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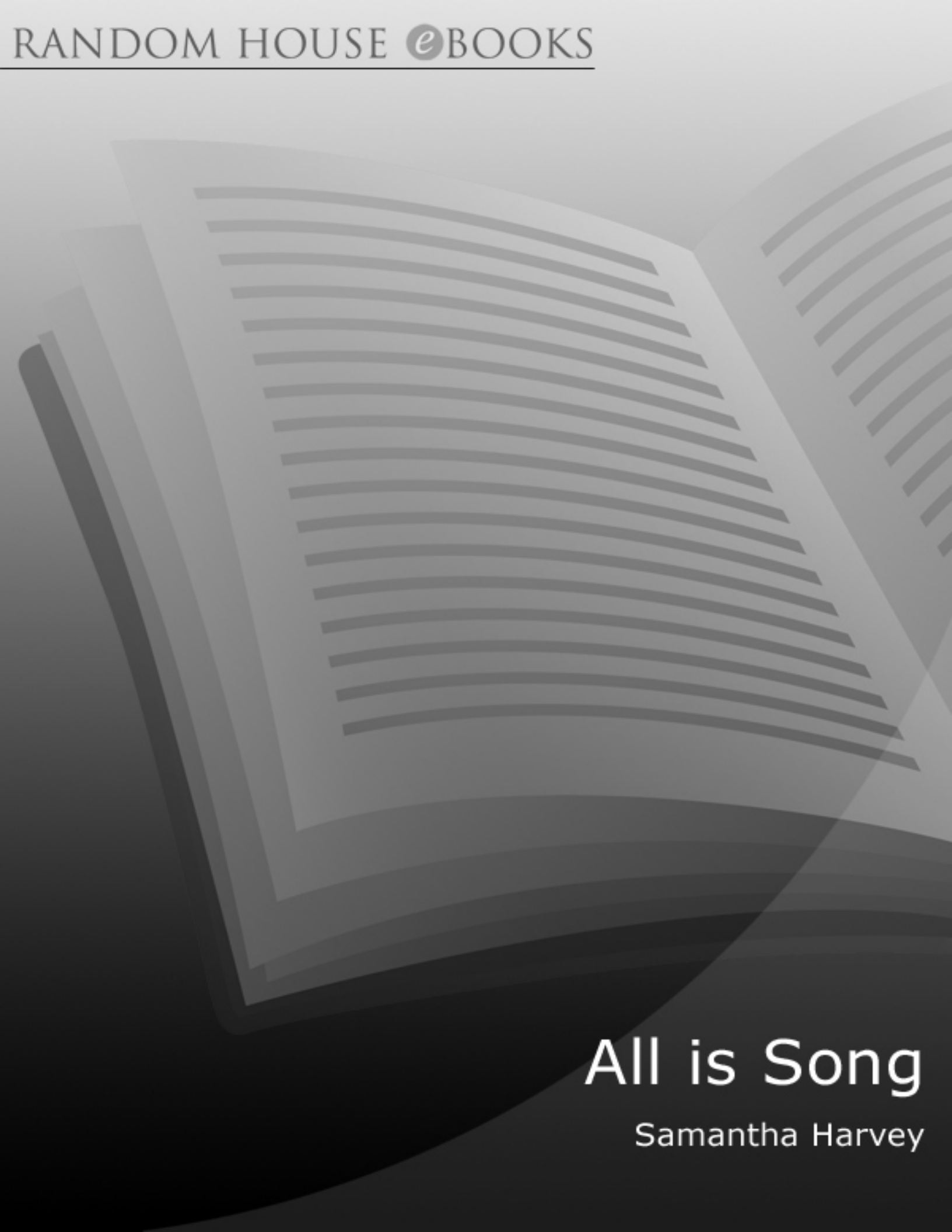

All is Song

Samantha Harvey

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About the Book

It is late summer in London. Leonard Deppling returns to the capital from Scotland, where he has spent the past year nursing his dying father. Missing from the funeral was his older brother William, who lives in the north of the city with his wife and three young sons. Leonard is alone, and rootless – separated from his partner, and on an extended sabbatical from work. He moves in with William, hoping to renew their friendship, and to unite their now diminished family.

William is a former lecturer and activist – serious, defiantly unworldly and forever questioning – a man who believes that happiness and freedom come only from knowing oneself, and who spends his life examining the extent of his ignorance: running informal meetings with ex-students.

Leonard realises he must drop his expectations about the norms of brotherhood and return to the 'island of understanding' the two have inhabited for so long. Yet for all his attempts at closeness, Leonard comes to share his late father's anxieties about the eccentricities of William's behaviour. But it seems William has already set his own fate in motion, when news comes of a young student who has followed one of his arguments to a shocking conclusion. Rather than submit, William embraces the danger in the only way he knows how – a decision which threatens to consume not only himself, but his entire family.

