The Wedding Party

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THE RISK IS in standing still.

It can come at you quickly. A gas lamp sets a tent alight and six Somalian refugees die in the flames—Ta-da!

Or it can be subtle. Last year, a great many Somalian refugees gave up their flight altogether, boarded boats in Aden, and headed home—and why? Maybe because the Yemeni authorities let on how many Palestinian refugees had already died in the camp they were bound for—the camp at Al Ghanaian.

The point, either way, is this—the risk is in standing still.

I've said to my wife: "Aiden's dead. Mocha's closed out."

I said to her: "Lebanon to Syria to Cyprus. Come on."

I said, "He hasn't any choice."

This is her brother we are talking about. My lover—which is a joke. Rather, he is the other side of that coin I once coveted—Redson and Hope, that long-wished-for alchemical wedding.

Slip through Europe, that's the ticket. If you can call it slipping. Slump through Europe. Slouch through Europe. Squat, squeeze, shimmy through Europe, to the Red Cross camp at Sangatte, just a short walk away from the Channel Tunnel.

Kurdish gangs patrol the camp, which isn't even a real camp—just a converted railway warehouse. The Kurds organize the escapees; they arrange transit attempts through the Tunnel; they know what's what. Whether you're a single man from Iraq or Iran, or a family from Afghanistan, Koso-vo, or Albania—it's all the same to them. You don't get through without you paying the fee.

And you pay the fee. Of course you do. The risk is in standing still. The risk is in standing up— standing up, I mean, to them. There are riots in Sangatte, as you would expect from eight hundred and fifty refugees crammed into quarters meant for two hundred. All of them trying somehow,

any-how, to scrape together that fee.

I've said to Hope—that's my wife's name, Hope—"Get Redson to Cyprus and I'll do the rest." And I'm already promising more than I should. The Snakeheads have much of this route I'm suggesting sewn up—from the Balkans to San-gatte, some say.

She says nothing. She looks out the window at the poisoned Devonshire countryside. No sound impinges from outside. The foot-and-mouth crisis has occasioned a wholesale slaughter of livestock in this region. Nothing moves. It is as though the holocaust has been extended even to the insects and the birds.

"He hasn't a choice!"

She looks out the window at the rain. If you can call it rain, drizzle scrubbing the land and the sky into one.

Drizzle subsumes everything, the yellowish panic-ulate—faint traces of a bruise—that must, I suppose, mark a nearby pyre. It subsumes too, and utterly, the fine spray from the hose, which runs above the five-bar gate. The hose spans the farm track on thin scaffolding. And there's the bucket where I dutifully scrubbed my boots an hour— Jesus, no, two hours ago. Impatient, I turn her chair; I force her to look away from the window, away from the near-bankrupt ruin that was a Devon dairy farm (it's not even ours, we just rent the house).

She hates it when I pull her chair about, when I take advantage of her condition. I stroke her head. "Stop it," she says.

"He really has no choice," I insist. "If it was any-one else he'd have got away with it. But Beneson was the only left-footed striker on the team. The national team. They won't let it go."

Redson—my lover, ho ho; anyway, my brother-in-law—he was working the qat caravans out of Somalia when he surprised a burglar, com-ing in through his kitchen window. Got terrified. Shot him—and thought that he was within his rights so to do. And he would have been—had the burglar not turned out to be a national hero.

Hope can do this. She can get him out. Overland from Mogadishu to Nairobi. Round the lake to Kampala and from there by air freight to Libya. By boat to Lebanon, then Syria, Cyprus, "Come on!"

Hope can do this—because she has done it herself. After we split she went back home to Malawi, as safe a country as you're going to get in central Africa, working at the Dzaleka refugee camp in Dowa. Only she got caught up with the Congolese mafia that run the bus concessions out of Lilongwe and Blantyre, and had to run in the end. If you can call it running. They drove her and drove her, nowhere was safe. And when she had had enough of running—if you can call it running—she bit the bullet. She slipped through, slunk through, squeezed herself painfully through Europe's ever-tightening net—did a good job of it, too—but in the end it was too much. She had to call me, make some sort of peace with me, beg me to help her cross the Chan-nel into Britain. Which I naturally did.

