RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Cleaver

Tim Parks

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About the Book

Overweight and overwrought, Howard Cleaver, London's most successful journalist, abruptly abandons home, partner, mistresses and above all television, the instrument that brought him identity and power. It is the autumn of 2004 and Cleaver has recently enjoyed the celebrity attending his memorable interview with the President of the United States and suffered uncomfortable scrutiny following the publication of his elder son's novelised autobiography. He flies to Milan and heads deep into the South Tyrol, fetching up in the village of Luttach. His quest: to find a remote mountain hut, to get beyond the reach of email, and the mobile phone, and the interminable clamour of the public voice.

Weeks later, snowed in at five thousand feet, harangued by voices from the past and humiliated by his inability to understand the Tyrolese peasants he relies on for food and whisky, Cleaver discovers that there is nowhere so noisy and so dangerous as the solitary mind.

About the Author

Tim Parks studied at Cambridge and Harvard. He lives near Verona with his wife and three children. His novel *Europa* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and *Judge Savage* was longlisted in 2003.

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TIM PARKS

Cleaver

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

PART ONE

I

IN THE AUTUMN of 2004, shortly after his memorable interview with the President of the United States and following the publication of his elder son's novelised autobiography, cruelly entitled *Under His Shadow*, celebrity journalist, broadcaster and documentary film-maker Harold Cleaver boarded a British Airways flight from London Gatwick to Milan Malpensa, proceeded by Italian railways as far as Bruneck in the South Tyrol and thence by taxi, northwards, to the village of Luttach only a few kilometres from the Austrian border, from whence he hoped to find some remote mountain habitation in which to spend the next, if not necessarily the last, years of his life. Ratting on your responsibilities, had been Amanda's interpretation. She is the mother of his children. The responsibilities of a man at my time of life, the eminent and overweight Cleaver told his partner of thirty years, can be no more than financial, and, acting on a decision taken only hours before, he signed over to her a very considerable sum of money of which neither she nor their three surviving children could possibly have any immediate need, with the exception perhaps of the younger son Phillip who was always in need, but never accepted anything.

The following morning, climbing on the train to Gatwick, still rather dazed to find himself taking such a momentous step, Cleaver switched off his two mobile phones. This is

not just another of your many projects, he repeated to himself. He was sitting opposite a young man cradling a CD player, his lips silently singing. You are not, as has been the case on other extended trips, planning to write a book, or to make a documentary. The young man, he noticed, had a glazed look in his eyes. He hasn't recognised me, thank God. The CD player was whirring. The culture, such as it may turn out to be, Cleaver told himself firmly, of the South Tyrol need not be analysed, ironised, criticised or eulogised. A recorded voice warned that the doors were about to close. The business of living in a remote mountain cabin need not be dramatised or serialised. Nor written up à la Thoreau into a sort of *Walden*. The train began to move. The Thames was suddenly beneath, then behind. The familiar sprawl of South London accelerated away.

Nor can there be any question of *recommending* anything to anybody, Cleaver was still reflecting an hour later as the airport shuttle took him to the North Terminal, or of reporting home on any wisdom supposedly acquired. He was lucky to be able to purchase a ticket for almost immediate departure. I have no baggage, he declared. Nothing. Nothing, Cleaver finally muttered, as he adjusted a safety belt to his girth, will be brought back from this trip for insertion in the national debate. For so many years a master of the public voice, he would now leave it behind. Such is the extraordinary idea that has somehow thrust itself upon Harold Cleaver during these last few days of remarkable public notoriety and intense private turmoil: I must shut my big mouth.

On the train that took him from Milan to Verona, Cleaver shared a compartment with a young woman absorbed in the study of what appeared to be some kind of marketing report. There were bar charts and he noticed the subheading *Bacino di afflusso*. Moving back and forth across the print, her eyes would occasionally hesitate before she stopped to underline a word or phrase with a

rapid, predatory jerk of the wrist. Every five minutes or so, distractedly, she resettled a white shawl that continued to slip down over slender arms, and sometimes, in her pensiveness, she smiled, or frowned, and her free hand slowly twisted a strand of dark hair between knowing fingers. Cleaver was pleased, at Verona, that he had not tried to talk to her. Only as he stood up to leave the compartment did their eyes meet in the mutual awareness that they would never see each other again. This is an excellent start, he thought. It was Mother's constant complaint, his elder son had written in the opening lines of *Under His Shadow*, that my father was as *utterly incapable* of leaving any woman alone as he was utterly, absolutely and *irremediably* incapable of turning down any offer of food or drink or cigarettes, or, even more chronically, any opportunity to appear in public at any moment of the day or night. He was *ambition, avarice and appetite* incarnate – the three As as he called them – at once and always *carnal and carnivorous*. I have not eaten, Cleaver suddenly realised as he studied the departures board at Verona Porta Nuova, since my early morning tea and toast.