Set against the backdrop of tabloid frenzies and an escalating national crisis, *All is Song* is a novel about filial

and moral duty, and about the choice of questioning above conforming. It is a work of remarkable perception, intensity and resonance from one of Britain’s most promising young writers.

About the Author

Samantha Harvey was born in England in 1975. She has lived in Ireland, New Zealand and Japan writing, travelling and teaching, and in recent years has co-founded an environmental charity alongside her writinglives in Bath and teaches on the MA in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University. *The Wilderness*, her first novel, was published by Jonathan Cape in 2009.

ALSO BY SAMANTHA HARVEY

The Wilderness

For my family

Samantha Harvey

All is Song

JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

THEY'VE COME, THEY'VE come, he was thinking, and there they were all around him spinning through the darkness, and lighting the darkness. It was all just an illusion, they said. You weren't ever alone. How happy he was to hear it. He opened his eyes to their bright limbs and was repeating to himself that saying, Nothing happens until something moves. And thinking, therefore, I must move. Lovely formless limbs wrapping around him, or were they just drifts of light? Extraordinary beauty anyhow, extraordinary. Behind him a sound drew on his mind and stole his rest away, a semicircular sound that scooped anxious shapes into his thoughts, and began, though reluctantly, to make sense to him. I know this sound, I must move.

Then he opened his eyes and sat up. These were the first bruised moments of waking, the moments when the sleep-softened brain was so susceptible to fear and the world was at its least consoling; he spent these few moments thinking hell had come. Ah, Leo, how ridiculous you are, he thought. Hell and all; you only ever think like that when your back foot is still in a dream. There was the ululating of the sirens that had woken him up. The room is on fire, he told himself, but it was a lazy warning; there was no heat and there were no flames. He got up and went to the open window.

The view showed smoke not more than half a mile away to the east. It was pushing the night apart with a strange, muscular solidity. It could have been any number of buildings – the residential streets between there and Shoreditch would pass fire freely between their terraces. There was the school and the shopping streets, and the hospital, though he had to hope not the hospital. The idea alone could make one shudder. And yet, no, thankfully the

hospital wasn’t quite there, it was much further south towards St Paul’s. He opened the window wider and the air was warm and smelt burnt, and the sirens pitched deep along streets. He closed it entirely.

He went back to the sofa where he’d been sleeping. But for his underwear he was naked by the necessity of the heat, and still he was too hot – such a queerly warm July they had just had, and too hot to have the window closed. He lay down and tried to sleep again with his palms facing upwards in relinquishment. Be gone, he thought, and then said, Be gone. It might have been that he meant the heat, or the noise, or in truth any number of things that drove vaguely at the mind and kept it littered and clumsy.

When he closed his eyes there was only the feeling that flames were creeping around his feet, and four times he opened them against all reason in order to check, and then to sigh, and then to close them again, and then to curl his toes up against an imagination that wouldn’t let him rest. He saw flecks of light that ordered and disordered themselves in and out of human shapes and he remembered that was what he’d been dreaming just before, but he couldn’t think where the dream had been going or what he should make of it, except that it had for a moment given him happiness.

Finally he settled for looking up at the chandelier in the centre of the room, and at the outside lights that travelled palely across it. The Bellevue displayed an unusual vulnerability, or so it seemed to him, in the occasional hot and tired creak somewhere deep within the floorboards. Maybe it was just that he was so unused to sleeping there, and that the room always felt that way at night, but he became convinced that it was flinching from that fire, having known a fire of its own. The creaks in the floorboards were empathetic little recollectings, the way a healed bone would always recall being broken.

He got up and poured himself a glass of wine from the open bottle on the table in the hope it would help him sleep, and after ten minutes he did feel sleepy, and lay down again. It was after three a.m. and his journey and the trauma of the day before had made him tired. He went into chattery and circular pre-sleep thoughts about the time he and William had redecorated the Bellevue, after the fire, and of how they'd spent those long hours playing games. It was word games sometimes, or riddles and logic problems, all while they swept up cinders and the deformed stalks of wood that had once been table legs, or chair legs. That was when they'd invented the shape whistling game; one would whistle, one would guess. Four equal whistles was a square, three an equilateral triangle, and it went on in that way – but inevitably it got more complex. Tetrahedrons, dodecahedrons, parallelograms, spirals. William had perfect pitch and could take a spiral from its central inception out through sound into the last expansion, the last curve, and end promptly with air still in his lungs. The first time the spiral had been sounded Leonard had guessed it right away, because it could have been nothing else; it had been drawn with air, onto air, and was almost traceable with the finger. But he'd let the shape complete its beautiful audible form all the same, just for the pleasure of hearing it, and for the pleasure of feeling so close to his brother. Only then had he inhaled on his cigarette, exhaled, pointed the cigarette's tip diagnostically at the space the shape had occupied, and said with confidence, A spiral, William. Precisely, William had answered. A spiral.