The snakeheads have Europe sewn up. From the Balkans right through to Sangatte, so they say. And that was enough for me. I got out of all that, and quick. For several years now, the nearest I've come to that line of work is to sort out the illegals who haunt Cricklewood. I'm a sort of fly-by-night foreman-cum-bus driver. You know what it's like—two navvies this way, and three navvies that and jump quick in the back of the van before we all get nicked. Seeing to the casual labor market of Cricklewood is more than enough to fill my day, and this morning I found myself seriously wonder-ing if I'm up to this fresh obligation.

But Redson is my lover, the other side of that coin I put such store by. And call me sentimental but I cannot bear to think of them parted like this. These two people. These two half-people, I should say, because it seems even now that they are only the halves of a single person, a person I might once have drawn together. A person I loved. Hope/Redson. Redson/Hope.

I've said to her: "Calais's as tight as a bitch. So I'll take him through Ouistreham. They've just axed the frontier post and there's boats sailing to Portsmouth all day."

"You mustn't," she says. "No. Stop it." Her torso flexes uselessly. Her head bobs and tosses.

I am stroking her neck. "Please." I am shucking her shirt free and stroking her breast. "Please."

"It's safer," I tell her, "it's really come on. It's so much safer now."

My hand does its business. The tears come and I wipe them away for her. I settle her back in her chair and I know I have won.

Hope has done her business and I have done mine. Redson has

landed up in Sangatte, because it’s safer for us to follow the migrant flow, because the Snakeheads have their nostrils raised and aquiver for the innovations of a competitor.

Anyway, I got him out of there last night and paid the Kurd his bloody fee. Then, soon as we were out of sight, I legged it with Redson back over the fence, away from the Tunnel, and back onto the highway system. It took a while to find the van—when I go shopping I’m always losing the damn thing in the multi-storey. It’s not big— people movers are taller.

We reached Ouistreham by first light. Redson sat there blinking up at the buildings like an inner-city kid on an excursion trip—he’s a natural tourist, a camera on legs.

I’ve rented us an old villa on the Riva Bella—the white sand beach near to town. Redson needs to sleep if we’re to make a start tomorrow, but the end is in sight, the biggest hurdle yet to cross, and the door had swung open on the room holding all my gear—he saw everything. It took an age to calm him down. “It’s so much safer now.” Though surely the size of the van is clue enough, what I have planned for him.

Redson is younger than Hope by two years. They have a Malawian mother, dead of AIDS. They have a Scottish father, a lapsed minister who vanished as soon as they got of an age to start ask-ing about passports and paternity. There is another brother, a half-brother, through whom I first met them—Olaf, a surgeon at the hospital where I did my placement. It was him who taught me how to fillet skin flaps for the scores of amputees we were dealing with then. Malawian roads, for all that they are practically empty, are some of the most dangerous in the world.

Hope’s skin is as dark as Olaf’s—she’s as dark as any pure-bred African. Dad’s pallid genes kept out of sight, dwelling instead, deep in the bone, narrowing and tightening her features as she grew, lengthening her neck and her back. Dad’s seed made her magically beautiful—people imagine she’s desert stock, from Namibia or even further north. A regal Saharan beauty. They’d never guess the wet and windy truth.

Redson, though, he’s the other side of the coin. Dad’s seed floats on Redson’s surface like a rash. It has gingered his hair and freckled his hands. Rough, blotched skin hangs off his heavy features like an old dog blanket. Stocky, hairy, unpleasure-giving. Until you understand the nature of my desire, my choice of lover seems ludicrous. You see, I was only half in love with him, just as I was only half in love with Hope. I loved the person they might be. But love’s all done with now. Unsa-tiated, love gnarls itself

into something else, something nameless.

