

Volatile

by Simon Ings

Robert Roth was due to meet me at six-thirty; I waited until eight, then I called him at home. I let the phone ring for a minute. My finger was half-way toward the off button when the dialing tone cut out. I put the phone back to my ear.

“Robert?”

I heard shuffling, a muted cough.

I said, “We were due to meet.”

“I’m sorry,”

“Robert?”

“Abigail. My dad--”

“Is everything okay?”

Firmly, with the precision drunks use, or stammerers, controlling their speech by force of will: “Everything is okay. How are things with you?”

“I’m worried about the film,” I said. We were making a twenty-minute animation for Channel 4. His picture cut had arrived on U-matic that morning. I’d thought at first the tape was blank. Even now, I still clung to the hope that something technical had gone wrong; he couldn’t have meant it, surely?

“Too long? Is it too long?”

“What do you mean, ‘too long’? It’s the content I’m worried about.”

“Why?”

“There isn’t any!”

He said nothing.

“Robert?”

Had I offended him? Well, what if I had? What reaction had he expected from me? I gritted my teeth: “Robert,” I began, sweetly, “I’m sorry if I--”

“I think . . . all wrong.”

I couldn’t tell if he was upset, or ill, or just half-asleep. I knew looking after his father exhausted him, but I had never heard him as bad as this.

“I’d like to talk it through,” I said. “Can I come around?”

“Sorry.”

“What?”

“I was supposed. We were going to meet. Your office.”

“How’s Nicholas?” I asked him, sure by now that something was wrong.
“How’s your dad?”

“My father is well,” he announced. “How are you?”

He wasn’t making sense. He wasn’t listening to me. I began again: “I picked up Nick’s medicine. Shall I pop round with it?”

Robert’s father got his medicine direct from specialists in Harley Street. I worked in Rathbone Place, not ten minutes’ walk away, and while Robert was working in his studio in New Cross I had been collecting the prescription: a bottle of plain white tablets in a brown glass bottle. But for the label on the front, they were indistinguishable from aspirin.

“Robert, I said shall I pop round with it?”

“Lots of trouble,” he said.

“No trouble at all,” I said, “you’re on my way home. I’ll see you in an hour.” I put the phone down before he could frighten me any more than he already had, made sure the bottle from the surgery was in my bag, threw in Robert’s videocassette, and headed downstairs.

I drove round the Elephant and Castle up Camberwell Road, left up Dog Kennel Hill and into East Dulwich. But rather than turn up Melbourne Grove toward home I headed east, across the Rye, to Robert’s flat.

Robert and his father lived in the attic of an Edwardian terrace house on a quiet, tree-lined road, its gutters thick with gray leaves and old crisp packets. Opposite the terrace rose three squat council blocks on a slope of thick grass and scanty trees. I parked in the lee of the nearest block; the hill was steep enough that I left the car in first gear in case the hand brake failed.

I reached Robert’s house and glanced up. The windows were dark. I went up the steps to the front door and rang the bell. I heard nothing. I stepped back and looked up. There was still no light. I glanced at my watch; it was barely nine. I rang again, and when there was no answer I crossed the road and tried peering through the windows.

I thought perhaps Robert had fallen asleep. Perhaps his father was frightened to answer the door. The curtains weren’t drawn, and after a moment I thought I saw movement in the darkened room. I called: “Nicholas?” Crows crossed and criss-crossed the window, flapping untidily from tree to tree like scraps of black

plastic bin-liner. There was movement again: a figure I only glimpsed before it vanished. Seconds later it came back, nearer this time, and in the light from nearby streetlamps, I recognized Robert's father.

"Mr. Roth!"

His disembodied head ducked and bobbed like a balloon in front of the dilapidated sash windows. I was about to call again when a second balloon bobbed up, similar to the first, but smoother, broader, better inflated: Robert!

They were staring at something in the tree nearest the window, craning forward together, eyes wide, heads to one side, like mannikins. There was nothing there, nothing but frosted branches and crows, flapping from one tree to another continually.

I slipped into the garden at the front of the house and scooped up a handful of stones from the ornamental path. I lobbed one at the window. It snapped against the glass. They ducked out of sight. A moment passed, then Robert poked his head up above the sill and peered at me.

"Robert," I yelled, "you silly bugger, let me in!"

