

I

I don't come here often. But sometimes, when my life has become too complicated, too relative, it's the only place to be. It doesn't resolve anything, but it makes things starker, which helps.

MY foot on the first cracked tread of the curved staircase, grand, broken. Do I dare? It has happened so quickly, the building coming apart, as if without Geoffrey, his order, his will, there is nothing to hold it together. Most buildings stand for ages, inertia stronger than disintegration; but here, it's as if every bond is broken, each element is disconnecting, withdrawing to its own. I remember being at its deep centre, enclosed within layer upon layer of meaning, letting go, journeying into the unknown, free to be ... And I climb slowly, winding up towards the gallery.

I lean over, breasting the emptiness, a bird about to take off, oh freedom! – when a sudden vertigo, the mosaic floor lurching up towards me, has me grabbing the thin ebony balustrade. I step back. Then forward again. Above me the dome of stained glass, ranks of etched geometries, figures, constellations, spiralling up to the rose-cut polar crystal that cracked that night. Life-filled, green-leafed branches thrust between bronze glazing bars. And deep below, seeking-roots push into the foundations, through walls, prying blocks apart, reaching towards the empty centre. Tropisms. I push one of the twelve doors, the first, the moon, opal, mirror, spider, madness, love ... It sticks, won't open. 'Oh, Geoffrey!' I cry. And although the dome is broken and the painted pillars moss-muffled, his name echoes, visiting each surface in a series of thinning embodiments, then fades to nothing. I walk slowly down the stairs.

At the door I turn, take a last look across the mosaic floor, a graphic encyclopedia, such learning, to the main room. How often I sat there, how lively the atmosphere, how lifeless now.

OUTSIDE, I stand by the rusted sculpture, intertwined figures, lovers. Each once moved independently, touching, apart, conjunction of two perfect balances in a mutual space. Now they are locked together, until structure itself breaks down. I look, one way along the exactly-calculated avenue to the solitary tree on the sculpted hill, the other to the jammed wind generator blade, the broken solar panels. I listen to the rippling stream, and miss the hum of the turbine.

‘Dreams are important, aren’t they?’ I’d said. Why had I brought her that day? I went on, ‘without dreams there are no possibilities, only alternatives. To dream you must be a little lost, a little free. And to make a dream come true takes a special sort of courage.’

‘Yes, a foolhardy sort,’ she had said.

‘How so?’

‘By choosing one you exclude all the others. And by making it come true, you bring it into this world, into the realm of your own personality, which is what we seek to escape from in dreams.’

‘I’m impressed.’

‘Don’t patronize.’

It hadn’t worked. Of course it hadn’t. Why had I tried to make this place *work* for me? Forget her. Forget everyone. Let it be. Let it be. And, yes, to dream one must be a little, unmoored.

I walk carefully through the mazy knot-garden, overgrown now, the rare and precious overwhelmed by the common and vigorous, to the seat in the rose-covered arbour, old pink roses, scented,

sharp-thorned, on the low knoll at its centre. What sensitivities of geomancy went into the locating of this precise place!

From here the whole of Geoffrey's private domain is in view; and beyond the wood, over the bank, the parkland and the big house small in the distance. My task, as always, is to bring it into being before my eyes, tell its story, then witness its falling apart. As if, with this telling, I will understand. I close my eyes. She is sitting beside me. I wait. She is gone. I am alone. I open my eyes, examine carefully the scene before me, and at last bring my eye to rest on the distant golden house that, in this instant, is lit up, illuminated by a beam of soft silver light.

VII

He made his arrangements, simplifying his finances, buying equipment, choosing the exact location he would live, with the certainty of one who believes he knows what he is doing, what the future holds.

SO that when, one late summer morning he drove his flatbed truck loaded with his possessions, piled high with his life, up the track, into the sun, he was sure he was driving to his destiny.

He felt like one of the Victorian discoverers of the Nile, Bruce, Speke. And when the engine died, never, he thought, to restart, he remembered Bruce's rapture on arriving at the source of the Blue Nile. And then the explorer's despondency at the thought that his journey was only half done, that the dangers he'd passed through all awaited him on his return journey: and Rolf thought – that is not so with me, there is nowhere to return to.

And when he stepped out of the silenced truck and stood silent in the midst of all the noise of the wood, he felt suddenly as if what was outside was inside too, that he was filled with the sun-dazzled air, scented with pine and honeysuckle, in which pollen tumbled slowly in voluptuous motion, through which birds darted, through him too, he gasped, so that he was, inside, endless.

HE made camp with practiced efficiency, pitching his large tent at the edge of the slightly sloping clearing, close to a bubbling spring. He dug toilet- and waste-pits to one side, then began arranging the tent.

He spread colourful rugs, hung up drapes of light sari cloth. In one room he placed a camp bed, sleeping bag, bedside table. In the other a small table, folding chair, bean bag, small book-

case with a dozen books, music player with ninety-nine tracks, a vase, and three small pieces of sculpture: a shapely Eskimo soapstone carving, smooth in the hand; an angular metal maquette that sharpened the senses; a leaping panther in wood, all captured energy. He set up his kitchen in the porch, then went to pick flowers.

HE spent hours arranging the living room: moving furniture, placing the sculptures, first here then there, turning them over in his hands the while like a blind man; re-ordering the books, reading a page in this one, a paragraph in that, lying down, chin on hands, to read a whole chapter; scrolling through the list of tracks intently, playing snatches, then one over and over, lying on his back. His whole life to date was in this fabric room, concentrated, focussed, relived in illuminated snapshots, experienced as a tumbled succession of vivid moments.

It was evening before he stepped out into the clearing. It was flooded with white light prised at the edges by his dazzled eyes. In the trees all around birds sang with a clamorous intensity, as if each was rushing to complete a day's quota of song; the trees were thick charcoal slashes against the white sun; the sky curved over him like the inside of an egg shell, clear blue, with a sharply-cut moon and one star. The sun slid into pinkness, the sky turned lilac; the birds suddenly stopped singing. There was silence. Emptiness rushed into the vacancy, filled him. He was made of glass, perfectly formed, everything working, without thoughts or feelings, registering exactly. The darkness settled upon him like a cloak onto a bird's cage, he within it silent and inviolate.