He is saying things to me like, “Leave me alone.” “I want to stay in France.” “I can speak French.” Only he is a murderer—in the law’s eyes, if not his own. And where might he procure a faster, more reliable change of identity than from me, with all my contacts—and all of them on the other side of that maddeningly narrow strip of water, that Channel?

And I am sitting here holding his hands, reassur-ing him for what seems like hours, is hours—2pm now, and you can see the panic and the exhaustion battling it out through that mottled, gingerish skin of his as he slides down in his seat. I stir him, lift him, urge him to the room I have laid out for him—dark, cool, looking landward, in an upper storey overlooked by no one.

It is hard to let go of his hand, hard not to bring it to my face. It is hard to face tomorrow.

So after a catnap I walk into town and have an early dinner at a seafood restaurant done out like a Thirties Parisian metro. I order smoked cod and cider and though the food is excellent I realize I have made a very bad choice. I must not drink because of tomorrow, and without a drink, and surrounded by this decor, how can I not fill my head with thoughts of metros and train tunnels, nets closing in, of narrowing doorways and lids coming down—?

I am back before Redson wakes. Carefully, I let myself into his room. He sleeps nude, as usual. It is a warm night, so he has pushed the blankets back and made do with a sheet. I ease it down, past his shoulders, his flank, his knees. I resist the temptation to touch, to map his body with my hands, to relent. He has no choice; nor have I.

You can deaden nerves by acupuncture—that’s the principle behind the blanket I’m laying over him. It’s faster than gas anesthetics and safer too. Except that it sounds unnervingly like a fire as it crackles and crinkles, tucking itself around his sleeping flesh.

Ta-da!

Dawn breaks and I’m detaching the muscles from his right shoulder blade, rolling the shoul-der girdle opposite to the direction of the cut to get the angle. It’s still not light enough that I can douse the lamps I brought along, though the heat they give off is wicked, and I need still more light to safely free and divide the neurovascular bun-dle, where it emerges just

beneath the serratus. Once the clavicle's free it's just a matter—or it should be—of closing the skin flaps over suction drains. Only it's the same problem with this arm as the last; in my hurry I've made the flaps too short. So I do what I did last time and saw off the acromion process parallel to the scapula, to make the wound more flat.

By now I'm exhausted and it's light outside, so I take another catnap, then I go back in and turn the lights out and open the curtains. There's a table under the window and I stand there, luxuri-ating in the cool coming in through the top of the sash, while I work on his arms, first one, then the other—disarticulating the elbows.

The bags I'm using are the cleverest, the scylliated insides sucking round and close over each body part. Pink goo runs across the seam like a cartoon smile.

In the afternoon I start on his legs and it's back-breaking work—I forgot how back-breaking. He's tall for the tank, and after careful measure-ment, I've plumped for pelvectomy. Work this radical is not without its sublime moments. Once the iliac vessels are out the way you can see the sacral nerve roots deep within the pelvis. But for the most part it's pure butchery, hacking the mus-cles of his back from the wing of the ilium.

And on with his blanket again. And a catnap for me.

It's dark again by the time the pelvis starts to open.

For two days, the drains do their work. For two days, Redson looks up at me, wide-eyed, his expression no different to the one he wore when we drove through Ouistreham. Mouthing. Trying to speak.

For two days, I hunt out things to distract him. Music for him to listen to. Things to read to him. But sound does not touch his spirit, and never has. He was born all eyes.

Even with all this equipment I cannot for the life of me jerry-rig the mirror he asks me for, so that he might look out of the window at the sky—"The sky, at least!"

Of course he cannot be moved.

