

**REPETITION.— If something happens once, it may as well have never happened at all. Unfortunately, nothing ever happens only once. Everything is repeated, even nothing.**

A British Airways jet, high above the coast of New England. The captain has turned off the fasten seatbelt sign, but mine remains strapped tightly across my waist. My fingers clutch the armrests, knuckles white. The air hostess evens her trolley with our row and bestows a sympathetic elevation of her eyebrows on me as she clears minibottles, plastic cups, crumpled napkins off my tray table. The other passengers regard me with caution. When I stumbled back from the toilet, I found that the young mother in my row had exchanged places with her tow-headed, round-faced toddler, who now stares obliviously at the white fields outside the window, in order to provide him with a buffer zone in case I were to do something erratic. Perhaps I'd been mumbling to myself again: a dangerous perhaps.

I tried to apologise to her, to explain that I rarely drink so much, it's only on planes that... but no luck. She doesn't speak English.

It's true, flying terrifies me. I can count the number of times I've done it on one hand. Twice with my parents. Once with school. Most recently, to Berlin with Zach during the Easter holiday. None of which has remotely prepared me to endure this seven-hour trans-Atlantic torture. Nothing — not a book or an inflight movie or even three minibottles

of whisky — helps me to relax. The least bit of turbulence, every unexpected dip in altitude, signals The Beginning of a Crash.

On the flight to Berlin, Zach noticed my anxiety and argued that this was precisely what was *so interesting* about air travel. It was to be regarded, he said, as an exercise in *amor fati*. As soon as you stepped through the doors, you were forced to resign yourself to the possibility that your *conveyance will turn into your coffin*. Your fate was no longer in your hands, no longer under your control. In fact life was always like this, but only in special circumstances were we made aware of it. *If to philosophize was to prepare for death he could think of no better place to practice philosophy than on an airplane.*

His words were no comfort to me then. They're even less of one now. The *last* thing I want to think about are preparations for death. And coffins. How does one transport a body across the ocean? On a ship? Down in the hold with the rest of the luggage? Maybe on every flight there's a coffin going somewhere. At this very moment my t shirts and toiletries could be nestling up with the dead.

When it is time, the air hostess helps me firmly lock my tray table and return my seat to its upright position.

We're beginning our final descent into New York, she explains.

No Miss, I am tempted to reply. Not our final descent.

The customs officer is a candle stub of a man with a damp, fleshy face that seems to have melted from the dark hairline of his crew cut into the wide, unbuttoned collar of his uniform. He flips through every page of my mostly blank passport, looks from me to my photo and back again. The photo, I remember, was taken at a booth in the Galleries, three or four years ago, in the thick of my rather dubious battle with puberty, right after one of those visits to the hairdresser, which, because I no longer live with my parents, I am no

longer obliged to make. I neutralise my expression and remove my glasses, as I had been instructed to do then, but it is only when my left eye, which has astigmatism, wanders toward my nose that the resemblance finally becomes clear to him. He asks me to confirm the information I had written on my declaration form.

Student. One week. 232 West 113th Street.

Business or pleasure?

Funeral.

The stamp falls with a dull, bureaucratic thump: Welcome to the United States.

I know what New York looks like from the establishing shots of countless films and television shows. But there the city is only as large as the screen you watch it on. A safe size. Contained. Manageable. Odourless. Two-dimensional. With clearly marked exit signs, if you're watching at the cinema. With a volume dial and an off button, if you're watching from the comfort of your living room.

These taxi windows offer no such protection. On the motorway, my driver slices through traffic, steering with one hand on the indicator and the other on the horn. When a removal van tries to pass us, he closes the distance at the last moment. The driver leans out the window of the van, his face red, spit flying from his mouth as he tries to shout over the siren of the ambulance behind us. Not one to allow an insult to go unanswered, my driver rolls down the passenger-side window, letting in the foul breath of late afternoon. I probably shouldn't have pushed my luck by getting off the plane.

Can you believe this shit! he bellows a few minutes later. He's been trying to engage me in conversation since he first pulled me from the middle of the taxi queue at the airport, not sensing from my mumbled one-word answers that I'd prefer to be left alone. Our eyes meet in the rearview mirror, which is wrapped in the black beads of a rosary; the silver crucifix dangling from the end bobs and sways as he speeds round a double-parked car.

Can I believe what, then?

What this world is coming to! It's been all over the radio this week. This brawd in Texas drowned her five kids in the tub.

