



Stones and Dunces.

At the end of 1999, my mother wrote asking me home.

Nothing exotic like St Ives, or even nice, like that early Christmas in Norfolk, with snow coating that green land. But that was then. Today, sixteen stones solid in that bathrobe, I was heading north.

Today was December 26th, and my whole body argued against going.

The glare of my mirror showed my hair fray and skin peel at my touch. My weight wasn't why I panted these heavy breaths onto the glass. Still, however modest, the trip hinged mostly on how I, a semi-recluse, would navigate family.

Family stayed on my mind as I packed Christmas sweaters my mother sent over the years and never saw me wear. Deliberately mustard knits that wouldn't run in this decade. Didn't help they were from *last* decade, embroidered 1987, 88... and timing our estrangement.

But part of me understood. Why the Christmas table, that wood and humble thing, missed my plate was no mystery.

I got dressed, with difficulty. Resisting easy motifs, I put on the 89, year whose fashion was thankfully looser. Ladling creams onto my permanently puffed face, I felt my coat for the letter and my pillbox, then locked the heavy door behind me.

The part that never understood kept doubting the invitation. If that's the word we want for that page-length paragraph quite shorn of punctuation.

Sweaters came with letters usually wishing for my health only indirectly. Stamped on December 1st, this one 'yearned for my touch North,' and notably lacked the usual review of a year in moss country, which uncles and cousins had seemingly spent terracing their house. Gone, too, were the nervous strokes of my mother's handwriting.

Waiting for my cab under the terrible sky, I went back to the typed letter: three grams of birch paper reading here wonderfully solemn.

"Dear James,

'With a heart poised between fullness and void I write. Emmet and Julia and children's bright cascade of laughter glide upon the frozen mirror while I offer cautions unheard. They perceive the world like you did but does that sight still linger in your soul? I happen to think it is...

A cab slowed on Monsoon Road, still that damp sexual black even dry.

I rushed to finish that line '*...it is opium to the sick but substitute to the warm thing,*'

... then carefully replaced the letter into my magnificent green coat and got in.

'King's Cross, please', I said, my voice low.

'King's Cross?' the driver said, straining to pivot.

King's Cross was maybe two swerves right from Monsoon Road.

The driver stared out onto the street: couldn't I just *walk*? But then he craned into the rearview, and winced at what he saw.

London, grey and post-fever, ran on slower clocks. Evading him and any chance of my face in the rearview, I looked on the comatose city, calm with neglect, sky to road to fiercely solo diners, caught in the beige lights of burger spots.

'Eight pound, mate,' said the driver as he braked, outstretching his hand without turning. Gave him a tenner and left the change.

Inside King's Cross, cathedral of screens pulsing bad news, I squirmed through the sleepless faces of alternative Christmas – waiters wrapped in cigarette smoke; short and fry cooks still in aprons underneath their coat.

Ducking under platform 5, I boarded the 3:50 to Sunderland and settled in Coach, my velvet seat only velvet-coated.

I understood neglect, the afternoon breakfasts. The people who had none, and went to bed nursing their thoughts. Faces like mine first settling here, skewing under displacement or obscene rent, and aimless in the probable rain.

I retrieved the letter again, then folded my coat. *'Opium to the sick but substitute to the warm thing.'* was only one of my mother's flourishes. The letter went on:

'Though he never said it even as he waned I know there wasn't a sun setting without your father worrying about you in London. I can't begin to understand how it must feel to stay so long estranged in the urbanite mess, masses but a substitute to the warm thing.'

Regards,

Mary Dunce.

Mary was my mother's name, and Dunce the one we now shared exclusively. Her prose was usually quiet, trusting there's style in distance. And in that distance, in those British asides and detours from significance (*'Emmet is poised to be a gifted right-back'*), all I'd taste reading her was metal. Sure, northern pudor, strictly inward. *'opium to the sick but substitute to the warm thing'*: still felt a strange way to say she was dying too.

My father, dutiful officer but stunted man, had yet loved her for that distance, firmly upper-class. This stayed true until I, their only child, talking early about books and plays, got older, teenaged, and started writing words that leaned explicit. Whenever I'd be doing voices from female leads, he'd retreat into that angular face we didn't share, darkly surveying the table son to wife. Just male blood, running hot after normalcy.

But as the train ruffed past the river Trent, my terror accelerating with each pine or field the season made barren, I remembered what came after: the rowing teams; the irony in segregated boarding schools with much-visited urinals. Two masses passed each other in my throat and stomach. Was this terror, irony? Then again it's true my meds came with booklets of side-effects, graphic enough to stay alert.