"It was a long time ago." I am back to my reas-surances. I really should have made a tape. A recorded lecture in an authoritative

voice—Tom Baker or Leonard Nimoy. I've done this so many times now I'm starting to whinge. "We didn't know as much, then." "Hope had really bad luck." As soon as I opened the bags I knew it was hopeless, though I tried, God knows I tried. In that Calais motel room, the seams had closed so tight and pink around Hope's limbs, there was no hint of trouble. But when we got to England and I opened the bags to reassemble her—the seams had gone the brown of a pineapple cut through and left to the air. Some seams had parted alto-gether and dark little puckers had formed round each breach.

There was no smell. It all looked fresh enough. But there's fresh and then there's fresh. As Hope and I discovered.

"It's so much safer now."

At last, he begs me to put him to sleep. So we sleep. Our last night in Ouistreham, our last night in France. I haven't the energy to leave his side, so I shuck off my shoes and my shirt and my shorts and I curl up beside him, under the sheet.

Lay your hand on a man's chest, on his belly. There is so much bone and muscle in the way of the true treasures—the miracles of liver, kidneys, spleen, and heart. But touch his back, below the rib cage—and they are tantalizingly close.

Like this, Redson is a chest indeed, a box of clever treasures. Sea creatures dream away their incarceration inside him. Wrapped up in each other, joined together mouth-to-anus by slick bonds only Crohn's disease can reveal and eventu-ally break, they are utterly dependent upon each other. And yet they are so different, each organ so utterly unlike its neighbor—how could they dream that they are One? Where does this dream of One-ness come from? When must we let it go?

In June of the millennium year, 2000—a Dutch lorry driver called Perry Wacker entered Britain in a rapid transit TIR lorry crammed with fifty-eight Chinese immigrants. He remembered to shut the lorry's sole ventilation flap, so as not to arouse the suspicions of customs officers. But he forgot to open it again.

All but two of his cargo asphyxiated to death.

But it's the fine levied on the lorry firms— £2,000 per head—that's done most to curb human trafficking by lorry. That and the technol-ogy, as even a well-insulated TIR rig is no defense against infrared and ultrasound.

The trend now is to shift fewer people in small-er vehicles. As the technology improves and the political climate hardens, it’s a trend that can only continue.

I just have time for a quick breakfast at a brasserie outside the ferry port. Its Seventies decor reminds me of Portsmouth, which is at once my home town and our destination today. Even the name of this restaurant—the Britannia—points toward closure.

Then up the ramp onto the ferry.

The checks on this side of the Channel are cur-sory, much less stringent since the French decided to pull out their specialist unit. Portsmouth, on the other hand, bristles with every piece of tech going.

So this is how it’s done—

Natural gas hasn’t caught on as a fuel in this country as yet, and no one knows what an engine that runs on both gas and diesel actually looks like. The engine is largely fake, but all the parts are genuine and professionally assembled, and who in their right mind is going to take an engine apart? So the bags sit in metal casings, many of them in plain view, and never get spotted. And because the bags are cold-blooded, relying for their primitive metabolism on heat from the actu-al engine (it’s in there somewhere under all the Meccano) nothing very remarkable ever shows up on infrared.

So we arrive—if not intact, then at least undis-covered.

Even Hayling Island is becoming gentrified now, though the softest of the creek beds have so far resisted development. I’m out the van, tinkering with the engine; taking the bags from their hiding places, stowing them in carriers. “Carrefour.” “Lafayette.”

There are old moorings among the reed beds, the wood all rotted away so only the holes are left—holes with a petrolish sheen over them where nothing grows. But who would notice them among all these reeds? What fills these holes is an essence of rotted wood and the micro-scopic carcasses of whatever fed on it, all mingled with the deliquescent remains of whatever fed on them. And so on—who knows how long a food chain? Though water covers the holes for much of the day, what fills the holes has very little to do with water.

The holes are something like the consistency of porridge and dogs have been known to disappear into them. One or two children.

So I am careful, and I resist the temptation to carry too much at one go, and within about fif-teen muddy minutes I have found what I am looking for.

Two more trips and I'm done. In they go, one after another, and the colors released, as the oily sheen closes over each bag, are the same as you find on those maps, which pick out countries in different pastel colors.