From Verona a second train followed the river Adige north up the Valpolicella into the gloomy mountains of Trentino. There were few houses on the slopes here. The barren formlessness closing in on either side of the train promised a solid barrier. It was fascinating how people had reacted to his son's book, Cleaver thought, or rather to his son's book in combination with the famous interview of the President of the United States. He was weary of thinking of such things. When a group of teenagers with knapsacks climbed on at Rovereto, Cleaver felt in his pockets for his earplugs. It was not that he had brought any reading material. There will be no more reading, he had decided. He just did not want to hear, even in a language he did not know, their shared life, their noisy collective identity. If I

must shut my mouth, he thought, I can stop my ears too. There would be no more voices of any kind.

Almost alone on the platform at Franzensfest, just below the Brenner Pass, Cleaver was struck by the sweetness of the air. What smell is this? Of cut grass, cow shit, sawn wood, of snowmelt running on stone. He stood there, unsettled, listening to the insistent clang of the station bell announcing the arrival of his train. He looked up to see a waterfall tumbling down from slopes high above. I will write no letters, he thought, aware now that he was approaching the end of his journey. He had not brought a laptop. Or even a notepad. Or even pen and paper. Whatever is about to happen to me, or around me, need never be told or expressed.

From Franzensfest to Bruneck, the railway is reduced to a single line. Cleaver gazed out of the window as the train crossed and recrossed a grey river flowing in the opposite direction. Only one other man shared the carriage. At Ehrenburg they stopped for almost twenty minutes to wait for the westbound train. The twilight deepened in the deep valley. A slamming of doors left the air quieter and colder. Well before Bruneck, the other passenger was standing impatiently, switching his briefcase from hand to hand.

Luttach, Cleaver told the taxi driver. It was the first word he had spoken since the purchase of his ticket at Gatwick, since calling Amanda from Victoria to say goodbye. It was his destination. At least tell me where it is you're going, she had demanded. The whole world's trying to contact you. Luttach? The driver asked for confirmation. He filled the name with catarrh. Cleaver had refused to tell her. Luttach, he repeated in the cab, altering his pronunciation to satisfy the driver. The man was wearing a green felt hat above a ruddy face, a heavy moustache. He can't believe his luck, Cleaver thought, as the meter began to measure the distance. That's a London thought, he corrected himself at once, an old thought. If my father, his

elder son had written, could take a taxi to go to the end of the street, he would, he *did*. After all, he was always on expenses. The only *account* I ever give of myself, he used to joke at dinner tables, is *an expense account*. This taxi ride is the last, Cleaver decided. He was paying with his own money.

The car proceeded sensibly northwards up the Ahrn valley. Again they were crossing and recrossing a river flowing against them. The water was faster now, flecked with white. They were climbing steadily. By the time they passed the village of Gais the autumn darkness was complete. Lights pricked out here and there on the slopes far above. This is what Cleaver has always remembered from his one previous visit to the South Tyrol: isolated lights high up in the alpine night. This is what has brought him here.

When the valley narrowed to a gorge above Sand in Taufers, the driver asked: Wohin wollen Sie? I'm sorry? Cleaver has forgotten what little German he once knew and has no intention of recalling it. In part, he has come here *because* he doesn't know German. Address, the man said. Hotel, Cleaver told him. He couldn't remember the name of the place he had stayed in with Giada. It didn't matter. Any hotel. The driver shook his head, risked a quick glance over his shoulder. Alles geschlossen. He pronounced the words slowly and emphatically. Sommer ist zu Ende. Der Winter ist noch nicht da. Alles geschlossen, he repeated.

Cleaver waited. The man will have seen I have no luggage, he thought. On the flat again above the gorge they passed the modern development around the base of the ski lift. The whole complex was in darkness. Hotels, alle geschlossen, the driver insisted. But he keeps driving, Cleaver observed. Five minutes later the car pulled up in the tidy main street of Luttach. The shop windows were dark. Everything is shuttered. Cleaver didn't move to get out. Hotel? he asked. A taxi driver always knows where to

find a bed for the night. The meter is still counting, time now rather than space. Zimmer? the man suggests. Ja, Cleaver told him. Perhaps he knows more German than he thought. An O level is an O level in the end. Or was. The car proceeded along the main street, and turned left up the hill.