He seemed not to recognize me. He leaned his head to the left, and to the right. I think he smiled, but in the light I couldn't be sure. He raised a hand. He didn't seem to know what to do with it; he lowered it again.

I gestured angrily at the door. He nodded, and disappeared. The hall was dark; I waited for the light to go on. Nothing happened. I stamped my feet and looked around, feeling foolish. I wondered if anyone was watching, from the flats opposite, perhaps. There was a mild fog. At the top of the road the air glowed sodium-orange in the light of a dozen powerful lamps, hung up on gantries around the newly modernized Nunhead Reservoir. A crane cast shafts of shadow through the luminous air; as the crane turned, the shadows wheeled like torch-beams on a film negative.

I turned back to the door. There was still no light. I thumbed the bell again, and again. I got no reply. I had had enough. I got Nick's medicine bottle out of my bag and shoved it through the letter box.

I crossed the road again and looked up. Robert and Nick were pacing backward and forward in front of the window, appearing and disappearing as they crossed and recrossed each other, eyes fixed, unblinking, upon the trees opposite, the icy branches, the crows--

I walked back to the car. I wanted to call somebody: the police, perhaps, or an ambulance. But it wasn't a crime to ignore a doorbell, and hardly a sickness to stare at a tree. There was no one else I could turn to, no mutual friend; no one who would know any more than I what was wrong. I told myself I was angry and

affronted, but I was lying. The sight of them had disturbed me. I drove home slowly, cautiously; I felt slightly unsure of everything.

I found Marlene perched on the TV. She glanced at me, then turned back to the tank; the tetras were playing in the wash from the oxygenator. Marlene's eyes glazed over. She went still as stone.

I said, "Don't even think it," swept her up in my arms and wrestled her into the kitchen. She leapt onto the draining board and sat in the sink, tail swishing.

"No," I said. "No baths."

She peered up into the mouth of the mixer tap. A droplet fell on her nose. She sneezed it off. I put some food down for her and washed up the breakfast things. I was through just in time to stop her getting into the water. She stared up at me from the work surface. I pulled the plug. She glanced at the sink, the receding water, and back at me--betrayed.

"Some cat you are."

She began grooming; her idea of a shrug.

I went back to the living room and fed the fish. "Relax, she only wants your water." Kicking off my shoes, I curled up in my big cuboid sofa chair.

Not the chair--my chair. I felt as if nothing else in the house--and I had furnished it more or less from scratch--was really mine. It was entirely my own fault; a minimalist phase that had seen me bagging up my entire wardrobe for Oxfam and replacing it with one designer grunge dress by Issey Miyake. Not content with making a wraith of myself, I had gone on to make a mausoleum of the apartment: polished floorboards, stained black; white walls; green gloss over the woodwork; Japanese tables; expensive black boxes with famous names hotfoiled on the side. Belongings that didn't belong. Belongings designed not to belong.

Marlene hated it. She spent most of her time outside now, in the jungle I had let grow in the back garden. I only saw her at meal times.

I opened my bag, took out Robert's video and let the box drop from my fingers onto the floorboards. Marlene flung herself out of the kitchen and pounced on it. I told her, "Be my guest," and slotted the video into the monitor.

Robert's film was a sort of test card--a white surface through which a black cube emerged, point first. The cube passed through the white surface, loomed up toward the screen, filled it, blacked it out, and disappeared. So much for the action.

Abstract animation is a wide field, and very intellectual, very etiolated. It's difficult to make a film that somebody, somewhere, won't appreciate for some wild and complex reason of their own. Robert's film was, for all the wrong reasons, something of an achievement; therefore, I could think of no artist, no movement,

and, more to the point, no editor, who would want what he had made.

I clambered out of my seat and crossed to the desk. Marlene had stretched herself across the study chair; she was peeking at the TV through the gap between the seat and the backrest.

“Still here?”

Marlene’s ears twitched. She hunkered down.

“I’m honored.” I dug Robert’s file out from under a pile of papers. I glanced through the budget I had agreed with Channel 4’s animation department. They’d allotted us 40,000[pounds], less than half the usual budget for a film of this length. Robert had spent barely 10,000[pounds]. I wracked my brain for a way we could lose money quickly; the more expensive I could make the film, the more willing the channel would be to mount a rescue operation on it. Nine-thousand-odd pounds wasn’t enough; they would simply pull the plug. I chucked the file onto the desk and went back to my seat. Marlene jumped down after me and weaved round my legs. I stumbled about, disentangling myself from her, and cuffed her gently with my foot. She came straight back at me, purring. I fell back in my seat and she leapt on my lap.

