

# The Ego Doctor

*And now good-morrow to our waking souls, Which watch not one another out of fear; For love, all love of other sights controls, And makes one little room an everywhere. Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone, Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown, Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.*

THE GOOD-MORROW JOHN DONNE

THIS was the third call-out in as many weeks to the affluent end of Chelsea street, though I had not yet attended this address. An ill-favoured footman took my card without looking at it. They required my presence upstairs post-haste. The sickroom did not smell of death, for the affliction I am called to cure is seldom life-threatening. Two young men and three women, one a pretty young thing, stood around the bed gazing forlornly at the occupant. Even though it was afternoon, they had drawn the curtains. Maybe in his seventieth year, a man lay still with his arms crossed across his chest. He gazed at the ceiling, whining.

‘Come now, sir, the Doctor is here and will put your mind at rest.’

A handsome woman of middle years grimaced at me with what she imagined was a smile.

‘Yes indeed. You can rest easy now, sir,’ I chirped.

The figure did not acknowledge me. I was not surprised. Nothing existed for him. I have seen those sightless and stubborn eyes many times before. His family were meaningless shapes, to whom he attributed whatever disgruntled him at the moment. My voice had no more meaning for him than a dog’s bark. I placed my bag on the bed and withdrew the trumpet. Though I knew what I would find, it is essential to go through the motions.

'If you would turn your head for a moment, sir. I mean to investigate what ails you.'

I carefully turned his head and placed the rubber end of the trumpet in his ear. After securing the inspection trumpet to his head with a leather band, I wound the expanding lever a complete twenty revolutions before looking into the funnel. The aperture was the size of my fist. I moved the mirror flap to direct a lamp's weak light into the hole. Nothing? I motioned a maid to pull aside the curtains.

'Aha! There it is.'

A glint of metal in the pink mess. I wound the lever five times, and the rotor's rim and gimbals were visible.

'Yes, there it is—a large specimen. The largest I've seen for a while, but not inoperable. He must attend my surgery. I will attempt an excision.'

The young man looked into the funnel with evident distaste.

'So that's what one looks like. I've never seen one close up before. Can't you just reach in and pull it out?'

'Bless you, sir! Only a small part is visible. With a specimen this big, it is, no doubt, attached to the eyes and mouth. It will need great care to remove it.'

The pretty young girl spoke falteringly, and her huge brown eyes looked into mine.

'Will it hurt?'

'Will what hurt?'

'The operation, sir.'

She was a lovely creature. I had forgotten the prone figure and the rest. I could look into her eyes forever. An uncomfortable silence jogged me out of my reverie.

'You need not worry about that, my dear. He will feel nothing. It is the little wretch inside him that will suffer. If I extract it without breaking it, I shall add it to my vivarium. I collect them, you see. For research. It is also something of a hobby of mine.'

She was not interested in my hobby and turned away to talk to the youth who had now withdrawn from the trumpet.

'It moved. It was horrible.'



I wound down the aperture, and the earplug came loose. After unfastening the straps about the man's head, I wiped down the plug with alcohol and replaced the apparatus in my bag. The patient resumed whining. The cords in his aged neck stood out with every breath. His eyes moved in their sunken sockets. Rheum oozed from between his crusty eyelids.

'They don't like the light, or they don't like being looked at. I can never tell which. We need to deprive the mechanism of its strength before I operate. He must not brood on whatever misfortune has caused his fall. Is it a financial misfortune? I ask so that I can suggest a suitable approach.'

'I believe my father would prefer the matter to be kept private.'

Her voice shook, and a glorious pinkness suffused her cheeks.

My mouth fell open. This enchanting creature was his daughter.

The young man by her side stared hard at me. I am not a perceptive individual, but I surmised the circumstances. My patient's pretty young daughter had found a lover. He had discovered them. His little girl had been with the young man. This assault on the older man's sensibilities had pushed him into delirium, where he preferred to stay rather than face the truth. The mechanism had grown to feed his grievances. The mature woman, possibly the girl's mother, cleared her throat.

'They voted Alfred off the board recently. A company he helped start. He has not taken it well. This has caused his indisposition.'

Rubbish! I said to myself.