Kommen Sie doch. The driver took Cleaver by the elbow and leaned on a heavy door. It's a bar, a bare room with wooden floor, wooden benches and tables, a dozen red-faced men in two groups talking loudly over cards. But there's a woman serving. The driver went to speak to her. They're old friends. Standing at the door, Cleaver savoured the foreignness of it, the hubbub of words one could treat as mere noise, the difference of the decor, the men's clothing, the smell. A wood smell, Cleaver thought, and there's smoke and leather and beer. It was exciting. The wall too, he saw, was clad in wood and there were old wooden skis arranged crosswise above the counter and dusty porcelain dolls on a mantlepiece over a fire of smouldering logs.

The woman came to speak to him. She is the kind of woman one calls handsome, past her best that is. Wie viele Tage? She was wiping her hands on a blue apron. Her skirt was grey wool. Cleaver shook his head. Then he was irritated when he realised that he was imagining himself on camera. He was acting the eminent man in the back of beyond for an imaginary audience. Just look where Cleaver's doing his show this week! Observe, he would tell the audience, the unusually large, carved wooden crucifix hanging over the bench in the corner, the Christ's twisted limbs, the sombre resignation of the upturned eyes. Armin! The woman went to a door and called down a dark passageway. Armin! You must stop doing this, Cleaver decided. Armin, kimm iatz! You must just *be* here, he told himself, and nothing else. No running commentary. The men at their tables showed no curiosity. Someone slapped

down a card and started to laugh quite raucously. It’s not even German they’re speaking, Cleaver realised, but some rough mountain dialect. So much the better.

A boy in his mid teens appeared, reluctant. His hair is long and seems to have been dyed coal black. He wears an earring with a silver skull. How many days you want the room? he asked. I’m not really quite sure as yet, Cleaver said. He corrected himself: I don’t know. The woman has seen, he saw, that I have no bag. At least three or four. Drei, the boy tells his mother and immediately turns to go. The taxi driver is tapping Cleaver’s elbow. Fifty euros, he says, in English. It seems excessive, but how can I ask to consult the meter? One of the card players darts the new arrival a knowing glance. Out of habit, Cleaver starts to ask for a receipt, then says, Nein, das macht nichts, and hands the man fifty-five euros. Until he spoke, he had no idea he knew the expression.

On a series of ledges and tables up three flights of wooden stairs and creaking landings, there are more porcelain dolls, dressed in the traditional peasant costumes of at least a century ago, their hard bright faces beaming, their glassy blue eyes wide open, as Cleaver labours upward, breathing heavily, led by the handsome woman, past her best. Only a foot or two from his face are her long brown socks, green slippers. He can smell them. He finds the stairs hard going, steeper than home. On the third-floor landing there is a huge old dolls’ house, perhaps five feet by four by four. White and pink, porcelain faces beam out of all the windows. The light in the stairwell is dim and yellow and the dolls’ frilly clothes seem musty. The wall is clad with vertical strips of dark wood and a splintery old scythe has been hung between drawn curtains. Cleaver smiled. In many ways it really is a shame there is no camera.

But to the eminent man’s surprise there is a smart TV in his room with an impressive remote. How impressive it would be, he thinks, to say, No, take it away! A bait I must

not rise to. As he is trying to get his breath back, the woman has already started speaking. She is talking very rapidly. She gestures here and there. Why is she doing this when she knows he can't understand? She is pointing to a door further along the corridor, showing him towels, repeating things she has said a hundred times before. She is doing her duty regardless of his ability to understand. But now the word Frühstück does ring a bell. Heißes Wasser, the woman waggles a finger. Noch nicht. Then she was gone.

Here I am then. Cleaver lay down on the bed. He is wearing a leather coat, a jacket, pink shirt and lemon tie, dark trousers. When he left the house that morning, he could perfectly well have gone to the studios and withdrawn his resignation. Was there anyone who was anyone who had not begged him to change his mind? And that was only yesterday. Think it over, Michaels insisted. For Christ's sake! The room was damp. It hasn't been heated. No one was expecting guests. You're a fat pig, Cleaver announced, hands folded on his stomach. A man of your girth, he spoke the words out loud, ought to create his own warmth. The room is quite large, but largely empty and dusty. How my father loved to rhyme the words girth and mirth, his elder son had written. Cleaver has no reason to open the wardrobe and drawers. What's the view from the window? He gets off the bed. Nothing but a narrow alley, a facade without a window. Turning round, he notices yet another doll sitting on the chest of drawers in a puddle of dusty frills; its face is set in that same changeless expression of blank complacency. The eyes are blue and wide and unblinking.