“Why thank you,” I said, surprised.

Admittedly, our rapprochement was not total. Rather than face me Marlene sat staring fixedly at the screen; the cube had emerged halfway from the white ground. Each plane was textured, glimmering through translucent surfaces, invisible at a first glance and meaningless at a second. Strange scratches and squiggles disrupted the surface now and again. I wanted to think them deliberate, to believe that they were meant, but no amount of mental acrobatics could prevent them from looking like what they were: stray hairs, bits of fluff, smudges on the lens.

Marlene bobbed her head, shuddered, rolled around stupidly. Absently, she clawed me through my skirt. I threw her off. “Call yourself a critic,” I said.

She settled on the floor, still purring.

“Easily duped, eh?” I said, feeling about for the remote. “You should write for the Modem Review” I hit the stop button.

Marlene fell silent. A moment passed. She got up, stretched, shot me a chill glance, and padded through the kitchen into the great outdoors.

Robert’s film had proved problematic from the very beginning. Our working relationship, which had started so auspiciously, had begun to show signs of strain. Perhaps I should have taken more care of him, but I was a producer, not an analyst, and to my mind his insecurities made him selfish and perverse.

I think he had decided early on to conceal his worries from me; his subconscious, however, had other ideas. He began to miss appointments, to arrive

late, or at the wrong venue; he became vague, unsure of what he wanted when his opinion was needed; and at the next moment obstreperous, belligerent, picking holes in the budget and the way the channel wanted to oversee the project. Thanks to him, what had begun as a 100,000[pounds] film became a 40,000[pounds] film. Nobody likes paying for something they are not allowed to see.

Then, of course, there was his father

It was a typical evening: I had booked a table for seven o'clock and Robert called at my office at eight, having already eaten. "We could have a coffee, first," he suggested, in tones calculated to deaden whatever sparks of enthusiasm might still be lurking in the room; so I trailed him round to Frith Street and elbowed a path into the Italia, past Soho hopefuls chaining Marlboros as they wound down from post-production sessions at the Mill, or lighting the evening set at Ronnie Scott's across the road. At the end of the bar there was a flat-screen TV tuned to a jazz concert. Orphy Robinson was playing.

"--no use," said Robert.

I glanced at him. "What?"

"You're not listening."

"It's Orphy Robinson."

"Who?"

I shrugged. "What's no use?"

"My dream diary."

Last time I'd tried to drag out of him what the matter was, he'd told me his imagination was drying up, that he felt like a hollow shell: a zombie, not a person. Startled by this abrupt confession, I had suggested he keep a dream diary. It was patronizing of me, and I was surprised he'd tried out the idea. I thought he was just being polite. It never occurred to me that he might be desperate--desperate enough, indeed, to grab at whatever straw was thrown his way.

"What went wrong with it?" I asked.

The waitress upended a big tin shaker and shook cocoa powder on my *caffè latte*.

"I've lost any real connection with my subconscious."

"You mean you didn't dream."

"Oh I dreamed, all right."

"What about?"

“Timetables,” he said, with bitter relish. “Late trains. Traffic jams in the rain.”

I handed him his espresso. “Anything else?”

“Forgotten appointments. Badly lit offices. Jammed sandwich machines. No narratives, no insights. No frights. I dig deep inside myself and all I come up with is daytime TV.”

I found us two stools next to the mirrored wall and sat him down beside me. I said, “I haven’t got time for dinner now. Will you be in the studio tomorrow? About eleven?”

He shook his head. “I’m picking my dad up at the airport. He’s flying in from San Francisco.”

“He’s staying?”

Robert nodded.

“Can I meet him?” I asked, in an instant swapping professional cool for little-girl effusiveness. Like Pavlov’s dog, I chided myself, salivating to the sound of a bell. I couldn’t help it. Back in the Fifties, Nicholas Roth had been Hollywood’s most powerful headhunter.

“I’m sure you can,” Robert sighed, slipping himself seamlessly into the role of the Great Man’s private secretary. He said, “He’s coming to London for treatment.”

“He’s ill?”

“Alzheimer’s.”

