

Crude

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Ida O'Dewey's first memory was of shocking pain, of white heat bursting behind her eyes, then flashing through her whole body. At the time this was a purely visceral experience, although she would soon be able to recount it as 'spilling boiling soup into my lap', finessing this some years later with 'my mons came up like a football'.

First memories are formed when the senses are subjected to some new intensity: the clamour and brilliance of a fairground, the faintly troubling smell of Tupperware, the surge of adrenaline at being abandoned at the nursery, the crack of a piggy bank giving way under a hammer, an uncle's too-tight grip around the wrist... These vignettes are the only access we have to our enigmatic prehistories, before we learned to preserve our thoughts and actions in language and lay them down for posterity. They tell us not so much about our personal stories, as our collective origin in the sensuous, meaningless slime.

But whereas most of us retrieve these memories from the third or fourth relatively inarticulate year of existence, Ida was already nineteen and fully verbal. The Spill happened one nondescript evening in the shared kitchen of her halls of residence. She assumed it was her halls, but could recall nothing of the circumstances that led up to the accident. And not just the immediate circumstances. There was a silent, colourless, odourless blank where there should have been memories of parental warmth, the rush of school days, the purple mist of teenage angst, the pinker, more pungent crushes, the intangible dreams, the all-too-concrete disappointments and the stretch and shimmer of learning, growing experiences. She was clearly possessed of a personage that had been formed socially, for she knew what was funny and how to be angered, could use her manners and usually observed consensual morality. And although later in life she would occasionally be haunted by childhood sensations – the reassuring pressure of the bar brought down on to her socked big toe to measure her for new school shoes, or the itch of melted ice cream drying on her chin in briney sunshine – there was no existing narrative to explain any of this, no circumstantial evidence to place her

anywhere particular. And no one had ever turned up to claim her. There were no birthday cards or Sunday evening phone calls, no one came to her graduation or expected her to visit during the holidays. According to the records she bore the surname O'Dewey, but all other descendants of the infamous librarian had changed their name to Browse during the Great Methodologies War. She was conspicuously without clan.

In the days following her sudden emergence into consciousness, Ida had taken to her room and wandered through the empty regions of her mind, like a family returning from holiday to find themselves burgled, her distress not mounting so much as dilating, as room upon room proved empty. With no inventory of what was missing, she was unable to express grief at nameable losses. Her anguish was paralytically general. Within a week, needing something specific to cling to, she had spun herself an autobiography: a dreadful accident had wiped out all her immediate family in one go, the traumatic news of their loss causing her to knock over her soup, which in turn triggered a profound, self-protecting amnesia.

But there was no letter or telephone hanging off the hook to corroborate this, and before long she would come to accept that she simply had not existed until she was nineteen. She had been born a fully formed adult, which, she decided, had its advantages. She was not burdened with the memory of tottering and falling during early attempts to walk, or forming wet sounds that no one else could understand in a mouth lacking the finer control required of articulation. And, as far as she was concerned, she hadn't packed her own kit bag of common sense through a painful process of lesson learning, but had always instinctively known that flames were hot, strangers posed dangers and the morning-after pill was not an honourable form of contraception. On her darkest days, not having had any experience of failing, trying harder and failing less completely, she felt she could never again learn anything new. Generally though, she was given to brightness and, with the attitude of one unaccustomed to embarrassment, tended to throw herself into situations where most would be wary.

A clarification is necessary at this point. When Ida said she had no memories, she was referring to the autobiographic sort that explain how one has come to be where and what one is. She did, however, discover a substantial deposit of memories of the impersonal kind, which described the wider world in general, if not her position within it.

A few weeks after *The Spill*, once her alienation had come to feel

familiar enough to be called her sense of self, she tentatively began quizzing that self for clues to its past. She had started with trivial questions, for safety's sake: What was the name of your first pet? What is your mother's maiden name? Who did you have a crush on as a teenager? Do you prefer cake or trifle? Surrealism or Existentialism? She had drawn a blank each time, until this last question. Why, that was easy: 'Existentialism of course. Surrealists were completely misguided in their assertions that their subconscious acted freely of their egos. Their egos became their ultimate product: they canned and sold their own breath. And don't get me going on misogyny! When they weren't sawing up their mistresses' bodies or filling up their vaginas with teeth and concrete, they were elevating women to symbolic stereotypes and then butchering and stuffing them. At least with Existentialism, in an amoral, Dogless universe, everyone and everything is equally meaningless. This is a profound eradication of capitalist hegemony, which Surrealism never even came close to. Surrealism simply condoned the indulgence and visibility of deeper desires, making them acceptable and visible enough for marketing departments to get their claws into. No, the only thing that Surrealism revolutionised was the advertising industry, by negligently building a motorway right up to the front door of the subconscious.'