Outside the sirens had stopped, and maybe they'd stopped some time ago, Leonard couldn't be sure. He took a last sip of wine, pulled the blanket over him for comfort and not for warmth, and pressed his cheek into the cushion, which smelt of tobacco and all the years of something unwashed.

In the morning William came. Leonard watched from above, leaning slightly over the rail of the spiral staircase as he emerged. The body angled sideways to account for the narrow space, and corkscrewed slowly upwards. It was never easy to climb that staircase, the feet had to pick at the treads, which tapered to an inch width at the centre of the spiral, and the right hand was always feeling ahead of itself for support. Even so, the awkward climb held a small spiritual consolation. Hadn't their father breathed repeatedly just before he died: Up I go. Their father, who claimed to know all about the glorious things that happened after death. Leonard could be forgiven if, for a moment, he fell upon the idea that revolving upwards around a central column might get you to heaven, or if he held an inbuilt bias for the vertical in general, or if he felt in some way that his position at the top of the stairs asserted his benevolence and his welcome.

Halfway up, William's dipped head entered the sunlight. Apparently he'd still not noticed Leonard standing there. Some fortunate gene in the Deppling line had granted them both hair for life – in William's case a thick mess of it, now greying and wiry, curling protectively against his skull. The morning sunlight spilling from the high, rear window in the Bellevue Room made the last black strands glow blue. William's head was notably large, a feature which made him look comical. There were, surely, sound physiological reasons as to why a human head should be the size it is, and why its furniture – nose, mouth, eyes, ears – should be in proportion to it. William seemed to prove that the slightest variation from this design stole an ounce of the human and replaced it with an ounce of the animal, so that all his life he'd been likened to some creature or another. A bull, a seal, a St Bernard, a bear. Now that head, that face, found the light falling from above and basked momentarily in it, upturned, eyes squinting, and Leonard took the moment to make his presence known.

‘William. It’s me.’

William peered into the blanched space, and then he must have made out Leonard’s figure. He smiled warmly, without excitement. ‘So it is, at last.’ Then he dipped his attention back to the act of climbing.

It had been more than a year since they’d seen each other, which, in a sibling relationship of such consolation and deep, quiet dependence, was considerable. So Leonard opened his arms to William’s ascent.

‘There,’ he said, as if a long choreography were drawing to a pleasing end. He hugged his brother, closing him reverently in.

In that second in which the light spilt down on William’s face, Leonard’s heart quickened for a beat. He felt like a point of salvation, and he felt the responsibility he’d used to bear towards William when they were children. The younger child wasn’t supposed to bear such responsibility for the older; their parents had worried that this would affect them both in all sorts of staggered and difficult to measure ways. But what else could be done? William had never been a proper child. How seriously he used to sit with his toys and stare at them quizzically, how joyless he was about other children; he would make them cry with his staring and questioning. Leonard in turn had been gregarious and bouncy, a proper ray of light. Socially, he’d been his brother’s saviour, and in that brief lit moment it was as if he were his brother’s saviour again.

‘I’m glad to see you. I’m glad to be back,’ Leonard said, withdrawing from the hug.

‘You haven’t changed. Have I changed?’

‘You haven’t changed.’

Well, it had only been a year. But they would always check, to be sure. For fifty years they’d run this test, briefly looking behind ears, peering into eyes, stepping back to appraise. The consensus was always that no change of any sort could be registered; the stacking up of years was so

seamless, so delicately done and relentless, that in generous moods at least they could both say honestly that it hadn’t happened.

‘There’s a bike protest outside,’ William said. ‘They’re about to come down this way, in a couple of minutes. I think they’re passing through into town, maybe to Westminster.’

‘I can hear it, the horns. I did get wind of it anyway, that it would be coming past here.’

The two of them stood somewhat adrift in the morning light of the room. William went to the window, opened it and looked out. The noise amplified, voices and the bleat of car horns, and as background some distant, unrelated sirens that were as indigenous to London as the song of finches.

William was in silhouette against the large rectangular window; in a way they were alike, both in their fifties – Leonard the earlier part, William the later – with their hair an inch or two longer than was common for men of their age, and their ill-fitting clothes, so generic as to be, in essence, invisible. That was to say, if they robbed a bank in their everyday clothes, witnesses would struggle to remember anything useful or exceptional. Their only defining traits, Leonard thought, were bare feet in William’s case, and in his own, really spectacular eyes. When they talked about their tendency for the mundane they concluded happily enough that they were to humankind what pigeons were to birdkind – workaday, diurnal, indiscernible.