Cleaver shivers. Here we are then, he repeats and lies down on the bed again. The one blanket is definitely damp. Turning on his side, he becomes aware of his mobile phones. I can finally lose weight, he thought. Lose touch and tension, unwind. He took the phones out of his pocket

and laid them on the bedside table. A pine surface. All the furniture in the room is untreated pine. Or ash, or birch perhaps. Cleaver knows nothing about wood. To be quite consistent, I shouldn't even have brought a phone, he reflects. On the other hand, one could hardly become a saint over night. Is there any signal up here in the mountains? he wondered. He smiled and shook his head, but then deliberately succumbed to a different temptation. He stood up, walked over to the TV set, clicked on the power and picked up the remote.

Settling back on the bed, he was aware his feet were cold. How can one be so fat and have cold feet? A man was taking a microphone into a studio audience. At once Cleaver felt anxious. He checked his watch. At this very moment one of his two stand-ins would be in make-up. Have I really left? After making mincemeat of the President of the United States? At the acme of my career? He watched the presenter push the microphone towards a pretty, pouting mouth in a convenient aisle seat. Cleaver has no doubt that the girl has been placed there on purpose. She begins to speak, urgently, confidently, in German. They must have a camera tracking down the aisle from the back of the studio to pick up the presenter's nods. Standard fare. The egregious man is agreeing. Cleaver has no idea what they are talking about. Something serious, he guesses. Suddenly everybody is laughing. An overhead camera pans. People always laugh together. The lighting is a little harsh, Cleaver decides. An isolated laugh is an embarrassing thing. The studio has olive-green seats, orange screens, matt black fittings. Very German colours. Don't all German subway stations, Cleaver remembers, have green and orange wall tiling? He changes channel. An earnest and voluptuous woman is reading the news in Italian. Cleaver listens. She is deploying the same rigid patterns of cadence, he observes, the same sudden extravagant emphases, at once routine and dramatic, of

which he himself is such a master. But this is an old observation. He has noticed the same things in French, a language he understands, and in Spanish, a language he doesn't. Everything must be urgent, yet the routine confidence of its delivery reassuring.

He gets to the tenth channel, the twelfth. Suddenly it's English. BBC World. They have a satellite. This is unexpected. Perhaps at the top of the hour there will be a word about his, Harold Cleaver's, surprise resignation from Britain's most serious, most successful talk show: *Crossfire*. But for the moment an old acquaintance, Martin Clabburn, is interviewing a man in a turban. Surely you're not going to pretend that you were unaware of collaborating with one of the most ruthless governments of modern times? Martin appears to be outraged, but poised too. The man in the turban gives a poised and combative reply. They are allies. The show proceeds. Cleaver sucks his teeth. Nothing, a voice has started to repeat in his head, could more emphatically confirm the rightness of your decision to bail out than this rehearsal of a completely fake confrontation. Clabburn again makes some piously offensive remark to which the turbaned man once more replies with offensive piety. How wearying. Yet so long as you lie here watching the show, you haven't really left. The viewer is always complicit. A close-up suggests that the only real emotion Clabburn is experiencing is his pleasure in the discomfort he imagines he is causing the man. Cleaver Carves Up President, was how the *Guardian* had described his famous interview. The fellow in the turban seemed to be relishing the fight.

Then Cleaver must have missed a few minutes – perhaps he actually dozed off – because now quite unexpectedly the theme music explodes; the screen is a kaleidoscope of dramatic scenes and hi-tech items that appear to be whirling through space between riots and bloodshed and exulting athletes. Television has been taken over by these

clips, Cleaver's elder son had written in his discussion of his father's many controversial TV debates and topical documentaries. How the boy could have claimed the book was a novel is beyond Cleaver. A mixture of the air-raid siren and the sexiest, state-of-the-art gadget, his son had written: the intention being, as my father once told me in one of his interminable attempts to *coach* me as a journalist, as a writer, because it must be understood that my father couldn't speak to someone, to anyone, without trying to *seduce* them if they were a woman or to *coach* them if they were a man – the intention being, my father explained, to instil in the viewer both intense anxiety and extreme complacency, *simultaneously*. Did I really say something as intelligent as that, Cleaver wondered? He smiled. Certainly his son had become a past master. I coached him well. My elder son. Then in the shifting red lights of this grotesquely long, end-of-show clip, Cleaver glanced at the doll on the chest of drawers. She is watching; her porcelain eyes are rapt, her smile enviably vacant. Cleaver lifted the remote and killed the screen.