'Yes, I thought as much. An unforeseen change in routine and circumstances is often the cause in men of a certain age. So, we must try to take his mind off things. Walks in the countryside. Let him spend time with his family. Are there any small children about? No? Dogs or cats? A parrot. Is he fond of this parrot? No? Perhaps get him a puppy to look after. Does he have hobbies? You get the general idea. He needs to spend time in an environment which encourages him to look around. The countryside is excellent for this. Don't let him talk about the business. Don't let him read about the business.'

The family stood about like actors who had forgotten their lines.

'I shall check my diary and let you know when I can operate.'

'Is a procedure absolutely necessary, Doctor?'

I froze mid-step on my way to the door.

'Excuse me, Madam?'

'I've heard that it. Do you call it an infection? It is not dangerous. Just inconvenient. I was just wondering whether we should leave things. What is the worst that can happen?'

I was momentarily nonplussed. No one has ever suggested leaving the parasite in situ.

'The worst that can happen?' I repeated slowly. 'The mechanism as a parasite, a parasite of the mind. What will happen is that it will become stronger and completely established in the patient's mind. The patient will experience ever-shortening periods of clarity but will finally succumb to delusional thinking. There will be no reasoning or sense. He will become more unbearable to be with. Capricious and cruel. Demanding and demeaning.'

I meant to go on but stopped when I realised that the family had

already experienced much of what I described.

'I am a little confused, Madam. Why then did you call for me?'

'Thank you for your attendance, Doctor. The footman has your remittance. As for a surgical procedure, may we consider alternatives before making an appointment?'

'Why, certainly! Of course. Though I must ask. Why would you want this to continue? He is suffering. Not in the normal sense, of course. In the Buddhist sense. He sees the realm of things as a source of suffering. I can give you pamphlets.'

'Thank you, doctor; we shall be in touch directly.'

The beauty signalled to me with a slight movement of her hand and raised her glorious eyebrows. She wanted to see me privately before my departure. I experienced a momentary flutter of excitement at the prospect of being alone with her.

'Of course, Madam. I would counsel not to wait too long. The growth is already at an advanced stage. I will take my farewell.'

I strode purposefully through the gloomy hallway and felt a gentle tug on my coat sleeve.

'A moment, sir. Tell me more about your hobby caring for, what do you call them? Egolets? It is an odd name. It is because they hatch from eggs, is it not?'

'Yes, my dear. They hatch from black eggs in the mind and emerge as fully active ego mechanisms.'

'How interesting! What do they do when you've removed them from the patient? How do they live? How do you keep them alive? Tell me how you feed them.'

I was more than a little confused, for she seemed content to talk about my vivarium, whereas I expected she wanted to divulge the real reason for her father's condition.

'You want me to describe feeding time? If you wish. They hide under rocks and behind plants during the day because they don't get on. If they meet, they screech at each other. At four, they tap on the glass to get my attention. It is noisy because they are tapping and screeching at each other. They need feeding one at a time. I place them, one at a time, in a globe and say pleasant things to them away from the others. You are so handsome or pretty. Much more so than the others. That sort of thing. I used to talk to them, but this quickly became a chore. I now play a gramophone disk recording of



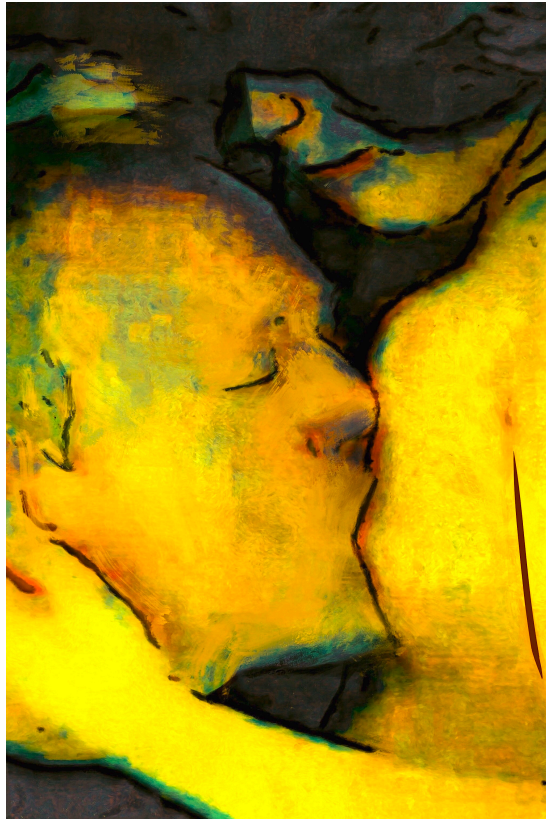
me complimenting them. They don't mind, even if I leave the room. They care only that none of the others can hear it. That's feeding time finished.'