I couldn’t think what to say. Robert took my silence as a question. “I’m looking after him. There’s a clinic in Harley Street. They’ve developed a technique.”

“Robert,” I said, “I had no idea--”

Robert treated me to a bitter smile. “I’ve known for a long time,” he said. “It’s not why my work’s going badly, if that’s what you’re thinking. It’s not an excuse.”

“I never thought you were using this--”

“That’s not what I meant,” he said.

“Is this--is it going to take long?”

He shrugged. “As long as it takes.”

I asked Robert whether, under the circumstances, we should cancel the film. He said no. I made up every conceivable excuse for him; he turned them all down. He wanted to go ahead with it.

I was sure Robert would never be able to juggle looking after his father with the demands of the film, but I tried not to listen to myself. Robert was the best young director I had; juries at Stuttgart and Oberhausen had awarded him major prizes. I had inquiries and offers of work from the BBC, the BFI, even the English National Opera. The last thing I wanted to do was stop him working.

I let things ride for a while, and hoped against hope for the best.

I got to meet Nicholas Roth about a month later, when Robert invited me round for dinner.

When I got there the flat was in chaos. The kitchen surfaces were blotched and smeared with tomato sauce, coffee grounds, God-knows-what else; there were crumbs and onion skins all over the floor tiles; in the dining area the carpet was rolled up and piled with library books. The floorboards beneath were cracked and filthy.

Robert had taken all the clipframes off the walls and fitted a green sheet over the sofa; his father, Nicholas, sat at the far end, hunched up, bobbing his head in time to queer, internal music.

“Dad?”

Nicholas Roth was not old. In his mid sixties, perhaps. Like his son, he wore his hair short. His eyes were hooded, the lids slightly mongoloid. His cheekbones, like Robert’s, were pronounced, but his mouth had lost all its firmness. As I watched, a droplet of saliva worked through the stubble on his chin.

“Nick?”

“Huh!” He turned, and saw me, and grinned.

I forced a smile for him. “Hi,” I said, “I’m Abigail.”

“Have we any stamps?”

“This week’s subject,” Robert murmured behind me, adjusting the controls on the oven.

The old man said, “I’m sending letters to Pinewood.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Do you send letters to Pinewood?”

“Sometimes.”

“Buggered if I can see the point, myself. “

“Oh.”

“Since we haven’t any fucking stamps.”

“Dad,” said Robert, “this is Abigail.”

“Who?”

“Beside you.”

Nicholas stared at the green sheet, rucked beneath him. “Chair’s broken.”

“Sofa.”

“Needs new covers.” His voice trembled.

I said, “I’m a producer.”

“Films,” he said, to no one in particular.

“Yes.”

His eyes came alive at last: “I’ve been in films!”

All through dinner he regaled us with tales--some of them obscene, all of them incoherent--about his first days in Hollywood.

“So much screwing around.”

“Dad,” said Robert, “at least put your bloody spoon down before you start waving your hands around.”

“So much tit.”

“You’ll put my eye out,” Robert muttered, wresting the spoon from him.

“Sorry,” he added, turning to me. I could see he was enjoying himself.

Afterward, Robert put his father to bed and we sat down to talk.

I said, “He doesn’t recognize you, does he?”

“Not often,” Robert admitted.

I put my cup down on the floor. “What happened to the carpet?”

“He’s afraid of it.”

I remembered it was red. So was the sofa. “The color frightens him?”

“There’s a place in Heathrow where the carpet color switches from green to red. When I met him off the plane he stopped dead at the edge of it, screaming his head off.”

I adjusted the sheet where it had rucked up underneath me. Something behind

me rattled. I felt for it, picked up a bottle of pills. I thought at first they were aspirins.

“That bottle,” Robert said, “is more expensive than your car.”

I read the label. It made no sense. “What does it do?”

“It turns on new parts of the brain.”

“The 99 percent we don’t use?” I said, skeptically

Robert waved his hands dismissively “It’s not about that. it’s about the way neurons communicate with each other. It’s possible for neurons to pass messages chemically, without the need for synapses. Half the brain’s presynaptic receptors are dormant; the trick is to turn them on.”

I tossed the bottle in my palm. More expensive than a car. If Nicholas Roth had this much money, why was he staying with Robert in a one-bedroom conversion in Peckham? I said, “What’s the advantage of that?”

