

Narrow

It was neither wet nor especially cold, but there was something about Oxford at that time that made it feel very lonely. As I edged past heedless dawdlers on the dark narrow streets, hating the long walk home, my feet slapped onto the pavement, and my whole body felt each step. I was through with crying now – at least, until I got back home and into my bed – but it occurred to me that possibly this was worse. What I was feeling was not grief, but something graver – the realisation that I had been given a warning, a kick in the teeth, and that I had ignored it and let this horrible city take me over again.

I approached Cornmarket Street and stepped out of the way of a crowd of drunks drifting towards me. As I neared the street, the warm sound of an electric guitar, transcending the heavy loneliness of the night, reached my ears, and at last there was something else to think about. I remembered standing by a gas heater the previous Christmas, clinging to its warm comfort as, in the corner opposite me, a pale-faced girl struggled to sit upright because her boyfriend had told her not to draw attention to herself. Earlier the same month, I had been huddled up in a thick blanket in a Spanish apartment with no central heating, poking my fingers and my face out of the bundle of covers so that I could read Evelyn Waugh. Tony Last got lost in the jungle just as my jacket potato was ready.

I had flown home alone that time – I waited for hours at the train station, and when finally on my way, looked out anxiously so that I didn't miss my stop. So eager to get to that plane and forget about being independent, I had paid for a cab rather than wait for the bus. When I was on the plane, I was calmly sure – as I always was, when I flew – that we were going to crash and I was going to die. It would be a shame to die just before Christmas, but then again, there was never a good time to die.

I punched in the combination code of my front door and quickly went up the stairs, with my room key ready. I picked up the post from my desk, and flicked through it. Some drama society was auditioning for a student production, somebody had been making toast in their room and setting off smoke alarms, and a new club night was being launched on Saturday. There were drinks promotions. I bent down, undid my laces, pressed the toes of my right foot onto the heel of my left, and pulled my left foot out. I sat down and pulled off my right boot. I reached out to my desk and turned my computer off. I took some paper from my desk and threw it at the bin. I got up, picked up the bin and took it outside. I shut the door, walked to my bed, turned on my lamp, walked back to the door and turned off the light. Then I took off my coat and threw it on the chair in the corner, pulled off my t-shirt, undid the chain around my neck and put it on my desk, undid my belt, pulled my trousers and socks off, threw them on the chair as well. As I got into bed I checked that the button on my alarm was on the right setting, then I pressed the switch on the lamp.