She was breathless. Where had this opinion come from? Her excitement swelled. She asked more questions: What is Surrealism? Who were its main proponents? Why do teenagers think it's cool? Does the recent return to the moustache as a motif of eccentricity operate along Surrealist lines, or is it merely a cynical and empty signifier adopted by a media-conscious generation? She was stunned to note that not only did she know how to ask these questions, but that the answers radiated from her, lecture-sharp.

Blocking out the sounds of other students sparring, bickering and loving around her, she paced what little of the room wasn't filled by bed or desk and began to excavate her mind with care and amazement. She muttered and muttered, paced and paced, moving from Surrealism to French Lettrism to the Canadian Group of Seven to the New Objectivity of Weimar... She barely knew which link to follow, which periods, styles, concepts or aesthetics to choose from. Art-historical facts were jostling to be voiced, like rabbits at the chicken wire when lettuce is offered.

Hours later she fell to the bed exhausted. This knowledge that possessed her was bewildering. She was not studying art history. She was enrolled on a vocational arts administration course. Where could

it have come from? You hear of people being raised by wolves or nuns. Maybe she had been raised by art historians. She spent another week assessing her grasp of the subject and the nature of its content. It was beyond her current ability to test its depth and detail, but its historical scope seemed to reach right up until about twenty years ago, when she would have been born, if she was the age she supposed. This curious coincidence lodged in her mind like a splinter, provoking a throb that displaced all other thoughts. Art history became her creation myth, and contemporary art a cipher for her personal story. If she could understand art of the last twenty years, she would become whole.

She applied for a departmental transfer, underwent rigorous oral examination and within weeks was attending classes on temporality and spaciality, sociality, radicality and many other adjectives-turned-nouns. Her new curriculum became her intrinsic structure, her lecturers her parental figures and artspeak her genetic argot. By the time she graduated, with distinction, she had learned so much about herself from the reflective qualities of contemporary art that she came to realise, even if she were to track down her biological parents, they could not provide a truer image of herself.

She would consult artworks for emotional guidance – a strategy that could be confusing, since art relates human concerns more complex and grave than the average post-graduate's. But this, she found, put things in proper perspective. When her college sweetheart proposed to her on the day of their MA graduation, for instance, dozens of paintings of drab eighteenth-century Dutch women trapped in the barren psychology of their domesticity flashed before her eyes, and she turned him down flat. For progressive advice on handling her first overbearing editor she consulted the Futurist Manifesto, but reviling her editor's decaying spirit (he was over forty) and throwing him aside like an old manuscript was not a course of action available to someone with ambition but no private income. And so she turned to the eighteenth-century Romantics instead, who taught her to feed off the horror and awe of his edits.

And now, twenty years on, with first-hand experience up to her elbows, art was no longer a subject external to her, to be learned; it grew within her like kettle fur. She was now a producer of knowledge who drew fragile respect from a capricious public. The momentum she had built up through the enthusiasm of her twenties and the mild arrogance of her thirties had propelled her to a supposedly powerful position. But since visibility and vulnerability had always been entangled in her mind,

she undertook her more prominent roles – as a regular reviewer in a quality newspaper and an advisor on a primetime television soap opera – with wary ambivalence. She was never so intoxicated by the heights of success that she did not notice the upturned faces willing her to fall.

CHAPTER 1

'So,' said Preston the insomniac lead scriptwriter, 'we've got a murder scene: the life-drawing room, tastefully cluttered with easels and drapes. And I think there should be an art-historical reference in the positioning of the body. Firstly, because it's classy...'

'Yes, definitely,' said Chip. 'There's always a heavy mailbag after an art-historical reference. Excellent.' The producer liked to coincide a dramatic new subplot with the start of each term, but the start of the academic year should be extra-special.

'And secondly, in case we need a serial killer. He could commit a whole series of murders and arrange the bodies in poses from paintings. People love a killer with a "thing".'

'Or she could,' said Ida. 'Why not a female serial killer?'

Chip exhaled smoke with a long hiss.

'Would the feminists like that? I never can tell. It seems that equality is desirable to them only when what is being shared out is something they particularly want.'

'Speaking as a feminist,' said Ida, tossing her copper curls, 'I'd like to see a woman break free of the murderer's sidekick mould. I for one would be interested to hear she had a psychotic personality disorder. Men always grab the best excuses for themselves.'