At once he became aware of singing. The men downstairs are singing something. There's the strain of an accordion. I'm hungry, Cleaver realises. I mustn't expect to be compos mentis today of all days. Just stick to plan. Compost mentis. That was an old joke. He put on his shoes and went out on the landing but couldn't find the light switch. Perhaps the handsome landlady had explained something. From the dark stairwell the singing swelled up louder. Cleaver ran his finger blindly over the walls. They were male voices singing boisterously, in German. This was risking a splinter. He went back into his own room, turned the light on again and, leaving the door open, found his way to the top of the stairs. From every shadowy ledge, as he descended, the dolls stared and smiled in facile approbation. There is something noisy about these dolls, Cleaver decided. Something choral. From beneath, the

male chorus grew louder as he trod carefully down past the mute, female dolls. There was something military to the rhythm now. Almost all the politicians I interviewed, Cleaver reflected, pausing to let his eyes grow accustomed to the darkness, were men; while almost all the viewers and readers who wrote to me were women.

Then, on the very last stair, imagining he was already at ground level, he stumbled and fell forward against a table where two shiny eyes stared blindly. A door banged open and there was bright light to his right; the card-players were cheering and thumping the table in self-congratulation at the end of their song. A tall bearded man paid Cleaver no attention as he stamped off down the corridor. Cleaver replaced the doll in a standing position and walked into the bar.

He had been sitting five minutes at a corner table before the woman detached herself from the far wall and came to him. She stood still in her apron, hair gathered beneath a white headscarf. Most of the dolls had headscarves too. Cleaver did not want to be reduced to pointing fingers at his mouth. He smiled apologetically: Do you, um, have anything to eat? She passed her tongue over her lower lip, watching him steadily. She is unaware of course that Harold Cleaver is used to talking to audiences of upwards of ten million people. Bread? He asked. The woman raised her eyebrows and looked around in evident impatience. Two men were singing softly, clinking their glasses on the table. Bier? she enquired brusquely. Cleaver surrendered and made the timeless gesture. He lifted his right hand and pushed three fingers toward his ample mouth, widening his eyes in what he knows any audience would register as a charming smile of self-irony and supplication. Zu spät, the woman said. Her face is attractive – there are friendly wrinkles round bright eyes – but the cheeks betray the slight jowliness of early middle age. Trinkn, trinkn, trinkn! the men have begun to chant. The knocking of their glasses

has become a clatter. The woman pushed her cardigan off her wrist and tapped her watch. Zu spät. Brot, Cleaver remembered and then, Speck? She pursed her lips and turned away.

Cleaver ate with his head forward over a wooden platter. The beer is icy. He wonders if the men have stopped singing because of his presence. More than fifty million had watched his interview with the President when CBS picked it up stateside. I put it to you, Mr President – Cleaver realised he would have to cut the speck into smaller pieces – that you have simply allowed your agenda to be driven by a series of ongoing debates and conflicts, the Middle East, terrorism, the white-collar tax burden – while the real challenges for the future – global warming, excessive consumption, alternative energy sources, you have largely ignored. When the President had hesitated, Cleaver added: Or do you think that in a democracy it's inevitable that the successful politician will be no more than a choirmaster for the loudest chorus? The stringy ham keeps catching in his teeth. Let me get this straight, the handsome President said aggressively, I am my own man. Then Cleaver smiled his famously dangerous smile. He smiles it again now, chewing his food: Mr President, you have just used two clichés, one right after the other. He needed a toothpick. A robot could be programmed to give better answers than that.

Suddenly the card players were arguing. Someone was being accused of cheating. Or so it seemed to Cleaver. The only man wearing a jacket and tie threw his hand down on the table and pushed his chair back in disgust. As he stood up, another jumped to his feet and pushed him back. Incongruously, he wore a leather cowboy hat. The well-dressed man stumbled and almost fell. Everyone was shouting or laughing. The landlady ran to the table. A younger man, a boy almost, in green corduroy trousers and chequered shirt lifted a red accordion from the floor and

began to play, softly and squeezily, some peasant dance. Perfect background, Cleaver decided. All at once the quarrel was over and another tray of beers was crossing the floor.

My room is cold, he told the woman. Do you have an extra blanket? He made the gesture of snuggling into wool, of pulling something up over his head. She concentrated on counting coins from a pouch at her waist. Blanket! Or I'll freeze. Brrr! It had been a mistake to order cold beer. But now the man in the cowboy hat came over. A big blanket for a big man! he boomed. He said something to the woman. She nodded. Welcome to the Südtirol! he went on expansively. He has a thin, almost cylindrical head, a hooked eagle nose, twinkling eyes. You want to ride a horse while you are in Luttach, you come to Hermann! Onkel Hermann's Stable! Already he was putting a business card in Cleaver's chill fingers. A big horse for a big arse! He clapped and laughed. You want a woman, you ask Frau Schleiermacher. She knows everybody. Ha, ha, ha! A bigger whore for the man who has more, Cleaver quipped. My father's quips were interminable and interminably crude, his son had written. But Hermann couldn't follow this. The Südtirol welcomes you, he repeated nodding and laughing and offering his hand. His grip was iron.