I was alert. Hurrying through piss-scented corridors, I passed another breed of London transplants sitting ticketless: commuters, long-standing failures at making it on either end of the Divide.

'Got a fag, mate?' one pleaded, huddled against the toilet door.

Which would have resonated funny if I hadn't been a second from soiling myself.

I went inside, my brain flushed with local scents. We clanked up to speed, passing the Moors and dry waterfalls; wheels screeched like joint pain; my head in the toilet felt far worse.

'Okay in here?' someone asked with rapid knocks.

'Yes, all good,' I managed, trying to stand.

But it wasn't all good, catching my breath on the very public seat.

Moments like these, my big illness branching into a new sickly side dish, I'd normally sneer at in my Barbican grief group. There, mourning an empty chair, we'd muse about life's ebb and flow, hoping to bring about the collective joke we felt was on us. Like, where was it, my life, what was left? In the pills, offsetting each other, or in my blood and now shit vying for dominance in the bowl?

With the voice and stare of conviction, our Barbican volunteer would preach about acceptance or try to. Nice guy, striding towards baldness, a contour of hairs tracing the jaw jawbones didn't. But the guy wasn't dying. So, yeah, acceptance.

The small window in the toilets now gave onto 'the Flats'—plains lightly interspersed with shaven trees, the tallest things I knew for miles. Our train, an old LNER, cooled on provincial tracks lined with ferns. I sanded my face, toilet paper grating at my skin. As I rushed back to get my things, home and context threatened me with public tears.

Stumbling off at Derrington, my stop, my coat on, I dragged myself to a bench.

Smells of damp stumps and that far out sea I loathed lapped at my coppery taste from London and AZT.

Under that winter dust from lampposts, I waited, thinking the letter had been a mistake, like coming was. For a while this is what shaped up, watching fellow men and women in sauced shirts or alright chignons rush into parental arms. Station clocks said this lasted five minutes, 8:20 to 25. But this felt more.

Just as the platform emptied, alongside the musk of train and canned armpits, rain boots stopped before me.

‘James?’

I looked up and saw a large man whose black beard shrouded all but his rubbery lips.

‘Yes?’ I said, confused.

And the man saw this.

‘That much, huh?’, he said, laughing and patting his enlarged stomach.

My face widened but didn’t light. ‘Tom?!’ I said. I got up, got hugged, then failed to stop him from grabbing my bag.

When crewing and all-boys schools failed, my desperate father had ordered some mandatory wood work alongside cousin Tom, all sinews and bulges then, a few months older and a few inches more adequate for the outdoors. Now, this was work, and appeared to be working, until rumors swelled from the village.

We walked to the car.

‘Good train?’ he asked, meaning the journey.

‘Alright, uneventful, you know,’ I said, wiping my face just in case.

Tom paused at ‘uneventful’, like a child would approach new shapes or algebra— dramatic head tilt, a pursed mouth.

‘Come on, they’re all waiting,’ he said as we got into the car.

Which *did* send me into algebra, reasoning that, the last time a sweater came paired with a photo, Tom already came with a wife and a child. And though I supposed sinkholes could happen to wives here, what happened most was them getting pregnant.

We drove, scorching the new road with our headlights, and soon passed a roofless church. But the adjacent pub, *Jeff's*, was truly why no one went to mass. *Jeff's* was how some quaint Americans had renamed the local trough. 'Their pub, their choice,' my father had said, driving past it in what was now Tom's car. I'd agreed in silence.

We drove on. Driving stick on 10-year tires demanded little effort from Tom, guided by stars unchallenged over that low earth. Noticing the pimples and dermabrasion from his life up our slopes, I imagined him content now, with a wife: 10 stones of heft and transversal thinking house to household. 'Surely he has his shits,' I rationalized.

Surely, not like mine though, damming my condition from anyone not sick and myself in medicine.

I spoke first.

'How is she?'

Tom's mouth squirmed; hairs around it brushed his nostrils:

'You know. Same, warm, a bit tough since your father and the legs.', he said, without deviating from the road.

'The legs?'

Tom shot me a glance, see if I was serious. I was.

'Yeah, the stroke.', he said.

'What you mean, the legs or the stroke?', I said, higher, holding in a cough.

'The legs yeah, from the stroke'

We could have gone on like that but the coming dirt and private lamppost announced the Dunces hamlet, 15 acres of Tudor ambitions centered around an icy pond. Far from the millennium strumming London's inner ear, our house stood cold and proud atop a driveway stylishly

unattended. Down the village, they spoke of the 'manor', and of us Dunces as the closest to nobility for miles.