'From a dramatic perspective, I think it's a great idea,' said Preston, removing his glasses to rub his bruised eyelids. 'She could be a vengeful, menopausal life model, returning the male gaze in the form of a dagger. And she only kills the men who have painted her.'

'Oh yes,' said Chip. 'The network'll love it – it has tragedy, gender politics and—'

'Stereotyping?' Lack of sleep, thought Ida, can darken an imagination, but it can also make it lazy. And basing the body's pose on a painting is going to be a problem. Male nudes aren't exactly prominent in art history. You could open it up to sculpture, because there's your Classical Greek statues, of course. But when is a murder victim ever upright and about to throw a discus?'

'She could hang her victims then,' said Preston.

'Great, that's it. Daisy,' said Chip, addressing the art director, who stood to one side, drawing frantically as everyone spoke, and crossing out furiously as they changed their minds. 'You'll need to research ropes and knots for that. And Ida...'

'Not so many famous paintings of hangings, I'm afraid. And the pose tends to be a bit samey. Doesn't naturally lend itself to variations on a theme.'

'Ok, so maybe she could crucify her victims then,' said Chip. The others grimaced. Even Preston found it a touch too gothic. 'Hmm, yes, you're right – still too samey. This isn't really working out, is it? Sorry Preston, can we revert to male murderer, female victim?' Preston nodded matter-of-factly, not quite hiding his disappointment. 'So Ida, you're back on reclining female nude duties, if you don't mind.'

'Just close your eyes, pick any art history book off the shelf, open it and point,' said Ida with a sigh.

'And Preston,' said Chip, 'to keep the feminists happy, let's have the victim be a lady professor. I'll check the cast list for any pending maternity leave.'

'Ok. So then we have Sam and Pamantha's first kiss,' said Preston.

'And a bloody long time coming too. I was starting to think they were frigid. So, go on.'

'It would be great to have it happen in the lecture theatre with a nice big slide projected in the background. There could be a close-up with a lovely pan upwards to an image of something sexy, beautiful, spiritual even—'

'Nothing too blue now,' warned Chip. 'No ecstatic St Theresa with a cum-face or cherubs pointing their willies about. Ida? Any thoughts?'

She closed her eyes, hummed and twiddled her ear like a radio dial.

'I'm getting a... a... a foot, yes a drawing of a foot.'

'Stop pissing about,' said Chip.

'No, actually, I think that's quite good,' said Ida. 'An anatomical drawing of a foot. They're kissing, with their mouths.'

'Naturally.'

'And they're thinking about working their way down to one another's vaginas. It always starts at the mouth...'

'Speak for yourself,' said Preston.

'On television it always starts and ends at the mouth,' said Ida. 'The rest is usually left to the imagination. But here we go too far, so to speak.'

We've already overshoot.'

'Hey, that's great actually,' said Preston. 'You know, in the black-and-white days you could only show a kiss onscreen if both actors had one foot on the floor.'

'I think you mean at least one foot,' said Ida.

'Ok, ok. But anyway, a foot image would make for a nice riff on that. I like it.'

'Oh yes,' said Chip, 'the viewers like that subtle cultural studies stuff, don't they, where they have to invent the associations.'

'Not invent – excavate. Sorry, I forgot, they don't teach you these thinky things on those vocational courses,' said Ida, 'but trust me – it's a classy bit of media critique that will generate a good few column inches.'

'Listen. Communications is a three-year academic course that's just as long and difficult as art appreciation, or whatever it is you pretended to study,' said Chip, pocketing his cigarettes, which was always a sign that things were drawing to a close. 'And anyway, who's top of this little hierarchy here? Now, as I was saying, I don't suppose anyone could be rubbed up the wrong way by a large foot – present company excepted, on account of you being filthy sensualists – so, if you think it's a goer, I'll run with it. Pardon the pun.'

A herd of gutter-press smudgers lived in the production office forecourt and pumped off a few rounds of flash-photos whenever anyone exited or arrived, whether they recognised them or not. Ida accommodated them with a brief pose, deflecting with smiles their standard questions regarding her next project, her personal life and career ambitions, before heading for the stationer's to stock up on skinny, hard-balled biros and slippery fibre-nibs. She also needed a new notebook for her big new project. She loved stationery. Half the job was done already if you had fresh tools lined up for it. They represented an exciting state of potential, in which there were as yet no compromises made, no sub-standards accepted with bad grace. A project was at its best in these first throes.