Beyond these generalities they weren’t equivalent. Leonard was taller, which gave him an advantage, and he was gentler in the face; his expressions were diplomatic and couldn’t always be read. William’s expressions, in contrast, were knotted, and belonged to clear brain states: surprise, happiness, sadness, amusement. He went from one to another as an engine slides between gears. But it was of no real use. Leonard thought this even now as he

looked at his brother in silhouette, unable to see his face clearly, but knowing it well. Readable William's expressions might be, but not necessarily believable. Even Leonard couldn't always tell whether William was being ironic. It was the eyes that caused the problem, because they gave nothing away and thus left nothing to be trusted quite. They were inscrutably blue and deep-set, always lit from beneath, always moist.

'There were well over a hundred when I saw them,' William said, motioning to the cyclists who weren't yet outside the window.

'No doubt it will grow to a thousand. A nice Saturday morning will always bring people out to fight a cause, I suppose.'

'As we know, principles are solar-powered.'

'You're right, of course.'

Leonard went to the long oak table in the centre of the room and uncorked a new bottle of wine. The remains from the night before was not enough to share. He poured a glass for each of them. William was indifferent to drink, but Leonard was the reverse – he never felt better than when he had a glass of wine travelling his blood, and he was conformist enough to find sedition in it, which in turn glorified the conformity. When drunk he loved the little things and the simple things. Being human seemed really quite agreeable, quite unarguable.

'Will you have some, William?' He gestured for him to come and sit at the table.

'It's barely eleven o'clock.'

'Well, these are hard times.'

William came, and sat opposite. Leonard pushed a glass of wine towards him.

'Scotland was difficult,' Leonard said, in answer to the unasked questions. *How was your trip? How have you been?* He knew William would never ask. 'I wish you'd been there, William, at least for a visit.'

No response, but then it hadn’t been a question, so he continued as if unperturbed. ‘Mind you, if you had come what would you have found? Me drinking wine too early in the day and watching films and scratting through boxes of things in the attic, like a weird animal. I can’t say I’ve really been in possession of myself.’

‘I don’t know what that would mean anyway. To be in possession of oneself.’

William smiled with intrigue as he said it. No comment on the events and outcome of that prolonged stay in Edinburgh, no query or evident grief over the loss of a second parent within a year. Leonard realised he would have to go through the usual process of assimilation that always followed any absence from William, in which he let drop his expectations about the norms of brotherhood, and calibrated, realigned, and finally – and with hope, efficiently – came to the island of understanding they had together managed to occupy for so long.

‘I think I’ve found some peace,’ he said.

‘At last, that’s good.’

‘I think Dad had to die before I could find it. I don’t feel regret that I could have done more, should have done more.’

William sat equably in the sunlight, his shoulders falling to a relaxed hunch as they did when he was composing a question.

‘What use would regret be, Leonard? The dead are in a good place, I do believe that.’

William reached his hand across the table and Leonard extended his in response, meeting for a moment, a firm squeeze, and that was the extent of it. Yes, Leonard thought: What use would regret be to a man who’s passed into eternity, as their father believed he would? Indeed, what use.

‘Do you know how wealthy we are now, William?’ It was pointless to evade the question any longer. ‘We inherited

everything.’

William offered an expression of plain happiness – a smile, the eyebrows rising to meet the new altitude of his assumed mood. The tone, however, was neutral, and his shoulders didn’t lift. ‘Well, parents have to have some use, I suppose.’ And then, ‘I’m joking.’

‘Do you want to know how much we inherited?’

‘Only if it would help you to tell me.’

‘Help me? No, it wouldn’t help me especially. I just thought you might be interested.’

His brother looked more distracted than interested, in truth; he appeared to have no concern for money, an unlikely trait that had nonetheless been tried and tested against circumstance and prevailed as seemingly sincere.

‘We’ll have to arrange the ins and outs of the finances at some point,’ he persisted. ‘I need to talk to you about it. Not now, but soon.’

‘Of course,’ William said. ‘Whatever I can do to be least trouble.’

‘It isn’t about you being trouble.’

William flashed a grin. ‘Oh, but I *am*. Always. You’ve said it yourself.’

‘I didn’t say you weren’t, I just said it isn’t about that.’

The grin ebbed to a kind, focused smile. ‘Whatever’s mine, you can have, Leo,’ he returned. ‘I trust you to do the right thing with it.’

‘William, don’t be ridiculous, I don’t want your inheritance.’

‘Then we have something in common.’

‘You have a wife and children.’