'She kept your room ready mate', Tom said as we climbed out.

He then pointed at second-floor windows, their frames rinded in moss. An old birch now gnashed at the glass, white with the moon bouncing off. Night made the house and same-shade gables look endless.

'She's awake?', I asked, my gaze returning to the car.

Tom paused fumbling for his shovels around the trunk. Festive fizz and orange light streamed out from the drawing room.

Through the rear glass and acceptable face fat, I saw Tom's throat tense under the power of his jaw.

I wasn't sure he'd heard me, or if I'd actually asked, so focused on the staying pink of his lips.

Mine chapped. Motif, vestige of that youth we no longer shared.

Having secured the shovels, Tom slammed the trunk; birds up the birch tree flapped off.

I asked again:

'Is she awake?'

'she was, yeah', he said, rattling through the gravel.

As I followed him inside, my calves stiff, I saw my father hanging in the stairwell.

Among oils of the Northern pastoral commissioned post exile, the portrait restored him in death and uniform: an adequate hairline; upright with my coat on; loathsomely primed in cavalry plumes.

Our Barbican meetings sometimes touched on forgiveness. I'd stopped before, only admitting that, part of growing up, of being sick, was to allow for the plurality of experience— mine, his and 1987 Northumberland, rarely kind to sexual openness. I breathed, careful with the coughs.

Tom dropped his shovels, dusting off his hands on his jeans, then turned into the drawing room. A flammable mix of sofas and mural tapestries of Agincourt talked up the vaulted ceiling.

'Look who's here', Tom said, stepping to the side.

I was about to follow, surrendering to fate, when I noticed a rail welded to the wall.

The stairlift wasn't down, wasn't there. I didn't ask, and didn't cough.

'James!' said a woman who, taking my large frame for sturdiness, immediately jumped into my arms. It took me a second to recognize my cousin Grace, her adolescent black strands now wrapped into a chaste bun. Took me another second to scale the whole room.

Soon before me sat, crouched or crawled 3 generations of Dunces, each an iteration of 'northern tan' or sun-fucked pallor. Three male cousins, and two girl cousins, 2 or 3 children each.

The Emmet and Julia of the letter whose paint-dipped fingers once signed my Christmas cards had harnessed the power of speech.

'Why?', Emmet asked, his small hand raised to my face.

I laughed, or gasped a high note.

'Emmet!', said his mother Grace, reeling him in. 'I'm sorry James,'

I laughed and they laughed, but not laughing and standing stern with a teacup was one uncle, Gordon, all chin and eyebrows and unmarried to the one aunt tending to the tree roped in LED garlands. Lower, Emmet momentarily set aside his toy car for the wrapping. Julia and others played on the furniture. Not a single Christmas knit.

‘I’m sorry your mother couldn’t wait up,’ said Grace, making room for me on the sofa.

‘It’s alright. It’s alright,’

It was alright; the eggnog wasn’t.

Crammed around a coffee table, my coat on, I then spent the next hour answering questions about London: the rent, the people, and explained rent wasn’t always obscene but that *any* amount was obscene for Whitechapel and its inhabited staircases. A world where locals taught postcode nuance to us provincial hopefuls. Seldom fed or booked artists whose shifting expectations (collage for painters; composers of white noise rhapsodies) helped neither with the feeding, the booking, nor a permanent address. And of that time hauling boxes between flats, my coat, my father’s, had stayed with me.

Tom listened intently, his hands clasped in interest; I didn’t tell them about the coat.

The evening went on fine, helping timid laughs out of our throats. We talked on about the millennium, politely skirting hot topics including my caked-up face. Children now scaled the Regency drapes swaying under their weight. Arranged in beds of thick logs, the large fire to my right crackled hot. Emmett got back to roving around in his toy car and for a fleeting moment, the rub of that sofa, the kick of brandy Grace just provided crept into me.

There was distance between us, and acquired distance too (Gordon: ‘how you mean, rhapsodies for white noise?’), but for that short burst of familial warmth, the ‘ill’ look and ‘sick’ label heaved out. Then I got low, and Emmet got close, reaching for my makeup starting to drip.

He almost touched it; and almost tasting the salt in my sweat, I inched forward to stand up.

‘Oh, you must be tired,’ Grace said, genuine.

‘Yeah, so tired,’ said Gordon, who wasn’t, his lower lip shuddering with contempt.