Cleaver had been back in his room five minutes when the boy with the dyed black hair brought the extra blanket. His satanic earring made Cleaver smile. But he couldn't remember the kid's name. Had it really been Amen? Foreign names find no pigeonholes in our minds. Cleaver's elder daughter, Angela, had been through a phase when she wore all kinds of rather grotesque emblems of death. It was gross misrepresentation, surely, to describe this as an attempt to reveal the depth of her unhappiness to her distracted parents. There are droves of adolescents, Cleaver announced out loud, wearing satanic bric-a-brac. Mainly earrings and bracelets of dark silver, or grey steel,

or black T-shirts with orange, hell-fire motifs. It is part of the modern world's parody of everything that once meant something and made us tremble. But Cleaver had never considered confronting his son over the account he had given in his book. Almost as soon as he lay down, he realised that the extra blanket would not be enough.

The problem is his feet. The extra blanket would certainly be enough, Cleaver thought, if only his feet were already warm. He turned off the bedside lamp. As it was, he couldn't feel them at all. He reached for the wire and turned the lamp on again. The Tyrolese doll is still staring at the blank TV screen. Oh to be as thoughtless as a doll! As careless of heat and cold!

Cleaver got up. He had stripped to his pants and vest. Leaving the door open, he padded out onto the landing – what a fat figure he would cut now – and tried the door that the landlady had indicated as the bathroom. What he did at home when his feet were cold was to take a hot bath. The times when Amanda would warm them between her thighs were over almost before they began. To say my parents had a stormy relationship, his elder son had written, would be like saying that Arafat and Sharon enjoyed the occasional tiff. The water in the shower was cold. Cleaver waited, advancing a finger from time to time. Sometimes my son's analogies leave a tad to be desired, he thought. He even laughed. The water gushed from the shower head but stayed cold, cold as the streams tumbling from alpine rocks in the night. Heißes Wasser. She had definitely said that, though now Cleaver began to wonder if the idea hadn't been associated with Frühstück in some way. Noch nicht. Returning to his room, he had the first inkling that this was a serious problem.

Cleaver put all his clothes back on, including his leather coat and climbed back into bed. Then he got out again and arranged the two blankets so that he could roll himself into them. Roly-poly pudding, he muttered. His face and his

bald spot are covered now. He breathed his own warm breath in the dark. This room smells, he realised. He hadn't noticed before. My feet aren't warming up at all. They seemed to be separate from the rest of his body, as if what he perceived as cold was in fact the famous ghost pain after amputation.

Damn! Suddenly he wants a cigarette. Cleaver turned on the light. There was no doubt that the sections of *Under His Shadow* that dealt with the narrator's father's chronic hypochondria were among the cruellest and the funniest in the book. Cleaver unrolled the blankets, sat up, hauled in his feet and began to massage them. Fuck the book. The skin is a queer, greyish colour. The wonder, his eldest son had written, is that my father's *constant* conviction that he was only a few moments away from a heart attack never prevented him from eating and whoring and drinking and smoking. However hard he rubbed them, Cleaver's feet remained exactly as they were, grey, cold and slightly damp. He hadn't had a cigarette for at least three months, nor a woman for six, so it was depressing to feel he wanted one now. How can I pass the time till my feet get warm? He looked around for the remote. And this is the man who is planning to go and live in a mountain cabin! Tomorrow he must sort himself out. I'll get all the kit.

He put his shoes back on and began to walk up and down the room. He was moving on blocks of ice. After fifteen minutes, no change. The doll is staring. Just go and bloody-well ask for another bloody blanket, a voice announced, or four, or a quilt, or a hot-water bottle. Didn't the Germans all use quilts these days? But Cleaver isn't going to go and ask. He knows that. It is something to do with the language problem. And a challenge too: he knows he would feel ashamed. The landlady has judged that two thick blankets should be enough. It isn't really a cold night. It's autumn, but not winter. Cleaver doesn't want to draw attention to his weakness. My father, his son had written,

would have competed with Carl Lewis at the hundred metres, with Muhammad Ali in the ring, with Pete Sampras on the tennis court. He was quite simply the most *competitive* man who ever lived. Sometimes I felt that he had chosen Mother and she him because, since they both worked in the media, they would be able to compete with each other day in day out their lives long. It's a lie that I competed with the children, though, Cleaver thought. Damn these feet. He grabbed the TV remote and pointed it.