'I would love to see them. I would love to see your egolets. May I come round one day and see them? Will you let me play with them?'

'Of course. But they are not playful creatures. Nor are they affectionate.'

She moved closer and took my hand.

'Please, let this be our secret. It will annoy my brother if he knows. Our secret, then?'



She pulled my hand to her and held it against her bosom. I felt the warmth of her soft mound. My face felt feverish, and my mouth was dry. I willed my hand into stone.

'Our secret,' I croaked.

'Thank you, thank you. Perhaps you could come to the writing desk and give me your address?'

I collapsed onto the substantial desk chair, found a sheet of paper and a container of pens. I had business cards but had forgotten

them. She stood over me so that her loose hair tumbled against my cheek. I realised I had also forgotten my address.

'My address.'

'Oh, you silly, you must start with your name.'

'Yes, of course, my name.'

'Edmund. What a noble name. Do you think I am pretty? Your shoulders are broad for a doctor. Not at all like the other one. He was old and moved like he was made of sticks.'

She moved even closer. I saw the armrest was lost in her petticoat. Her eyes were glazed. As I wrote, she leaned against me. The armrest creaked a little as she rocked. I looked up. Her lips parted. There was a fine sheen of sweat on her upper lip. Her expression transfixed me, and I watched her for an eternity. She gave the gentlest of moans and rested her head on my shoulder. The pen hung lifeless in my hand.

'Emma, a word if you please.'

The youth stood in the doorway. Emma did not respond.

'Emma. Now, if you please.'

She gave a moue of disappointment and straightened her dress.

'Remember, our secret,' she hissed.

The youth said something which made her pout. She flounced past him and climbed the stairs. Her eyes shone when she looked down at me.

My writing hand was shaking.

'My sister is friendly, is she not? I'm afraid she is too friendly. Please disregard anything she has said to you.'

'She expressed an interest in my egolets, nothing more.'

'Truth to tell, it is my sister's unusual disposition that causes our step-father's predicament. I tell you this against my mother's wishes for good reason. It is desirable that her husband does not succumb fully to delusion. Naturally, it is desirable to the entire family that he recovers, but his current state is inconvenient for me. I understand we should starve the parasite of attention. We should deprive it of those things which seeded it, made it grow and hatch. Have I understood this correctly?'

'Quite correct.'

The armrest still kept some of her warmth. The smell of her hair lingered in my nostrils. I finished writing my address, so I didn't

need to look at the youth.

'You need to know the truth to tailor your treatment? It is counter-productive to cloud the issue. Your profession guarantees discretion. I know you study medicine before specialising in Ego diseases. It is part of your oath.'

I was in a fit state to stand now. I replaced the pen, left the paper sheet and stood.

'Also correct. There is an implicit agreement of confidentiality. The penalties are severe for those who divulge something mentioned in confidence.'

'Excellent. My sister is a nymphomaniac. You are familiar with the term?'

'Of course.'

'The sexual act obsesses her. She thinks of little else.'

'I see. How beastly. Poor girl.'

'We found her with a footman. Alfred discovered her with a footman. She was pleasuring the footman with her mouth. The shock rendered her step-father unconscious for a short while. He had no previous notion of her condition. My mother has insisted we keep this between the three of us. After the marriage, Emma found pleasure in Alfred's company and, no doubt, he found pleasure in hers. My mother encouraged the attachment, for she is not, what you might call, an affectionate woman. He loves Emma, I suppose. She has made him happy. You might consider their age difference a barrier, but it is not. My sister disdains youth and favours the more mature man. I am afraid you are fair game to her. You are handsome with fine calves.'

'I hike and climb often. It keeps me fit and strong.'

Words cannot express how foolish I felt confiding this.

'Perhaps I should take my leave now? Obviously, I will keep our conversation in the strictest confidence. About Mr—I've entirely forgotten the patient's name, I am afraid.'