I expected this from Gordon, my mother’s brother and self-declared good man, always a quid denied from wealth like ours. So did Tom, apparently, who snapped a dark glare at his father

‘Don’t mind the old twat mate’, Tom said, hauling my bag upstairs with ease while I held my face.

I didn’t mind. Long before my exile, when I was Emmet’s age and size, my hair then neatly parted to the left, I’d sense Gordon’s eyes in the distance sniffing me out. This had kept up; he’d never signed any Christmas cards.

On the second floor, Tom and me teetered from the upholstered hallway into my room. And it was true what he’d said: my mother had kept it alright, mauve sheets to journals scattered in fits of adolescent rage.

‘That’s alright then,’ Tom tried, lacking conviction.

But I didn’t care, what with the dribbling makeup and pills wearing off.

'I'm bent,' I said, forcing 'bent' for fatigue. 'I'll see you tomorrow, Tom,' I said, and pressed him out the door.

While the humidity outside soaked our clothes and blackened our stumps, the cold here in my room didn't penetrate, stopping at my face. In the framed mirror I didn't look so ill. To its usual volume and swelling from cortisone, my face here firmed into a pale red. At specific angles I looked younger; at others, leaner; before the moon shifted—a cloud or something—and old colors faded back into the reality of my health.

After a string of coughs splattered on the mirror, I flipped open my pillbox, texture shifts from soft capsules to rough tablets guiding my fall. I could do it in the dark, and often did.

Kicking off shoes, pants, and the 1988 sweater rough on my chest and handles, I slid under the heavy covers, crushing me under cardinal red.

Counterintuitive to my presence here, I steered the last of my consciousness not to my absent mother but the disease, its meaning and permanence, having lived with it almost as long. Had I been reckless back then, sleighing down the 'scene'? And when was 'reckless'—hot 88? the 90s, post-knowledge? Birch branches on my window gave rhythm to this, pressing me to answer.

Smothering dry cries, I wrestled with what I could have done differently, or had done so different from others: the non-sick without night sweats, free of chills down their spine.

Framing my time in-between flats as 'part of growing up' fell on me easy. For all the tears that followed my face in its skew, there was an upside. Or an upshot. the upside was this: the sense of commune we'd embalm any newcomer with, and find renewed amid the stick and slime of secluded pubs, or the grandiose and urgent needs of Soho, and, later, in low-glow waiting rooms, our soles

trenching the plastic floor with not-knowing. Doctors couldn't exactly tell how or when I got sick, with the many ways and paths I had taken to get there. 'Could be', they said absently, before frowning at this or that week's lab results, the same relief or devastation traversing us before the envelope.

'Can cause hallucinations' read the back of my pills, yet what woke me was tangible, coming from the vents or pipes. But was I even sleeping?

I straightened against the headboard, my heart and mind racing after a pattern.

Every Spring we'd scout our land, my parents teaching me about animals and their steps. Sepias of these times remained on my adolescent desk, tripartite holiday poses here enduring in the dark: shoulders they'd cinched; my crisped smile holding some helpless carp I'd managed.

The noise got nearer. And wasn't animal—too straight and regular, meaning intent.

I fumbled for the switch, found it, flicked it, only for the noise to stop. A line, a flat shadow, then stretched along the threshold of the door.

Quietly I reached for the small nightstand and something. Anything, which happened to be one of my journals.

16 stones sadistically gathered around my face and stomach meant something out in the world, the tautological marking of a fat fuck. But in my version, my pocket, this meant health. This meant life, one a squeak or toxoplasmosis could threaten.

'Stop,', I said.

My voice crackled but shouldn't have already. Wasn't there a toy car downstairs? And Emmet? Still I lifted the covers and went for the doorknob, ready to smash that first binding over whomever, when along the threshold, the shadow hobbled and the noise stopped. Or this one did, trading the malice in my mind for that of aging knees buckling to stand. Followed a second try, then a fall, in clanks of metal and little wheels.

In the shared stillness of night and room I slid against the door, listening to the grunts demanded of torn lungs. Faint or feminine strength left that body with each of these knocks on the door, each its own effort, its own economy.

At my then-darkest, hovering like many between food security and actual security, I'd strain for her early smiles, shot from frothed lips and sparse dentures. And yet, while my patriarch of a father had ultimately exiled me, it was over her I still agonized.

The slender figure and rosed woman, so fierce protecting the name she had married into.