As if he had turned on on purpose to hear the news, BBC World launched directly into its top-of-the hour bulletin. Eleven p. m. European time. BBC World! an authoritative voice declared, Demand a broader view! Cleaver sat on the bed and took his shoes off again. Anyone who truly took an intelligent view, he thought, would deny himself the use of the slogan. What my son lacks, Cleaver realised then, watching the camera pick over the ruins of some Palestinian village, which is what makes him so successful perhaps, is any sense of pathos. The pathos of journalism's interminable superficiality, the pathos of marriage and parenthood, the pathos of cold feet, damn it. Though of course he and Amanda had never married. Every time Mother asked, my father said no, and every time my father asked, Mother said no. We're the perfect mismatch, my father quipped. A match yes, but always a Miss, Mother would answer. Match, as in incendiary device, my father would come back. Cleaver massaged his miserable feet. My son is a genius of caricature, he decided. Everything and everyone was described in such a way that he, she or it could be slotted into some available cultural pigeonhole. Hence character and action were always memorable. That's the key to success. A name the public can recognise. A situation where everything is clear. The boy missed all the pathos of it, Cleaver thought, and the fun too. I myself forgot the half and more long ago.

Without thinking, Cleaver reached for the bedside table and turned on the red mobile. I must get away from this sterile engagement with my son, he decided. It was exhausting. The small screen glowed. You did not come to the South Tyrol to conduct conversations with the world you left behind. The name HAROLD CLEAVER appeared together with his home phone number. I'll have to change that. Then there was a few seconds' wait. Cleaver had often tried to visualise this business of the little gadget sending its feelers out into the busy air for some welcoming network to lock into. At such moments, even the mobile has a pathos, he thought, an imagined pathos, the desire to lock in to the collective mind. The BBC began its ritual analysis of the world's stock markets. By now everyone has a pigeonhole for the NASDAQ, the dollar against the yen.

OST-NET, the screen suddenly decides. Almost at once the phone began to vibrate. One message. Two messages. Three, four, five, six. The number stopped at fifteen and a small image of an envelope began to flash in the top left corner. Memory full. Cleaver felt in the inside pocket of his coat. He felt in his jacket. Don't say! He can't find his reading glasses. Rapidly he went through all his pockets, his jacket, his trousers. Could I have been so stupid? But perhaps it would be better not to read them. He had meant to give up reading in general. Straining his eyes to focus, he wondered what order the messages had been written in. Is there any way of knowing? All from Amanda. No, he couldn't make out the letters.

Turning away from the television, Cleaver had to put the mobile under the lampshade right in the naked glare of the bulb. There, just.

What am i supposed 2 do with yr stuff mr renegade because if u've really gone no way i want it cluttering the place here

As soon as Cleaver pressed the erase button, the phone vibrated with the arrival of another message.

BTW u shld see the phonebill yr daughter has run up.

Again Cleaver erased and again the phone vibrated. Amanda could text, he reflected, while cooking, while driving, while on the john. Amanda loves texting. He squinted:

Michaels has called 5 times in 15 mins I reminded him deserters shld b shot as they ran

Cleaver smiled, clicked again.

I knew u wldn't have the balls not 2 take yr phone

Now he had to close his eyes a moment. The letters had begun to blur. The BBC had started a feature about a language on the edge of extinction, in Siberia. It is extraordinary how much enthusiasm and drama a TV troupe can put into such reports that in no way affect the lives of 99.99 per cent of their audience. Apparently the marvel was that these Mongol-looking people needed only one word to say, I'm going out bear hunting.

I really will throw yr stuff out u no – he went back to the phone – 1st editions included

Though there were hardly any bears left, the journalist was lamenting now, and even fewer language speakers to hunt them.

Dear mr fugitive i imagine us meeting by chance some day at angie's graveside. Don't worry i'll pretend not 2 recognise u

Cleaver shook his head. She hit below the belt to elicit a response. Angela's accident, he muttered, could in no way be described as the chronicle of a death foretold.

Michaels has just phoned AGAIN 2 ask if i wanted 2 do yr job. Little old me! Can u believe it?

Cleaver didn't believe it for one moment.

If u don't tell me where you are i'll go 2 the police and tell them u've disappeared.

Every time Cleaver erased, the phone vibrated. There was no end to it.

I love u. U're the only man i ever wanted 2 live with, the only possible father 2 my children

Cleaver wondered if she was drinking.

