

I. VERSION

It was Mrs Lambert at number twenty-three who put us up to it, or rather, who nobbled your father. In those days every quiet inner-suburban street had its complement of kindly, plucky old ladies, living all alone in their three-bedroomed houses as if they'd never done otherwise, but taking a beady-eyed interest in young couples like Mike and me. I wonder where they've gone.

Mrs Lambert didn't live all alone, exactly. She had two cats, Toby and Nancy, and one day she cornered your father by her front gate and said that Mr Nokes, the vet in Wells Road, had a lovely black cat going right now, a rescued stray, just a handsome black moggy. Who would want to abandon such a thing? She was just passing it on, but there'd be no harm, would there, in our going to have a look?

I don't think Mrs Lambert's neighbourly wheedling would have worked so well on me. But there you are, when your dad was in his twenties he was a soft touch for little old ladies. And your dad might have ignored it, but he mentioned it to me, as if he had a duty to please Mrs Lambert. He said that Mrs Lambert had said that if it didn't find an owner soon, well, you know... And, put like that, it made us seem like callous murderers if we *didn't* go and take a look.

I said, 'For God's sake, Mikey—a cat? A *cat*?' But we went along to take a look. And we were sold.

This is the simple truth that I don't think your father will mention tomorrow, though, arguably, he has even more invested in it than I do. Before there was you, there was a cat. But it goes a bit further, since it would be true enough to say that you owe your existence, your very genesis to a cat. You came from a black cat called Otis. A remarkable train of events, since Otis, like so many cats, had been well and truly neutered. But without Otis you might never have found your way into the world.

There, it's out of the bag. A secret that's never really needed to be a secret—I mean the existence of Otis—but we've kept it so, all the same. You've never heard us, at least till very recently, even mention his name. He died before you arrived. He was still there, at Davenport Road, not so very long at all before you were born and we left Davenport Road when you were still three. I'm always surprised you have any memories of the place at all. Perhaps tomorrow you'll try to dig up some more.

Otis. After Otis Redding, of course: the late-great Otis Redding, whose happy little paeon, *My Girl*, had wafted over Brighton beach in the spring of 1966. And whose bitter-sweet but oddly buoyant ballad, *Dock of the Bay*¹, had later floated, one summer, over London—over Earl's Court, over our basement and its red bedspread, over Mike's snails in the lab at Imperial², where he sneaked in a transistor radio—and become, for some reason *our* song, Mikey and Paulie's song, the song of our togetherness, our co-existence, our future.

There, another little secret. Why should a song of heartache and separation have become the song of our happiness and togetherness? I don't know, it just did.

Graham Swift, *Tomorrow*, 2007

¹ The titles of the songs are not to be translated.

² Mike is a scientist researching on snails.

II. THÈME

La chaleur, à ce moment, sembla monter encore. Cottard enleva sa veste et frappa sur la tôle. Un petit homme, perdu dans un long tablier bleu, sortit du fond, salua Cottard du plus loin qu'il le vit, avança en écartant le coq d'un vigoureux coup de pied et demanda, au milieu des gloussements du volatile, ce qu'il fallait servir à ces messieurs. Cottard demanda du vin blanc et s'enquit d'un certain Garcia. Selon le nabot, il y avait déjà quelques jours qu'on ne l'avait vu dans le café.

– Pensez-vous qu'il viendra ce soir ?

– Eh ! dit l'autre, je ne suis pas dans sa chemise. Mais vous connaissez son heure ?

– Oui, mais ce n'est pas très important. J'ai seulement un ami à lui présenter.

Le garçon essuyait ses mains moites contre le devant de son tablier.

– Ah ! monsieur s'occupe aussi d'affaires ?

– Oui, dit Cottard.

Le nabot renifla :

– Alors, revenez ce soir. Je vais lui envoyer le gosse.

Albert Camus, *La Peste*, 1947