Is the hole deep enough?

The risk is in running, if you can call it running.

The risk is in moving, and in being moved.

Each moonless night, hulks registered in Cam-bodia ply the seaways from Lebanon to Syria to Cyprus. Fishing boats from Somalia run aground on the beaches of Mocha; they run aground, or they sink.

Snakeheads throw women into the sea after their children, a mile from the Spanish shore. Then they torch their own ship.

Dozens of would-be migrants drown off the coasts of Italy and Spain each year as they attempt the crossing from the Balkans or North Africa.

So much horror, so much desire—sooner or later it stalls, bottlenecked at the Red Cross camp at Sangatte.

One hundred and fifty people a night are caught trying to travel illegally through the Channel Tun-nel. Some hide inside goods wagons, breathing through hosepipes in a hopeless attempt to evade the carbon dioxide detectors. Others ride on the outside of the trains, wrapped in foil to keep them warm. Still others cram themselves into tiny com-partments beneath the floors of passenger coaches, barely inches above the live rails.

February this year. An Iraqi Kurd dies after leaping twenty feet from a bridge onto the roof of a goods train—only to slip and fall across an elec-trified rail.

19th June 2001. Six Russians steal a speedboat in Calais, discover that the engine's missing, and elect to set out anyway, paddling it across

one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.

31st July 2001. Two Lithuanian refugees cross the Channel on children's air mattresses. More than ten hours pass before they're picked up. They even have luggage.

The gates are swinging shut around Europe. The nets are tightening—meshes of infrared and ultrasound. Dogs. Carbon dioxide wands.

The traffic through Portsmouth was lighter than I expected, which means I've made it home before sunset.

"Home." Not Devon; that can wait till tonight. I mean the house I rent in Ferring, a little seaside town in West Sussex, a stone's throw from Brighton. I get in and already, within minutes, I'm picking up the ends of my life, I'm washing up dirty dishes, changing the sheets. Putting CDs back into boxes.

It's a big house.

I enter the garage and dig out the valves and gauges that will free Redson from his high-pressure prison.

The van—like I said, it runs on both petrol and natural gas. The gas tank is mounted in the back of the van. I've had customs officers want me to pull up the hardboard housing to reveal the tank— but beyond that they do not go. Maybe a few raps on the outside with a torch. But it's not a good idea to go peeking inside a pressurized container.

This is how it's done, you see: where the carbon dioxide detectors cannot go; where infra-red and ultrasound are blind—this is where the truly, irreducibly living part of Redson, head and torso, lives and breathes.

In the footwell of the passenger seat, I lay out freshly laundered blankets to make a nest for him.

It's important to have hold of all the parts dur-ing the crossing, in case you get caught. With all accounted for, you have some shred of defense, as you can argue that you meant no lasting harm to your charge.

But what would be the point in reassembling him? Hope and Redson reflect each other.

Redson/Hope—I cannot allow one half to mock the other.

The acid slew in the old post-hole must surely have eaten through the bags by now; must already be strip-ping Redson's arms and legs down to the bone, chewing through the bone, I don't doubt, given time.

In the back of the van, I check on my charge. He mustn't depressurize too fast, or the bends will take him. But the math you need in order to do this safely—it's easy enough; and I have done this before, many times.

I look at my watch, calculating the air he's got left.

Plenty, enough that I could leave him in there, unconscious, until we are all three met again, a wedding party, in that house among the pyres and the rain. Already in my mind's eye I am drawing the blinds on that bankrupt, poisoned countryside. I am rolling them together, torso to torso. Inevitable, irresistible, a contact more intimate than any embrace. I am blessing them, telling them, "Kiss!"

But no. It has been a long day. I am exhausted. It's over two hundred miles to Devon, and that union I have for so long desired to bring about.

I shall tilt the rearview mirror so Redson can look out. And he will help me stay awake.

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