'My mother shall contact you. She is a careful woman. As we speak, she is weighing up the pros and cons. Never one for impulsive decisions. She is also angry at Alfred. I suppose they deserve each other. Alfred kept his condition a secret, and she said nothing about Emma's disposition. I rather expect she will decide to leave poor Alfred as he is. He is certainly more manageable when sunk in



delirium. The Board insisted on a professional prognosis. Alfred retains a substantial shareholding. I'm sorry if your visit has been a waste of time.'

'Not at all. If there is nothing else, I should take my leave.'

'No, Doctor. Ah, Mater.'

The mother bustled into the hall as if on her way to somewhere important but stopped in front of me with her mirthless smile. She rubbed her hands.

'Come, sir, you must be hungry or thirsty. Come to the pantry and let us find refreshments for you. What must you think of us for keeping you for so long? Perhaps a wife is fretting for your return?'

She was more kindly disposed towards me than in the sickroom.

'Thank you, madam. I am fine. I have imposed on you long enough.'

'Nonsense. I would not hear of you leaving without a cup of tea, at least. Besides, there is something I wish to discuss with you.'

'About the patient?'

'In a roundabout way, yes, about poor Alfred. Eric, please inquire after your sister. She seems out of sorts.'

He muttered something under his breath and left the room.

The mother stared hard at her son's retreating back but turned to me with her fixed smile. It reminded me of my family's cat, who seems agreeable enough until she tires of petting. My nose carries several scars as a witness to her unpredictability. I followed the mother into the kitchen.

'You've met my daughter? Yes, she is a lovely girl. And so friendly?'

'My opinion, Madam? She is a lovely and friendly girl.'

A heavy silence hung in the air.

'Yes. You are a medical doctor?'

'They require us to take a medical degree before specialising in ego disorders. I was a general practitioner for several years. Are you in need of medical attention, Madam? It would be more appropriate to see a general practitioner. I can highly recommend two in this area.'

'Indeed, indeed. There is a doctor who attends us for medical matters. He is rather old-fashioned and was not helpful in this one instance.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

Another long silence.

'Madam, is there something you want to ask me?'

She lowered her voice to a whisper.

'My daughter has an affliction. She has an unhealthy interest in intimate matters.'

I lowered my voice, 'Yes, your son has informed me of her condition. I know something of these matters because it impinges on abnormal ego psychology.'

'Yes, Eric said it was worth asking you. It is a sickness, is it not? An infection? Is her ego mechanism broken or distorted?'

'Hardly an infection, Madam, because everyone has one. We are born with them. They grow immediately after birth. They all grow differently. My Observer's guide to ego machines lists many categories. You would scarcely credit how many types there are. Some are finely wrought, some fleshy and ill-defined. Some black as sin and others gold studded with gemstones. They don't attract attention unless they cause a problem. I doubt yours is even visible,' I said gallantly.

'And my daughter's?'

'I couldn't say Madam until I have consulted my books. I have not examined someone with her condition before. She would need to be examined to establish whether treatment is possible or even necessary.'

'Necessary?'

'Whether the sort of treatment I can administer is appropriate, I meant to say.'

'How do you treat this disorder, doctor? It is not physical surgery. You don't use knives. Is it more like an exorcism?'

'Like I told Madam, I need to consult my books as I never had a patient with your daughter's sickness. I am not clear whether ego pathology is at work here. One of the new psychological therapeutic methods might be appropriate. A little electricity is involved and much talking. I can do a little research for you and inform you later. What I do is nothing like an exorcism. There are pamphlets in my bag if you will allow me.'

Her son rushed into the room, 'Alfred is calling for you, Mother.'

The three of us burst into the invalid's room, expecting to see God knows what. My examination had apparently prompted a change in

state. The patient sat up in bed, looking about with good-humoured curiosity.

'What is happening? Why am I in bed when it is daytime? Who are you? A doctor? Hmm. The bestower of labels. Am I sick?'

'Not sick. Another one of your turns, Alfred. You have turned the house upside down with your demands, you unreasonable and unruly man.'

He didn't look unreasonable or particularly put out by the woman's impertinence.

'Really? I do not recall being a nuisance, but then, I never do. Where is my treasure? Have I been beastly to her?'