‘So I do.’

Leonard tossed the cork in William’s direction and it bounced off the chair and coiled across the floor. William smiled at him as though to say, Let’s talk about something better than this. Leonard was prepared to do so. Born into wealth, every family loss the two men had ever suffered

had made them richer. Surely in the furthest reaches of their psyches they were always waiting for the next person to expire? Well, it was a dire thought, low and bad. To talk about inheritance felt in some respects unclean, and William's indifference only added to this; Leonard was happy to let it rest for the time being. The death of their father two months ago had left them in a state of indisputable prosperity, and William must have known it, but was incurious. It was the kind of prosperity that could change one's stature and outlook. It delivered the weight of total freedom, a difficult weight overall and one which could, with the wrong handling, become a burden.

Leonard leaned back and put his thumbs in his trouser pockets. He found his brother's eyes. 'People were angry that you didn't come to the funeral.'

'People are always angry, Leonard. I wish it wasn't so, I wish it as much as you do.'

'And they were sad, too.'

William gave an understanding shrug. 'It was a funeral, after all.'

Leonard exhaled and extended his arms outwards along the table, hot, frustrated. The two men had always slipped into these starched dialogues when the topic became personal. For all their closeness over the years they still didn't know how to negotiate the extremes of one another, and as soon as the *I think* became *I feel*, they faltered, as if they were constrained by the awkward fact that they were human.

It wasn't just a funeral, William, Leonard wanted to say. It was *our father's* funeral. He took his wine and trod the length of the room with it. The Bellevue Café itself, on whose first floor they now stood, was the fruit of family loss. Leonard had bought it almost twenty years before with money they both inherited from their grandparents; William had handed over his share without a blink or tremble. They'd cashed in their rustic, blowsy, big-hearted

grandparents for a fire-blackened building in the city, which, as it turned out, they'd never even used as a café. Downsairs the chairs and tables, the empty shelves, the boxes of crockery never unpacked – a whole life they hadn't got round to living.

Leonard felt the whole truth of that, sitting there orphaned with his brother. They didn't speak for two or three minutes. Was it an easy silence? He must assume so, otherwise he could count himself as a man who had no true friend in the world. He thought of what he could say, and wondered if he should share those things he'd been thinking about regret, or maybe he could mention the chickens he'd heard about on the local news earlier that morning, who'd had their necks stamped on. Such things wouldn't normally bother him – the welfare of a chicken; there were enough other things to worry about. But in the vision of its feathery head bulging wide-eyed from a flattened neck he seemed to see all the futility of loss, and of anger at loss, and some flood rose in him without his willing it. Why? he'd thought in repertory with a mash of other journeying thoughts. Why the stamping, *stamping* of all things, why?

Outside, beyond the two large sash windows at the front of the room, the mass of cyclists was passing. William stood to resume his vigil of them, and slid off his sandals. A few car horns sounded on the street, and some muffled shouts. Leonard went to the other window, the one on the right, opened it, leaned out for a moment, and gave a quiet impressed whistle.

'There are well over a hundred of them,' William repeated, as if this fact had a particular currency for him. He smiled at Leonard and turned back to the view, with his hands to the windowpanes. 'Maybe two hundred. I'm not good at judging numbers.'

Leonard thought maybe more than that, but it was hard to tell. Pressed closely, the bikes made their own chaotic

geometry; behind them a bottleneck of cars crawled in vexation. Leaning out briefly he could see the cyclists' progress down towards Finsbury Mosque; there was excitement in the air, once again the sound of horns, intended to be aggressive but hitting the streets as nothing more than a wail of plight, ineffectual for all its urgent pitch.

The light slanted long into the Bellevue Room. The large table was piled with dry reams of paper, and the wood of the tabletop was also dry where years of dust had settled in the grain. Above it the sun fell a thousand-fold on the crystal chandelier, and bounced back off as multiplied light. The clutter proliferated in the late-morning light, giving the room the busy luminousness of an eye close up. Leonard found the bag he had brought the day before, stowed under the sideboard out of the sun, and took from it some cheese, bread and figs, which he put next to the wine. He was struck by the unintentionally biblical array.

'Will you eat, William?'

William took his hands from the glass and turned to the room. 'You always phrase your questions this way. *Will you?* As if you're asking a favour.'

'I was just asking if you wanted to eat. I don't care if you eat, it was just a figure of speech. Honestly, you can be so difficult.'