Central Academia was in a similar state of potential. September was the most verdant month of the academic year, when any leaves so inclined in the deciduous and evergreen mix forest had a way to go yet before they turned. Even greener freshers were arriving by train and tram in the outer districts, where halls of residence showed off their new coats of paint, beaming in the sunshine. In the centre, standing at their allotted clearings hacked out of the forest, the Greco-Roman

Etymology Department, the neo-baroque Philology Block and the art nouveau Critical Faculty Building bore newly planted blooms in their many borders, balconies and baskets with the grace of well-brought-up women who know how to wear jewellery appropriate to age and occasion. But while the stone and marble façades served up a potent cocktail of awe, anxiety and ambition, the sprawling television centre inspired a very different sentiment. Its hodgepodge of architecture told of goals achieved through incremental increases in budget, know-how and populist appeal, upgrading over decades from a shanty of single-floor portacabins to glass towers that forged upwards with the launch of each new channel – six at present, with a seventh under construction.

In the stationer's, a busy three-floor emporium that peddled every hue and tone ever manufactured, Ida picked out a fine-nibbed green ink pen with a transparent barrel that seemed more technical than it was. It was of no relevance to her big new project though. She was distracted by more immediate appointments and deadlines, and in particular her appearance on a radio panel game show that evening. Having been on the programme numerous times before, she knew there was no possibility of preparing for it, other than generally clearing the mind and limbering up the geniality muscles. And so, on quitting the shop, she decided to walk about for a bit to see who else might be on the prowl.

Among the first trickle of students in their best outfits, she ran into a shambling man she could never remember the name of, although she knew plenty about him: he was a point-two in the Etymology Department and had a penetrative sibillance that barred him from the career in broadcasting he had so dearly wished for. He had emerged, carrier bag in hand, from among the television executives in suits and lecturers in gowns, like a camouflaged predator leaping from a sand trap to engage Ida in small talk.

'Ida, hello! It's been an age. So, tell me, what are you working on at the moment?' This was a conversational gambit she particularly hated.

'Oh, you know – the usual. Bits and pieces.'

'C'mon, there's always something special bubbling on the O'Dewey stove. I hear you've got something big cooking up, no?' He was always interested to hear what the a- and b-list were up to, and felt no trace of resentment. He was relieved to be mediocre. It was infinitely less stressful than leading the sort of life he enjoyed spectating.

'Well, I am revving up to start a new book.' She waggled her new pen at him.

'Great. What is it? More on affective of functionive?'

'Dog, no, I think I've done my bit on that subject – er, topic. No, I'm researching a new area I'm in the process of making up. It's always hard to say at the beginning, but, loosely speaking, I think it's about measuring.'

'Wow – amazeballs!' He seemed genuinely impressed, which was sweet of him, Ida thought. He always spoke positively. Very rare, she thought. Very undignified.

'There goes someone important,' said Ida as a professorial limousine pulled out of the professorial car park and nudged along the elevated road that only professors could use. All other traffic was consigned to zigzagging about the pitted streets engulfed by the forest below, which served every last outhouse and offered no direct route between any two places that a normal person might need to use. This was why, besides service and goods vehicles, train and tram were the primary modes of transport in Academia.

'Bo, yes, anyway...,' said the man. 'I'm still campaigning for "doing" to be pronounced "doing"; which he made rhyme with "boing" instead of "woosing".'

'Of course, yes, it's important work, taking on those dictionary cartels. You must explain your etymological revisionism to me some time.' She always said this to him, although they both knew that she didn't really want him to and that she would never lend her name to the campaign, despite the list of quite reputable endorsements he had already garnered. His uncle, a Reader in the Linguistics Department, had backed him, not through nepotism, but because the nephew was a usefully inert body to have on the staff. His academic mediocrity ensured he was a team player by nature, averse to intellectual liberty, risk and innovation. This 'doing' campaign gave the impression of intellectual progressiveness required of even entry-level academics, but would never actually upset any theoretical or institutional apple carts.

'Well, I must prepare myself for the radio this evening.' She looked him, whatever-he-was-called, in the eye for perhaps the first time during their exchange and smiled warmly. The final impression is the one that lasts, she always thought.

'Oh Ida, you do live the life...'

'Shit, have you seen the time?' she interrupted, in case another avenue of chat had occurred to him, and tilted towards a busy tram stop round the corner, out of sight, while he, floored by this metaphysical parting shot, shook his head and rubbed the back of his neck in bewilderment.

'Have I seen the time?' he muttered. 'Have I seen it? How do they do it, these high-flyers? They have a mind, just like I have a mind, but how do theirs come up with these abstract and brilliant things?'