'Yes, you've been a monster,' she said with no particular relish. 'I don't know why we put up with it.'

'Me neither. For love of your husband?'

'Why would we love you? What have you done to make us grateful, you condescending wretch? Nothing is what you have done. If I had known you were half-mad, I would have run a mile. If I had known you were destitute, I would never have married you.'

Alfred's eyes flashed, and the woman, perhaps realising she had spoken out of turn, was quiet.

'That is not quite the truth of it, Marjorie, is it? But never mind. You are a doctor, sir? How am I? Am I sick or well?'

'I am a doctor, sir, but my specialisation is in ego mechanism pathology. They called me upon to determine whether an ego machine was the cause for a recent bout of erratic behaviour.'

Emma bounced into the room, 'Daddy, daddy, daddy, are you well now?'

'Yes, baby girl, daddy has quite recovered.'

She threw herself onto the bed and wrapped her arms around his neck. They whispered intimacies. She said something close to his ear that made him grin like a stevedore who had won a bet. It was not a dignified expression for a man of his years. Still, he was not so much older than I. Perhaps I was a little jealous.

'So! An Ego Doctor. The Board requested this? Yes, they are merely following the procedure. Your visit has proved fruitless, doctor. I don't believe my ailment has much to do with ego. I know a little about ego mechanisms. A friend claims to see one perched on my shoulder. It's red and scaly, like a lizard or a snake. It whispers

into my ear and tempts me. He saw it lean over my face and scrape away sleep from my eyes so that I could see my wife for the first time. I never tire of telling that story.'

'And we never tire of hearing it,' the woman muttered.

'Sir, if I may correct you. The ego mechanism is at an advanced stage of development. I've already advised you to have it removed. Its removal would restore you to stability.'

'You surprise me.'

'Yes, daddy, it was huge, and it moved.'

'Doctor, you should not let my little girl see something so disturbing.'

'I apologise, sir; I confess I lost control of the situation. At least one family member is required to witness the parasite.'

'No matter then. You say it is large?'

'Yes, sir. I would say without hesitation that it causes your current indisposition.'

'You surprise me more and more. Perhaps my condition will generate a research paper. They diagnosed me with acute melancholia. I did not know that this could be an ego pathology.'

'We are at an early stage in our understanding of ego pathology.'

'But there is a misunderstanding here. I am improving. Yes, I was recently incapacitated, but aside from the occasional lapse, I am nearly fully recovered.'

'Humph!'

'No, Marjorie, I am. I am a new man. That you came into my life with Emma and Eric makes me grateful to you, though you test my patience so.'

I looked doubtful, for Alfred nodded at me.

'Emma is my saviour. No matter what Marjorie said.'

The mother shuffled and peered hard at the rug.

'I would like to talk to the Doctor alone, my darling one. We shall meet later. Be good.'

'Yes, daddy.'

The mother and daughter walked out, arm in arm. Emma licked her lower lip as she looked back. She had my attention and brushed her breast with her hand. My face was simultaneously hot and cold.

'Are you familiar with John Donne?'

'The Metaphysical poet? I know a little. He is not to my taste. I am more of a Byron man.'

'If ever any beauty I did see, which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.' That is what Emma means to me.'

'She is a lovely creature indeed.'



'If I may also speak for my parasite, beauty is not what we desire. Beauty is not in it. If you care to examine her features, she is not beautiful. Like her mother, she is rather plain. Although she is older than she looks, she has youth on her side, but her features are not beautiful. Her features are not regular. Rather lop-sided. When she dies, she will be an unremarkable corpse. It is the spirit within that gives her the illusion of beauty. She is beautiful because of what she is and what she does. She is quite depraved. Young, pretty, and completely lacking in sexual morality. Does she look like a succubus? More like an angel. How can such an innocent face hide such a corrupt soul? There are many precedents. Messalina, Claudius's wife, for one.'

I maintained a studied silence. I was astonished and had no clue what thesis he intended to present.

