



This was the summer before the world stopped. We thought it was pretty bad, though in retrospect there was joy to be found. Aboveground monsters were everywhere, with terrible hair and red neckties. The monsters weren't in control of their powers—the hate crimes, mass shootings, heat waves, stupidity, certainty, flash floods, wildfires—but they had reach. *Everyone talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it.* Turns out we were supposed to.

August 2019: I shouldn't be vague, though that's my nature. Things felt dire, which now seems laughable. You could still unthinkingly go places. Myself, I'd gone to London, where a heat wave had bent train rails and shut down art exhibitions and turned the English into pink, panting mammals. I, pink, mammalian, panted alongside

them. I was trying to decide what I thought about my life.

On the internet I'd found a small hotel in Clerkenwell, a neighborhood I hadn't heard of. "*Clarkenwell*," the owner of the hotel clarified when I arrived, but I couldn't get the hang of deforming only the one *e* and kept calling it *Clarkenwall*. He was a gentle, blinky Englishman named Trevor, who might have been thirty and might have been fifty. He had a shaved head, hoops in both ears; he wore espadrilles, long loose shorts, and a brown linen vest, which he surely called a waistcoat and surely pronounced *weskit*. Altogether he looked like someone who was either a vegan or knew how to mindfully butcher a pig and use up every bit, snout and kidneys, trotters and tail.

Perhaps you fear writing a memoir, reasonably. Invent a single man and call your book a novel. The freedom one fictional man grants you is immeasurable.

"Here for pleasure?" Trevor asked. "Or is it work?"

"Bit of both," I said finally, with an accidental English accent.

Trevor smiled. His canines were obelisks. "Come this way. You'll like it here. Full of history. They used to hang people on the green."

"Wonderful," I answered.

The usual feeling of having my fortune told came over me, as it did whenever I approached accommodation for the first time. Good, I was blessed; bad, cursed. A short

list of my minor obsessions: hotel rooms, fortune-tellers, coin-op machines. Embarrassing, how much I refer to fortune-telling in my life—by *life*, I mean writing. Not memoir: I am not a memoirist. The room at Trevor's was on the ground floor—a curse—but the photos on the website hadn't done justice to the green leather armchair or shown at all the little desk in the bay window, the old cast-iron stove set into the fireplace.

Trevor's hand, as he gestured, was knuckly and atremble. "Cooker's original to the house," he said. "Georgian. There would have been a whole family in this one room. Just the two nights?"

"Yes," I said, "alas." *Alas* was one of those things I said too often, a way to say no while presenting myself as helpless.

He nodded. His eyes, like the chair, were oddly green. "I'll leave you to it."

The bathroom had a snub-nosed slipper tub and a toilet that flushed with a pull chain. At the bottom of the toilet bowl in pale-blue letters baked into the porcelain were the words *Thomas Crapper—London, Ltd.* Such a world, that has such toilets in it!

I put my laptop on the desk in the window and drew the curtains, to reveal another pair of curtains, and drew those curtains to reveal a sheer panel attached at both top and bottom. There were pubs on either side of Trevor's place. I could hear the drinking Londoners on the street: conversation, blunt laughter. Two men moved in front of

the window like burly shadow puppets, inches away from me. I could see their shapes but not details. “Tenerife’s no good,” one said to the other, bringing his pint glass to his mouth. “Tenerife’s where I fucked up.” I switched on the desk lamp, its glass shade the same Robin Hood green as the armchair. Peter Pan green. Poison green. If the drinkers had noticed me, I would have looked to them like an automatic fortune-teller in a box. *Go back to Tenerife*, I thought at the man outside, *and find your true love*. Perhaps I’d write this advice on the back of a business card and push it through a crack at the bottom of the window.

Never give up your metaphoric bad habits, the way your obsessions make themselves visible in your words. Tell yourself that one day a scholar will write a paper on them, an x-ray of your psyche, with all of your quirks visible like breaks in bones, both healed and fresh.

I took out the burner phone I owned for international travel, turned it off, and set it on my desk so that I wouldn’t be woken up by a middle-of-the-night text from America. The one person who might need me, the simmering emergency and joy of the past few years, my mother, was ten months dead. The last time I’d been to London was with her in 2016, after the presidential election but before the inauguration, on a lark of a Christmas trip. We’d had an exceptionally good time. I’d only minimally sniped at her. I’d let her make every decision and I’d picked up every check.