William smiled and glanced up. They ate together quietly. In the warmth the bread had hardened, and the cheese, once firm, had a rubbery bounce that Leonard found unappetising, but he was hungry; he craved a succulent little fillet of beef to put between the bread, yes, or salami – why hadn't he bought some salami to layer on the cheese, or some of that honey-glazed ham? Surely William's lifelong vegetarianism struggled to sustain his large frame. For those short weeks that Leonard had tried it himself he'd felt in constant arrears with his appetite; but he'd seen pictures of particular dinosaurs, those great

herbivorous leviathans, and, he'd thought, if the dinosaurs could live without meat, he could too. As it turned out, he couldn't, and in fact if the dinosaurs' eradication was anything to judge by, neither could they. He ate the figs, and then the majority of the cheese, and all this while William picked. When the noises outside had passed and faded, Leonard decided to embark on a discussion he hadn't planned for and had wanted to hold back on, but which pressed at him suddenly.

'I do have a favour to ask, in fact.'

'Tell it.'

'Before I left Scotland I wrote to Tela to say I'd be coming home soon, I sent the letter with a bunch of flowers, the great romantic that I am. And by return of post I had a letter back from her to say that she couldn't really see the point of us going on. It was a very detailed letter, she must have been up all night writing it. It said that she'd be going away for a month and it said when she'd be back, and it was very specific about how she needed all my things to be gone from her house by that date. Which is next week. It is her house, I suppose. I always knew I was on borrowed time.'

William's expression became gentle, if not a little forlorn. 'What's the favour? Would you like me to change her mind?'

'If only you could.'

When nothing more came, Leonard elaborated. 'I need somewhere to stay.'

William pushed his fingers through his beard and mouthed, Oh. And the dawning had no authenticity to it – of course he knew that this was the favour, he knew it from the moment Leonard had mentioned Tela's name. He probably knew it, Leonard calculated, from the moment Tela appeared seven years ago. He'd probably been waiting for this conversation with his usual patient sense of irony. But William was literal to a fault, which meant that he

would only answer a question that had been asked, and thus a look of poised curiosity appeared on his face, as if to say, *And the favour is?* Leonard laughed at that – at that fastidiousness about exchange and punctuation which meant that his brother couldn't rush to his rescue until an official cry had been put out.

The laughter freed him from an impending sense of loss, one in which the image of the stamped-on necks of those chickens swam with that of Tela's pale face underwater. This was how he kept imagining her, with her eyes closed and her hands pushing the shampoo from her hair, or rising with a full crooked smile through the river's surface, and it did no good, those images, it did no good to replay them.

'Can I stay with you for a while?'

'My house is your house, Leo, you can stay as long as you like.'

'Thank you. I'll return the favour, I promise – I won't forget it.'

'Leonard, all I ask is that you do forget it, please. I'd hate to have any sense of debt between us.'

'Well, thank you.' Leonard took a mouthful of wine. 'Won't you have to ask Kathy?'

'Kathy's amenable. I will ask her, but you don't need to worry, everybody will be happy to have you. The boys will like you being there.'

Leonard both hoped and doubted it, but was silent while his brother wiped some dust from the table with his thumb. William had a way of saying his wife's name with such unfettered love, softly but strenuously also, as if the very concept of her distilled down for him all the deep and wonderful things of life. It was testament not to the fitness of their marriage, which Leonard had always thought was rather cold, but to William's insistence on loving, and to the odd massiveness of his heart. They'd mockingly used to call him the great erotic, the great romantic, William of the

imperturbable belief in human nature, William who could fall in love with a bridge, a leaf.

Leonard withdrew from those thoughts to once again occupy his own. ‘It was a shock to get that letter from Tela, you know,’ he said. ‘You’d have thought I might have seen it coming – if you leave your girlfriend for a year what can you really expect? It’s just that, on the few times she came up to Edinburgh to visit, it was dreamlike. We got on better than ever. I thought, I don’t know, maybe marriage could be on the cards. And now I’m single again.’

William poured a little more wine into Leonard’s glass, which, for him, was a sign of utmost sympathy. He never did things like this, he never noticed or catered to other people’s needs. To have the sympathy was enough to stop Leonard needing it, and he straightened. ‘But look,’ he said, ‘I wailed and kicked out for a week or two, and now, gradually, I think I can see my way through. Conceptually, at least, it makes more sense to me to be single.’ He went motionless for a moment and gazed at a vacancy a foot in front of him. ‘Maybe.’

‘Conceptually?’

‘Yes. Just seems to me that maybe that’s how my life will be. It never used to, but it does now.’

William nodded. ‘Ah well, there you go.’

Of course, this meant nothing, and Leonard had half a mind to challenge it. Sitting back to drink some wine, he asked, ‘How are the boys?’

‘Oh, they’re fine,’ William said.

‘They’re doing okay at school?’

‘They’re doing well at school. They’re quite bright apparently.’

William had such a light in his eye when he said this, and a mocking smile.