'They fooled me into marrying Marjorie. However, I had been a widower for these past thirty years, a recent marriage. I met Marjorie at a banking dinner. A friend introduced us. She was decades younger than I and looked an agreeable prospect. It flattered me. She threw herself at me and then told me she was pregnant. Were there scenes of anger and recrimination? No. We married. The pregnancy never materialised, but I no longer cared. Emma was entering womanhood and becoming a pretty and engaging companion. I became infatuated with Emma. Much to my astonishment, she responded enthusiastically to my clumsy attentions. Perhaps her mother put her up to it, for I was no youthful Sir Gawain, but Emma came to my chamber and offered herself to me.'

'My young body is yours. Do with it what you will.'

'I am no courtly knight. I gave in to my young seductress and failed where Gawain succeeded. But I succeeded where he failed. The holy grail lies between her breasts. I am an old fool, but I am not blind, and I quickly learned that she responds to any man who shows even a fleeting interest in her. I don't care, and I don't blame her in the slightest. It is the last time I will feel firm young flesh. It's a small price to pay for how she makes me feel when she lavishes her attention on me.'

He tailed off, no doubt overcome by his reminiscences. I found his expression difficult to look at. It conveyed a mixture of lust and pathos. Not an easy combination to see.



'They are a family of rascals. The mother is the worst.'

He chuckled as if the notion gave him pleasure. I was un-moored and tacked desperately back to a familiar shore.

'I examined you.'

'So, I should now consider my melancholia as an expression of ego dysfunction? Is this what you are telling me? Yes, I suffer from bouts of acute melancholia. It makes no difference whether the cause is an imbalance in humour, black bile or a mechanism growing in my brain. The feelings are the same: total apathetic despair, hallucinations, thoughts of suicide and whatnot. I am intrigued by your proposal to remove it. Would this remove my affliction also? No one has promised this from other forms of treatment. One doctor wanted to electrocute me into health; another wanted to drill a hole in my skull. I've tried a variety of diets and exercises. I even dabbled in morphia for a time, but it did not agree with my constitution. Describe your treatment, doctor.'

'The priority is to weaken the mechanism's status in your mind. Dr Beach recommends taking in a variety of scenery; and taking freely of exercise in the open air, such as riding, walking, gardening, farming. He thinks the patient should peruse interesting books and converse with cheerful friends; and above all, be located amid pleasant scenery, where he can enjoy a water prospect, a country air, and country diet.'

'I've heard similar approaches recommended for gout. What then?'

'Why then, I remove the parasite with specialised tools.'

'Can it be that simple?'

'It is not a simple procedure, sir.'

'I mean, can the removal of the parasite make well me?'

'I am reasonably confident of success, sir. The patients who've undergone the excision procedure are at peace. There are few side effects.'

'At peace? Don't we use the noun to describe death? Is a man meant to be at peace? I will not explore this option, doctor. To be fair to you, I decided a while ago. I stopped looking for treatment the day I found Emma. I've found my cure.'

'But your parasite, sir?'

'Yes, I know. It and I used to fight a running battle every day.'

Sometimes I succumbed because it is easier. Sometimes, I girded my loins and attempted to fight it off for as long as I was able. There is no getting rid of it. I have given up on ridding myself of it.'

I made to object. Alfred raised his hand with a gesture that silenced me.

'No sir, the serpent is part and parcel of me. What you ego doctors consider a successful operation is the loss of everything the man was. Docility is not a good outcome for anyone but the relatives. Have you looked into the eyes of a man who has the parasite removed, doctor? No, I mean truly looked. Yes, maybe suffering has ceased. Perhaps the things of the world no longer plague him, but what is left? What have you removed? Maybe there is nothing left of the man after, but a vacancy of awareness, no better than a box with eye-holes.'

'I can assure you, sir...'

'I am at peace now. The little monster can do what it will. There is distance enough between it and me. We have our minor battles. Sometimes it is in power for a time. Sometimes it retreats into the forests to regroup. We have reached an understanding of sorts. I am content. It comes, and it goes. I have a say when it can emerge. Keeping it caged without hope of remission will not do. The melancholia or ego mechanism or whatever you want to call it needs exercise or else it will destroy the furniture.'

'This is remarkable, sir. You speak of the melancholia as if it were a separate entity. It is uncommon for a patient to reflect like this. How have you tamed it?'

'Not tamed. I fight no more. It has its way when it wants. It has the world of things to fight. There is more than enough to keep it busy. I watch from the safe shadows, for I am surprised to find such peace. Maybe it means I am near death. Well, so be it. I should thank you for giving my nemesis a form. It grows, and I diminish, but I am content. My secret keeps us both content.'