I sigh with resignation and ask why a person would do such a thing.

Because she's crazy, that's why! Post-pardon depression or some shit. Said God told her to do it. God of all people! Now you tell me, boss — would God ever tell somebody to kill their own child?

If I'm not mistaken, I say, clearing my throat, God ordered Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. And the Father himself offered up his only begotten son to —

What? What was that you said? he yells, although he's heard me perfectly well. The taxi screeches to a halt. This is your stop, buddy.

At the airport, I changed all the money I'll have to live on for the week. It was the first time I'd ever held dollars in my hand. Green-and-black pieces of paper, no nonsense notes, dour expressions on the portraits of men called Grant, Jackson, Hamilton — presidents presumably. I take a Grant and a Hamilton from my wallet and press them through the square opening in the plastic screen that separates me from the driver. Plus tip, buddy, he says. I hand him another ten dollars.

He remains seated as I take my luggage out of the boot. As soon as he hears the door shut, he speeds off again, leaving me, I soon realise, far from the address I'd given him. Not an hour in New York and already I've been ripped off.

My hostel is located opposite a primary school in the middle of a short, derelict street in Harlem. I'd spent most of my savings on the flight and this one was the cheapest I could find at short notice. On my walk here, three different beggars asked for money in tones ranging from supplicant to menacing. I dropped the two quid I happened to have in my pocket,

shrapnel from the carton of cigarettes I bought at the duty-free shop, into the outstretched cup of the one I passed as I turned onto 113th Street. I moved on, head down, hoping he wouldn't notice until I was well out of shouting range.

I ring the doorbell. Open the door. Approach the large desk in the lobby and say, My name is Owen Whiting, I have a reservation. At the other end of the room, an elderly couple is sitting on an exhausted brown couch, watching a game show on the telly. Another guest is typing an email at the ancient computer in the corner. Next to him, there is a plastic display for tourist brochures and pamphlets and a table whose dusty surface supports a metallic coffee dispenser, a stack of paper cups, and a basket filled with pink sachets of sugar, plastic stirrers, and jigger pots of milk and cream. Framed photographs of the Manhattan skyline have been hung unevenly and seemingly at random on the beige walls.

My room, up three flights of stairs, proves to be equally spartan. A pair of bunk beds. A bank of lockers for valuables. A grated window that looks out onto a fire escape and down into a dark alley, which is separated from the road by a barbed wire fence. The ceiling fan spins slowly, straining to circulate a dainty handkerchief of tepid air on the slab of dusk that has also taken up residence here.

My bed must be the one on the top left — at least that's the only one that's been made. I strip down to my underwear, stuff my clothes into my rucksack, and place it into the locker with the key still in the hole. Book in hand, I climb up to my berth and lie down on the thin pillow and starchy sheets. The reading lamp clipped to the metal bedpost splutters a few flashes of yellow light before it shines a paltry neon cone on the cover of Zach's copy of *The Zero and the One*.

On the black background, the white circle of the titular Zero intersects the white circle of the titular One, forming an eye-shaped zone the jacket designer coloured red. Beneath the title, also in red, the name of the author: Hans Abendroth.

From the earliest days of our friendship, Zach and I sought out philosophers whose names would never have appeared on the reading lists we received before the beginning of each term. To our tutors, such thinkers did not merit serious consideration. Our tutors were training us to weigh evidence, parse logic, and refute counter-examples; they encouraged us to put more stock in the rule than the exception and to put our trust in modest truths that could be easily verified and plainly expressed. Whereas the philosophers who interested us were the ones who would step right to the edge of the abyss — and jump to conclusions; the ones who wagered their sanity when they spun the wheel of thought; the ones, in short, who wrote in blood. In counter-intuitiveness we saw profundity and in obfuscation, poetry. With wide eyes, we plucked paperback after paperback from the shelves at Reservoir, the used bookshop opposite the entrance to Christ Church Meadow, our own personal Nag Hammadi, hunting for insights into the hermetic nature of the universe and ourselves.