Don't hope i'll kill myself, she wrote.

I know u're only pretending not 2 read these

I hate u

Bill white phoned about selling the balkans doc 2 french TV. He wouldn't tell me about money

Sleep tight harry wherever you are. Did u remember yr tranquillizers?

I always said u were a coward

Still the messages kept arriving. Cleaver's eyes hurt. Without reading them, he repeatedly pressed the button that opened and then erased the messages, until, after three or four minutes, the phone was still. He turned it off. I won't reply.

The BBC was now marvelling over the special effects used in a new film about the paranormal. Apparently the computer graphics were more interesting than the subject. Cleaver turned that off too. There is nothing for it but to lie here, he thought. He took off his leather coat, wrapped himself in the blankets again and placed the heavy coat, folded in four, on his feet. They were aching with cold. What on earth am I doing so far from home and simple comforts? He had brought no drugs. This is stupid. The doll was watching as he turned out the light.

He couldn't sleep. Think of nothing, Cleaver told himself, determinedly, of nothing, of nothing, of nothing. Like a doll. The minutes passed. Count all the women you've had. That was a reliable pastime. He wearied. Oh, but I should have thought of the trick with the coat before. His feet finally began to warm and before he knew it he was waking in the early hours to find himself too hot. This is fantastic. He went to the bathroom, stripped to his underwear, rearranged the blankets. His feet were glowing now. Welcome to the Südtirol, he told them. He was

chuckling. His whole body was wonderfully present, wonderfully comfortable. He couldn’t remember such physical pleasure, such relaxation. What a disproportionate reaction! Lying in the dark now Harold Cleaver enjoyed an enormous sense of well-being. Done it. Escaped.

II

THE NAME OF the house is Rosenkranzhof, some two thousand feet above the village of Steinhaus, a ski centre to the north-east of Luttach. But Cleaver didn't find it at once. The first day he bought boots, warm clothes, toiletries, walking poles, a good waterproof and a backpack. His whereabouts would be evident from his credit card bill, he thought, so he phoned the bank and asked for payments to be made by direct debit. He would inform of his new mailing address anon. Then he did the same with his private mobile contract. Turning off the phone after making the calls, ignoring the new messages that were still arriving, Cleaver decided he would turn the thing on only once every forty-eight hours. Briefly. In the evenings. His work mobile, on the other hand, which was also his flirt mobile, he wouldn't turn on at all.

At the Tourist Information Office the girl couldn't get it into her head what he wanted. Perhaps she hadn't really understood the word remote. She is pretending to understand, Cleaver thought. Here is our list of farms with rooms to let, she said. Her pretty young hands opened a printed brochure with pages and pages of photos and prices. There were the usual coded descriptions of what was on offer. Five minutes from the ski lifts at Sand in Taufers. Self-catering. It was an English edition. Easy walking distance from the cable car at Steinhaus. Sleeps

eight. Parking for two vehicles. I want something remote, Cleaver repeated, high, high up. He made a gesture with his hand. For months, not weeks. Years perhaps, he thought. The girl stared. She wasn't unattractive: honey blonde, pink cheeks, generous, uncomprehending eyes. Not unlike his younger daughter, Caroline. She went behind a door to call for help. A man in his early forties appeared. Such a place, sir, he pointed out, so far from anything, would probably not have electricity, it would not be easy to live in. That's what I'm looking for, Cleaver insisted.

Clean-shaven, solemn, chinless, the man spoke with a bureaucratic we. We only advise accommodations that meet our high standards. We inspect them all. That is our boast. As Cleaver turned to leave, the man advised: If you rent a place on your own, you can be as isolated as you wish, even here in the village. The people of the South Tyrol are very discreet. Cleaver hadn't expected this wisdom, this level of English. After all, the Tourist Information employee went on, and he smiled knowingly, it might be unwise to find yourself too far from essential services. The girl also smiled. They were telling him they had taken note of his age, his weight. I want a remote place, Cleaver repeated. Absurd as it was, his success in warming his feet last night had given him the determination to press on. I want to be one of those isolated lights, he thought, high up on the mountainside at night. When the heart attack strikes, so be it.

On returning to Unterfurnerhof, as he now saw his guest house was called, Cleaver found there was a quilt on his bed, but when he went down to talk to Frau Schleiermacher she made no mention of this change. Armin, she called, Armin! My mother, Armin translated without enthusiasm, does not understand why you want to find a place so high high up. The boy has blond eyebrows beneath his coal-black hair, pale blue eyes. Today his earring was a triple six. Distorted guitar music drifted from