'I understand, sir. You have made your decision and are not to be dissuaded. Earlier, you mentioned a cure. Is this your secret? Is the secret one you can divulge?'

'You have listened, but you have not understood, doctor. My treatment is radical and would raise eyebrows if it reached the Lancet. My therapy is to share intimacy with Emma. I suckle at her breast

and play with her sex. She hungers for it. She coaxes my manhood, and I enjoy her as she enjoys me.

“Licence my roving hands, and let them go, Before, behind, between, above, below.”

His eyes, wide with rapture, shifted from his hands to the ceiling, as if beholding a divine revelation.

‘Her father used her in the same way. This is why she is broken. I would not dignify what we have by calling it love, but it is near to it. We are comfortable. We are happy together in this room. She makes my one little room an everywhere. My ego machine is content, for I have a beautiful, young girl in my mouth and on my fingers.

“My Mine of precious stones, My Empire, How blest am I in this discovering thee!”

‘I and my ego machine are flattered. This is how it and I get on with each other. This is how I feed it to passivity. It’s what the ego machine craves and receives. That is my secret. There is a little shame, but I am too grateful to wallow. So, there you have it. My cure for melancholia is to lock myself away with a beautiful and broken woman, who for a short time wants me as much as I want her.’

No adequate rejoinder was forthcoming. I nodded and quit the room. My mind did a reel. My legs needed precise instructions, for they had forgotten how to walk.

The mother and her children stood in the twilit corridor. They stood in a line as if waiting for inspection. Their grey faces were masks; devoid of animation and conveying imbecility. I passed them without acknowledgement.

‘Where is my baby girl?’

Emma twitched to life.

‘Here, daddy.’

I let myself out and sucked in the clean late autumn air. Increasing maturity is difficult to bear. There is much he said that sounded a sympathetic chord within me. Age is not just giving up the things of youth. It is coming to terms with mortality. The recognition that everything you are will be extinguished in a moment is challenging. The ego machine, which has spent a lifetime building itself, finds this truth difficult to accept. This is one of the many reasons for its growth spurt past middle age. I can empathise with Alfred,

but indeed there are limits. I have my fight, for daily, I feel my thinking ossify. Constructing a novel line of argument is effortful. It is easier to cherry-pick ready-made opinions from God knows where and treat them as my own. I have adopted them and feel righteous indignation if they are slighted. My ego mechanism is firmly established in my mind. I have no wish to confirm this with an inspection funnel. It is something I feel. I do all Dr Beaton recommends to reducing the pressure to attend inwards: hiking in the hills, walking in the dales, my hobbies. These have all sustained me so far, but I feel the ossification progressing. My mind is turning to lacunae infested chalk. Would I do as Alfred has done? My stock of outraged sensibilities rushed into my awareness. I do not believe I could live with the shame. Perhaps, to a soul tortured with melancholia, shame is of little account. An hour of bliss with Emma is all that matters to Alfred and his ego mechanism. One drop of joy wrung from the husk of old age. Not so old. I am only five years younger. He looked older, and I estimated about seventy when I secured the inspection funnel. On our second meeting, he resembled a spry sixty-year-old. No. I am being uncharitable. He lifted Emma onto his lap and grinned broadly, like someone much younger. A brawny fisherman scooping up a mermaid from his nets.

Now, a collision with a lamppost interrupted my reverie. I let out a foul oath. Tears sprang to my eyes as I probed my nose. Not broken, but there would be bruising. This is the way of it. It becomes easier and easier to stew in my juice. The world of things is less interesting than the contents of my skull. What my ego mechanism spits out into awareness is more interesting to me. That is the truth of it—nothing more and nothing less. I thought of my vivarium, my music and my books and sighed. The fully formed and articulated thought exploded like a firework in my skull.

‘Maybe you should invite Emma over to play with your egolets?’

A tide of indignant propriety surged within me, as fierce and clamorous as a pack of hounds baying at the door. I laughed at the internal uproar. My ego is prim and correct. I have unintentionally put distance between myself and my ego mechanism and laughed at it. I imagined it shivering in horror. Whistling and humming the low bits I could not whistle, I strode briskly toward my bachelor quarters.