Eyes shut, we synched our breath, as she did with me then, when our bond obsoleted words and the outside world. My illness was global, blurred timelines: gentle wheelchair thuds became her tapping my forehead, then enough to ease my cries into calm; old rage felt renewed.

I didn't open, letting the door get impacted for once. Instead I lay here like I usually did at St Bartholomew, shocking doctors with my decline and nurses who saw my sheets artfully rolled into her shape: I lay in yearning, her touch not warm exactly but serene, less caressing than holding my cheeks. And what was left? Two bodies defined by diminution under the indifferent moon.

She hadn't come to the station that day, her curtains staying unmoved by the sputter of my his car warming outside. Sure, the sweaters since, and the letters tangentially caring. But warmth, actual care, then and since?

She hadn't come that day, cinched between same-shade clouds and grounds.

Unlike my father: biting on tears; shedding his coat for protection against the miffing wind.

The cold woke me up deep into the afternoon. A contour of sweat on the stone part of the floor said how I'd slept. How eventful the motion, the vivid tosses on the black slate.

I hauled myself up full of tremors from lack of pills and glanced at the driveway outside.

I saw no car, not even Tom's buggy.

As pale light slithered in, I quickly swallowed my pills for coughs and focus, then went to the charged sweaters. 87, 89 barred into 90, stylized into a green smile. To the sleek elegance of yesterday's 1989, I chose comfort, security, and picked two. 1991's, also a yellow year, with that mirror date woven in red; 1987, when I left, just seemed fitting.

I emerged into the half-lit corridor coat and makeup-free, ears and neck craned to the domestic silence. I stepped—no, crept slowly and saw the stairlift was down.

'Hello?', I said, looking down the wooden staircase. Holding the ramp firmly, I passed my father and paintings from regional middleweights ('Christ, the waves...'), each a fantasy of the land I knew.

In last night's grand room, I saw no toy car, no wrappings. The tree, now bare, slouched over last night's table tucked against the tapestry. A stack of birch paper was at its feet.

Like the version I'd received, waxed-shut with full trust, my mother's drafts were typed.

But where they? Where they truly hers? I sat, or dropped, sifting through dubious 'fields bursting with wild green', our hamlet 'edged by wildflowers.' I did wonder about the 'deer dancing among ancient oaks.' About the birds 'soaring on cerulean arcs', when the only blue like that was on Tom's jeans.

I set aside more of my mother's urges ('kestrels cries ripping the seam of the afternoon'), gripping my head for the headache in it.

Whatever this was, I had started it. And Tom, then lean and loose in those jeans, had been right to say so. Not okay, missing the swirl of his tongue around my body, but true. For all it took and pilfered, my illness granted me that one clear memory of us shoveling dirt and stumping birches. On good days, or bad ones perhaps, birds chirping in woodland silence echoed in my skull. The feel and taste of sweat and salt on our backs endured.

I'd framed it an 'experiment', local limits and discovery spilling into gauche sex. Something for which moss country lacked the word then; Tom's father Gordon just lacked the temperament.

The skilled headache now grew into a migraine as I remembered the silverware trembling under Gordon's wrath that day. His head half-cocked in denial, my father had listened to his graphic retelling of that afternoon. Crying throughout, my mother rekindled religion, asking the sky why and how could I have strayed so far. Per custom, my father no longer in denial after Tom's contrition, blamed my mother (suspending matrimony), and she readily blamed herself.

Gordon blamed me, my father's son. And, curled at the center of that shame, was only guilt I couldn't trade for anger.

I stood up, gripping the table with my right hand; the 'kestrel' draft fluttered from my left.

Stumbling toward the French doors, the cold did penetrate now and bit at my sweaters knitted too loose.

Proactive, I forced a cough up and spat on the gravel, startling the drove expecting to be fed up the birch. Winds from the distant North Sea fell on the grounds, spread around the shine of the frozen pond.

I stood above the shape my interiority took on gravel. Biohazard green and brown, dead cells not all mine. With a long stick I poked the mass slugging away, asking the disease where it hid.

Enough. I ran the drafts across my chin and the tear that got past me then hobbled on toward the pond: to look at some dead things. Through the lacework of ferns and invasive knotweeds, I briefly imagined the moral life if I had stayed here: straightened spine; seeing virtue in simplicity and merit in what they said about us in moss country. Miffed by Northern winds chapping my lesions, I looked into the pond and saw the carp.

Burn-bright orange caught in ice mid-gasp; sickly white framed mid-swerve: dorsals veering left, caudal now forever right. I resisted the motif, and that smile distorting my face.