, Sinead took eighteen-months' leave from the local junior school where she was again making fast progress with the magic wooden letters. And Des, tired from a day analysing a new commando-strength laxative, would appear every evening with his tie askance, hungry for the phenomenal Irish stews that had played such a vital role in Sinead's wooing of him. Every night at six p.m. she would hear his key in the lock and there he'd be – every night (if that were possible) slightly balder and ready to rest his head where it most naturally fell due to their height difference: on her sternum.

Yes, things were good for a couple of years in Hamford, if not a little . . . well, boring. In retrospect, this could have been the end-of-life-as-she-knew-it for Sinead Easy (the atrophying of those vital energies) if it wasn't for what happened when she returned to the school. She met a man. She met a man who would eventually (and literally) sweep her off her feet – that most destructive of female aspirations. To quote my namesake, maidens, like moths, are ever caught by glare. His name was Delph. Delph Tongue. Scandinavian in origin, so I'm told. And he was (very Lady Chatterley's this) the assistant caretaker, the man who painted the glutinous, supernaturally straight pure white lines on the football field every summer. And also a man who had watched her – married, unavailable Sinead

Easy – walk through the low gates every day like a galleon-tall, devil-black vision of erotic invitation.

I've often wondered why my mother – so nurturing, so at home in the bewildering polytheistic universe of the under-five – only ever wanted one child. It has taken a number of years to realise that, for her, dealing with children every day brought her close to tearful and justified mass murder. It looks like an easy gig, teaching: those endless holidays that stretch long into scorched August; the early finish to the day leaving the evening free to run a red biro facetiously over a couple of exercise books. But you would be wrong. I read somewhere that only airline pilots and those in the nursing profession suffer the same stress-levels as teachers. Cases of burn-out, if not outright crack-ups and suicides, are high. A teacher's mornings and evenings are often filled with interminable meetings, sandwiching the daily descent into the braying aviary of the classroom. And then they have to take it all home with them, in the form of essays to mark, lessons to plan, administrative assessments to wade through. It must be like having homework for ever.

So it was this life that Sinead Easy (aged thirty-three) found herself leading; and it was into this life that strutting, cocksure northerner Delph Tongue walked. The truth was, after a couple of years in Hamford, Sinead's veneer was beginning to chip off. Every night she'd flop crimson-eyed into bed after a day of unintelligible mayhem and five hours of epic marking. Every night a little less beautiful. Every night a little less certain why life had to be lived, or what it was even *for*. Desmond would be in his armchair, listening detestably to Radio Four, some half-brick-heavy tome open on his lap. Often he'd be picking his nose. She felt like the classic neglected woman. Then along came Delph.

It helped that he was a northerner too. They had that instant rapport born only of geographical serendipity. Though of Dutch or Danish parentage, this Viking had grown up in the grim wooltown of Wakefield and had spent his