Condoling friends used the words *grief* and *mourning*. But neither was what I felt. All my life I'd heard people use those words to discuss the ordinary deaths of elderly people—or, worse, elderly animals—and (I am hard-hearted) I found them melodramatic. Those old people and dogs were never going to be immortal. Grief, as I understood it—grief and I were acquainted—is the kind of loss that sets you on fire as you struggle to put it out. My mother's death hadn't changed my mind. I just missed her. I hated to see her go. But she'd had a sweet end, or so I kept telling people, though who was I to speak for my mother? She'd hate that, my opinion about her experience. It was sweet for her family, at home with hospice nurses and cats, and friends around the bed, at a time—2018—when you couldn't count on a sweet end but it wasn't impossible.

At my Clerkenwell (*Clarkenwall*, *Clarkenwell*) desk, I read an email from the real estate agent who was going to try to sell my mother's house in far-off Massachusetts. A crew of professionals had cleaned it, organized the contents, held an estate sale, and then swept all the leftover things into three dumpsters. The estate sale I had attended; the clean-out, as it was called, happened afterward, over weeks, though I hadn't seen the pictures or heard how much the sale had netted. The real estate agent had grown up in the same Italian American neighborhood as I had (I was not Italian American), with the same sort of name as the boys from my elementary

school, which is why I had picked him, though he was ten years older than me and my former classmates, a youngish senior citizen in a blue suit. I didn't know him, a relief. One of my mother's neighbors was keen to sell the house for me, had in fact met my mother while canvassing the street for houses to sell, had in fact emailed me to offer condolences and her services. I was tired of people who'd known my mother getting in touch with me, not because they had no claim but because they did. In London, I found I wanted to hoard my little portion of her. I didn't write back to the neighbor, or to the Russian handyman who worked for my mother and wanted to know whether he should cut the lawn, or to his wife, an enthusiastic though incompetent house cleaner who brought my mother homemade chopped liver and loved her entirely. Mow the lawn? It was a reasonable question. I just didn't want to answer it. I didn't even write back to the real estate agent, whose daughter, he said, had taken pictures of the house: The listing would be up by the end of the American day. Let him list the house. Let it disappear without me noticing. It wasn't a haunted house but a haunting one. It had haunted me a long time.

Bereaved. That I'd own up to. *Bereaved* suggests the shadow of the missing one, while *grief* insists you're all alone. In London, I was bereaved and haunted.

The house was for sale. Soon I would have nothing to do with it.

I didn't want to see the pictures. I didn't want to work,

either. I closed my laptop and felt the internet burble through the lid, felt it flow into my fingers and hectic wrists. The next day, I decided abruptly, I would spend the whole day out, just my internetless burner phone in my pocket. I would let the city fill my head, and I would be a person on the earth instead of on the internet. I loved the internet, no mistake—the natter, the burble, the possibility of offered love, the opportunity to ask for love and receive it, never unalloyed, perhaps only fool's love, shining like the real thing, which was sometimes good enough even if it didn't last so long. The thrill of finding fool's love was still a thrill. The internet, or my relationship to it, had become a sixth sense, a shitty one, a power I used to divine things, sure, but also a prickling sensation in my organs: *There is information out there, better find it!* The monsters, too, whose power lived in the way they convinced you that you could defeat them with words they'd never read. I had a fantasy that someday I would meet one or two of these monsters, shake a hand, lean forward, and whisper the one thing each would most hate to hear. *You do know you're going to hell. Fat ass. Everyone can tell how stupid you are. God doesn't love you. Your wife doesn't love you. Your children will forget you. You're going to hell. You're going to hell. You're going to hell.*

As for myself, I didn't believe in hell or an afterworld of any sort. What netherworld could be more nether than this one? I believed the afterlife was, as an atheist might tell a child curious about heaven, the memories of other



people. How my mother would have hated that! To cede control to other people's brains, when her own brain was what she trusted. Still, she loved being thought about.

"You know," said the man on the other side of my window, the one who'd fucked up in Tenerife, "that's how it is. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah."

"But do you know what I *mean*?"

My mother distrusted memoirs and I wasn't interested in the autobiographical and for a long time that made things easy. But writers change even if mothers don't.

(Mothers change plenty. Don't trust a writer who gives out advice. Writers are suckers for pretty turns of phrase with only the ring of truth.)