‘Well, you’ve never thought much of education, William.’

‘On the contrary. I think everything of education, which is why I’m sad that they go to school every day and never

get any. Still, I trust they'll pull through in spite of it.'

Leonard couldn't be bothered to assess that view. 'I'm not a parent,' he said. 'I suppose I can't judge.'

'But you're a teacher, Leo, I sometimes forget that. I know I'm prone to a bit of lambasting of your profession and I shouldn't, it's probably very worthy. I'm sorry.'

'It's fine.' And it was; those lambastings were so long-standing that they'd become more a comfort than an insult and he never took them to heart. 'Oli was always very good at drawing, wasn't he? Does he do that still? He always seemed so talented.'

William shrugged slowly. 'Is he talented? I don't know, I've never really thought it matters.'

'Of course it matters, they're your sons.'

'Well, if they do wrong, does being talented make any difference? If they're miserable, does it make any difference? I'd rather they lived well and were happy.'

'All the same, Oli's good at drawing.'

'If he is it isn't my doing. I just made the necessary biological provisions.'

Leonard watched his brother for a moment. 'You always say those things,' he observed, and it was by way of saying, *therefore they aren't true*. He paused. 'I meant to tell you, it was something beautiful. At the funeral one of Dad's friends, James – you remember him – read a poem about parenthood that Dad had written when you were born. *I love this child, who is my faith made truth*. That was one of the lines – *my faith made truth* – it was really quite beautiful, not just that part. I wish you'd been there. He said that about you, William. His faith made truth.'

William considered that with brows that dropped a little, and as he nodded he ran the back of his hand slowly across his chin.

'Like I said, I wish you'd been there and heard it for yourself.'

‘And that’s your wish, Leo, and I suppose one of the skills we should try to perfect in life is not confusing our own wishes with another’s. I wish that it were fine for a son not to go to his father’s funeral, and that all sorts of inferences about love, or lack of love, weren’t drawn from that. But I know they are, because other people wish very strongly for the opposite. So I try not to get confused between whose wishes are whose.’

In spite of himself Leonard smiled; a typically mechanical diagnosis of things from his brother, one that was almost a relief in its sieving through of emotions, in the rinsing of some of those things that had been clogging his heart. ‘Then I apologise, for not trying to do that myself.’

‘If you’re apologising to me, forget it. I love you, whatever you do or don’t do is neither here nor there. It couldn’t put the slightest dent in that love.’

This was said with no irony or facetiousness, and it struck Leonard anew, this capacity his brother had for such frank, unmitigated declarations, and how they didn’t ask or hope for anything in return. ‘And also – Leo,’ he said, ‘believe me, I actually *am* just a provider for my children. The three times we slept together to conceive – Kathy and I – Kathy turned the other way and counted to eighty.’

Leonard drank through light laughter. ‘I think Tela occasionally did that too.’

‘So, we are not good lovers. Men are not good lovers any more, at least I’ve heard women say so, and women aren’t given to idle talk. Really, men are the modern tragedy.’

They smiled at one another. Leonard was surprised by the amount of happiness he managed to feel in the midst of his abandonment; first his mother, then his father, then his partner. If he’d been told that this would be the run of things, and that in particular he would come back from one borrowed bed in Edinburgh to find himself searching out another in London, his fifty-one years clanking heavily against the massive fact of his aloneness, he might have

defied himself and prayed. But reality was seldom as bad as projected reality, and he didn't know what he would pray for if he put his hands together now.

William inhaled in readiness to speak. Then silence, then he did finally speak.

'When will you be coming to stay?' he asked, and Leonard cleared his throat.

'I'd rather be out well before Tela gets back, I think if I saw her I would start begging. I'm not going to beg.'

'I am sorry about Tela, Leo. She was rare.'

'We're all rare,' Leonard offered, surprised again by that glimmer of sympathy.

'No, not all of us. Some of us are common. Some of us are out-and-out rife.'

'That can't be true.'

'It must be true. There would be nothing worse than a world full of equally special people. Tomorrow then? You'll come tomorrow?'

William stood so that he could stretch his arms above his head. He really could be bear-like in his movements, Leonard thought. All slow manoeuvrings and deliberateness.

'Yes, tomorrow.'

Leonard put his hands to his lower back and looked towards the window. The early August sun rose up above the top of the window and the light in the room fell. The table still bore minutes from distant meetings. When he looked up to William it seemed that he had slipped deep into thought, as he sometimes did, or even into a trance of sorts, in which he was nowhere to be found in this world. Alone, Leonard walked to the window and observed the small Edwardian brickwork, the white-framed sash windows of the buildings opposite, and up along the terrace to where the houses grew gradually in stature until they became the four-storey tenements that marked the wealthier end of Bellevue Street. There were times already

when he wished to be back in the spaciousness of Scotland within sight of mountains, where even the cities were generous with their passing round of light and air. He turned back into the room.