“When the brain needs to reroute a signal, to bypass a lesion say, it tries the route out chemically first. If presynaptic receptors pick up a chemical signal, they tell their neighboring axon to use this or that synapse and to pick up the rerouted signal. If you promote chemical uptake, the brain gets into the habit of rerouting its signals more often. It can do more with less.”

I said, “It sounds like a treatment for stroke.”

“That’s how it started,” Robert agreed.

“You take quite an interest.”

Robert shrugged.

I turned to read the titles of the books piled on the rolled-up carpet. They were all about medicine. I picked up the nearest: Hannah’s Heirs by Daniel Pollen. It was about the genetic origins of Alzheimer’s disease. I said, “I didn’t know it was heritable.”

“It isn’t always,” said Robert.

The obvious question hung between us for a moment, unspoken. My nerve failed me; I dropped the Daniel Pollen back onto the pile. There were other titles, not all of them to do with medicine. How Monkeys See the World; a book about sharks; Daniel Dennett’s Content and Consciousness.

“Some new ideas?” I suggested.

“Every animal sees the world in a different way.”

It dawned on me suddenly that he was afraid.

“Afterward--will Nicholas . .

He swallowed, stared at me. “We don’t know,” he said, giving nothing away. “No one’s done this before.”

I’d expected Robert’s picture-cut to appear rough around the edges; nothing could have prepared me for what I received. It was no surprise when, a week after my abortive visit to Robert’s flat, I received a letter from Channel 4’s animation department terminating all funding.

I rang Robert and as usual I got no reply. About an hour later someone from the Wheelhouse rang in to say Robert had left some belongings in the studio I had hired for him. I sensed that something was wrong so I agreed to pick them up myself. I headed over immediately, feeling stupid and obscurely ashamed, like the hard-pressed parent of a difficult child.

My contact at the Wheelhouse, an advertising consultant called Terry, put the bravest face she could on matters, but from her manner I guessed that Robert hadn’t made himself welcome. In the lift I asked her straight out how things had been with him. “He was a bit abrasive,” she admitted.

“How do you mean?”

“Kept the door to the studio locked. Wouldn’t answer the phone. Ignored the security men. Left chicken bones on the Harry deck,”

“It’s being that cheerful keeps him going,” I said, hiding my embarrassment behind gallows humor.

“Is there a problem of some sort?”

“Not now,” I said, with a malign smile: “I give you my word, he won’t be darkening your doors again.”

“Only I thought he might be ill.”

I shrugged, said nothing. I don’t take kindly to people who jeopardize my hard-won contacts so I wasn’t going to make excuses for him.

Terry let me into the studio. Vertical blinds of plasticized rice paper screened wall-length windows. The Harry deck stretched along the far wall; its monitors rained cornflakes, tuned to the antics of the producers in the studio next door. Near the door, on a foorthigh dais, were two steel-blue sofas. Robert’s gear had been piled neatly upon the nearest. I gathered it up: jumpers, pads of cartridge paper, a camera, empty videocassette boxes--

“And his aspirins,” Terry said. She reached down into the gap between the cushions and drew out a brown bottle.

“Might as well chuck them,” I said. I slid his belongings into my shoulder bag

and zipped it up. I took a deep breath. "Terry," I began, "I'm really sorry that Robert--" and then I stopped.

Terry gave me a commiserating smile. "Forget it--and the offer holds for next time. Anything to escape the cornflakes . . ."

I waved her to silence: "Aspirins?"

She fished them out of the bin.

I read the label; or rather, I tried.

"Are they special?"

I nodded.

More expensive than my car. "They're his dad's," I said. "I'd better take them."

I lumbered back through Soho with my bag full of blank drawing paper and jumpers and a 6,000[pounds] pill bottle rattling about in the shallow, next-to-useless pocket of my designer jacket; and if an acquaintance had asked what I was doing I think I would have killed myself. I had decided young in life not to be a mother, and I resented having to start now.

But Robert's hapless behavior had awakened my maternal instinct and as I climbed the stairs to my office I found to my chagrin that I was rehearsing all the usual motherly lines: "How did you expect to keep warm without your jumper?" and "What were you doing with Daddy's tablets?"

I let my bag drop from my shoulder. It fell back down the stairs. I plucked the bottle from my pocket. I shook it. it rattled. I opened it, teased out the cotton wool plug, shook the pills into my palm. Chalky, with a single line across, like aspirins.