Zach had seen an aphorism from *The Zero and the One* cited in Lacan's seminar on Poe, a reappraisal of which had appeared in *Theory*, a London-based journal of continental philosophy whose back issues Reservoir kept in stock. Subtitled "an essay in speculative arithmetic," *The Zero and the One* (*Null und Eins* in the original German) is Abendroth's only book to have been translated into English. For a whole month we searched every bookshop we passed and came up empty-handed — not a negligible failure in a city that must be one of the world's largest markets for used and rare books. Even Dr. Inwit had never heard of Abendroth. The Bodleian had two copies, naturally, but the one that was permitted to circulate was on loan that term. Zach placed a hold on it, only to be told, when he returned to the Philosophy and Theology Faculty to collect it, that it had been reported missing. Despite his insistent pleading, the librarian, citing a recent act of Parliament, refused to divulge the identity of the borrower. When he finally found it, on Niall Graves' shelves

at the *Theory* launch party, he yelped, alarming some of the other partygoers, who must have thought he had just done himself some serious injury.

Though he was quite generous with his money — he picked up the tab wherever we went and never once turned a beggar away — Zach wouldn't let me borrow the book. It was, you might say, his prized possession. He quoted from it often and sometimes read whole passages aloud when he wanted to prove some point. The first time I held it in my hands was four days ago, when his father and I were cleaning out his rooms. Save for the travel guide I bought at Blackwell's, it is the only reading I've brought with me to New York.

I flip through the collection of aphorisms, looking for one in particular. The book shows all the signs of intense study: broken spine, wrinkled edges, dog-eared pages, creased jacket. Inside, the margins are heavily annotated in black pen. The underlining consists of lines so perfectly straight they must have been traced there with a ruler or with the edge of a bookmark.

On my first search, skimming all the dog-eared pages, I fail to find the passage I'm looking for. It was something about *The Possessed* he read to me that night. Something about Kirillov. Kirillov's suicide. The aphorisms all have titles, but there's no table of contents; nor is there an index of names in the back. I'll have to be more meticulous, examine every sentence Zach found worthy of comment. I turn back to the beginning, but I'm only able to read a few pages before the light bulb splutters again, this time fatally, and the room goes dark. I flick the switch once, twice: the light isn't coming back. I take off my glasses and slip the book under my pillow, giving what remains of my waking attention to the vague, slow circles of the fan and the dim lattice of orange and black the streetlamp has cast on the ceiling.

I've just begun to fall asleep, for the first time in a week, when I hear someone, one of the other guests, struggling

with the door lock. Two shadows, one male and one female, stumble into the dark room. From how loudly they whisper to each other not to make any noise, it's clear they're both totally pissed. They fall into the bunk beneath mine; the bedsprings shriek under their combined weight. I cough into my fist, to let them know someone else is in the room, but they remain oblivious or indifferent to my presence. Rather than embarrassed silence, the rustle of fabric. Lips on bare skin. A moan — hers — escapes the fingers of a muffling hand as the bedframe begins to sway. Beneath the small of my back, my mattress elevates slightly. The palms of her hands or the balls of her feet, I wonder.

Outside the window, there is a dull pop. Then another three, in rapid succession. The bedsprings stop contracting abruptly beneath me.

What was that? the woman whispers, petrified.

What was what? Her lover sounds deflated. He knows exactly what she's referring to, and can already tell that he's lost her attention.

That *sound*.

Nothing, baby, he says. It was nothing. Just a car back-firing.

I never learnt where Zach found those pistols. Where does one buy a handgun anyway? Estate sale? Antique shop? The black market? I hadn't asked, and if I hadn't asked it is because I'd rather not know. When Bernard told me that the Inspector from the Thames Valley Police had managed to trace the pistol (he said pistol, *singular*, and I certainly wasn't about to correct him), I let it be understood with a wave of my hand that I preferred to be kept in the dark about certain aspects of the case. Still, this hasn't prevented me from speculating. Whoever sold the firearms to Zach would surely have told the Inspector about the second pistol. Unless he bought them from two different people. Unless: he stole them. It wouldn't have been the first time, after all.

The pistols were small and old. Their black barrels were

no longer than my outstretched index finger, the sort of weapon my grandfather might have stripped off the corpse of some Nazi officer during the war. They looked ridiculous to me, but Zach was quite serious about them, as he was about any technology the rest of us considered antiquated. When I asked him if they even worked, his expression soured. *Of course they do!* He'd *tested them* to make sure. Yanks and their bloody guns. Whatever else they may feel about them, they're all obsessed by them. Even Zach, the latchkey kid born and bred in downtown Manhattan. When he collected me from Prelims, one pistol weighing down each pocket of his dinner jacket, he must have been the most heavily armed person in all of Oxfordshire.