‘William,’ he said.

William roused easily to the sound of his name and, with a smile, lifted one inquisitive brow. ‘You called?’

‘Have more food.’

He went to William and took his wide, short hand, squeezed it hard, opened it, put a fig in it, pushed wine towards it.

‘Eat, drink.’

Without any trace of ingratitude or impatience, William put the fig back in the bag; he did take a mouthful of wine, more as a gesture of goodwill than through need or desire, Leonard thought, but still. Leonard topped up both their glasses and stood to close the windows, to bar the noise from the street. The wake of the bike ride at the far end of the street – a couple of stragglers with a puncture-repair kit, and a few flyers on the road. The street was uncommonly quiet; a success, then, because the traffic had been deterred. He turned suddenly to William.

‘This morning when I woke up,’ he said, ‘I heard something on the local news, on the radio. Some chickens that were kept at allotments in Finsbury Park, just down there, were killed; somebody had stamped on their necks.’

He took a few strides back to the table and gulped at his wine with unfeigned indignation, because all the bike protests in the world would come and go and fade to silence, and not a single person would care about the flattened neck of a chicken. Something about the idea of flat necks horrified him; the whole concept of the killings horrified him, but that specifically. The thought of boots, human feet, and those little neck bones. ‘And a few weeks before, at the same allotments, other chickens were decapitated.’ He paused. ‘Decapitated, William.’

William gave no response. A look of untrammelled sadness seemed to pass over his face, but was that to do with the story, or just a random movement of thought, quickly to be followed by some other movement of thought? Even after five decades Leonard couldn't tell. 'I mean,' he went on, 'it isn't difficult to kill a bird. It isn't a display of great power to kill a chicken, for Christ's sake. Why do it? What pathetic deficit of manhood makes you do it?'

'I didn't do it,' William clarified.

'Not you. *One*. What makes one do it?'

'I don't know.' William raised his chin a fraction. 'Would you say it's a lack of morality?'

Leonard replied, 'A lack of love, more like. A lack of humanity. Somebody called in to say maybe foxes had done it. Do you know what the presenter said? He said that, with all due respect, he didn't think foxes were strong enough to stamp on a chicken's neck.' He leaned back and pressed his palms into the edge of the table, and released his incredulity with a sharp exhalation of breath. 'Well, with all due respect, I don't think it's a question of strength. It isn't that foxes aren't strong enough to stamp on a chicken's neck, it's that they aren't desperate enough, they aren't lost enough, they aren't broken-spirited enough. They don't kill for pleasure, they kill when they want to eat.'

With that William held the back of his own neck with his hand and nodded slowly. 'I see precisely what you're saying, Leo,' he said. 'Yes.'

Leonard had missed his brother; he'd missed his serious contemplation of the small and obscure things that escaped everybody else's notice. Anybody else would have laughed off this anxiety about the chickens, forced a joke from it. They wouldn't have seen the point precisely, they wouldn't have nodded in empathy. From the earliest years of remembered childhood William would credit any subject with importance, and he would never belittle Leonard's thoughts no matter how callow. In their teens William

would expose him to arguments beyond his years and in doing so bolster him, make him feel less childish. William scratched his cheek with deliberate care. How could it be that a person's face – simply the way the weight and light fell around their face – could prompt indivisible love? For all that one's family could irritate and infuriate, their mirrored genes and minds of shared memories broke down every defence. There they were, and things were perfectly simple.

The room was hot with the windows shut. It occurred to Leonard that maybe he was drinking too much. He filled his glass and wanted to say any number of things about the last year in Edinburgh, and the last weeks of their father's life. William narrowed his eyes and went to speak, then he wore, suddenly, an expression of great tenderness. This turned, as though at the flick of an internal switch, to wicked amusement. 'The season starts again soon,' he said suddenly. 'You're in for another whitewash.'

'We'll have a race on.'

'Ah, be real, Leo, Saracens will be wallowing at the bottom of the table.'

'We're fighters.'

'Well, with players like that you have to be. All over the place.' William smiled again, and stood. 'I have things to do, we'll see each other soon.'

'William – another thing.' Leonard crossed his arms in front of him. 'He died with photos of each of us on his lap, the three of us. One of Mother, one of me, one of you. I just wanted you to know that.'

William nodded a slow, cautious acknowledgement of this fact, as though he were reluctant to take on the truth of it, or as if the mental image he was forming of those photographs gathered in the old man's hands was inexplicable to him. He said after a silence, 'So then, tomorrow.'

'Yes, tomorrow.'