I think ... all wrong.

The bottle was half empty.

I got home to find Marlene, as usual, perching on the TV. She howled. I headed for the kitchen. She followed me in purring frantically and headbutting my ankles. At one point she leapt up and dug her claws into my leg and I nearly dropped the tin on her head. "Please," I sighed, "it's been a bad day." I put the dish down in front of her, went into the living room, and poured myself a gin.

Just like a mother, I had done my best to ignore the truth of what Robert was doing. "They look just like aspirins," I told myself. "They should have put them in a funny-colored bottle or something." But I wasn't taken in.

I recalled that night in the Bar Italia, when Robert told me about his father. He'd said: "I've known for a long time."

Not every case of Alzheimer's is heritable. But was Nicholas Roth's? If it was, it would explain why Robert had taken on the job of looking after his father--at risk of Alzheimer's himself, it was the only way Robert could guarantee himself a supply of those miraculous, unaffordable pills.

I recalled how that night, and on countless other nights, he had told me how his imagination had died, had shriveled up, had vanished--but I had not listened. I should have put two and two together when I heard about his father's Alzheimer's; but who could have imagined that he would treat himself with someone else's medicine? Fearing the onset of the disease, why had he not sought treatment for himself? Why had he behaved so surreptitiously.?

Unless--

I stepped back from the drinks cabinet and fell over the cat. "For Christ's sake," I snapped, shaking gin off my fingers, "what is it now?" Marlene howled. I went back to the kitchen. She'd merely picked at her food. "You sure you're okay?" I asked, with grudging sympathy. I checked her water bowl. It was full. I emptied it and refilled it. She ignored it, leapt up on the kitchen counter and howled again.

"Oh for God's sake." I put the plug in the sink and ran the hot tap. Marlene edged forward. "Mind," I said, pushing her out of the way. I ran enough cold in for the water to be comfortable for her, then went back to the living room, fell into my chair and slugged back what little gin hadn't spilt over the floor. A few seconds later Marlene leapt into my lap. Her fur was dry.

"What's the matter now? No bath salts?"

Marlene looked up at me and whined.

I sighed, and tickled her behind her left ear. "Of all the nights to kiss and make up," I chided her, softly.

She whined back at me.

"A small boy gets trapped in a faulty garbage compactor.?"

She wouldn't stop whining.

"An old drunk twists his ankle on a deserted dance floor?"

She just wouldn't stop.

I ignored her, picked up the remote and pressed play. The screen went white. A black point emerged in the left-hand corner. I was going to change the cassette but Marlene had started to purr.

"Happy now.?"

She circled twice and lay down.

Stray hairs, smudges, fleeting lines and stains flickered across the screen. The spot grew bigger.

Marlene clawed me absently through my skirt.

I yawned. "Do we have to watch this?"

She swiveled her ears like radar.

"Earth calling Marlene."

She growled ecstatically.

"You're as bad as they are," I said, "staring at their bloody tree."

I went cold.

Minutes passed. The video snapped off. Marlene's purr trailed into silence. When it was clear the show was over, she yawned and stretched, slipped off my lap and headed for the cat-flap.

I wondered: What if Nicholas's Alzheimer's wasn't heritable? What if his son ran no special risk of developing the disease? Why, then, would he have taken his father's pills? Simple curiosity? No, that sort of juvenile experimentation went out of fashion in the Sixties; besides, it wasn't in Robert's character. He must have been taking them for a reason. Something other than Alzheimer's, perhaps. Something he could not explain to any doctor. Something for which no legitimate treatment yet existed.

Boredom?

Self-disgust?

All that talk about his hollow, worn out self ...

I rewound the film and played it again. It was no good. I couldn't think my way into it, the way my cat could. Robert's film had bored me, but--

Afterward

We don't know No one's done this before.

I went back to the living room and dialed treble-nine.

When the police broke into Robert's flat they discovered remains, dismembered and part-eaten, in a corner of the living room. Further investigation traced these remains to several sources: stray dogs, in the main; a pet rabbit; a missing child. In the opposite corner, Robert and Nicholas Roth were curled up asleep, wrapped round each other, naked, under a nest of shredded bed linen and soiled, crumpled clothes.

An ambulance took them to King's College hospital and later that evening, mewling and spitting, they were admitted to the Maudsley, South London's leading psychiatric hospital.

They are still there.