

## PROLOGUE

The two men watch him cascade into the darkness, watch him tumble between the train tracks, his body spinning and broken, his arms snapping at him like whipping rope.

The smaller of the two, Hector he is called, lights a cigarette and says, 'So, what did we think of that?'

The other waits. His look is pointed as an asterisk. He waits and looks at his companion until he is handed the cigarette. He draws on it and, while Hector retrieves for himself a replacement, he speaks.

'Instinctively I suppose I enjoyed it,' he says. This second man is called Charles. 'It's obvious enough why. There is inherent drama in the transformation.'

'One moment he is a person,' says Hector, 'the next he is a clutch of broken pencils. He's blood and meat and roiling volition, and nothing else. And gone. Backwards and out of sight, leaving us to think about him.'

'Or we are gone,' Charles points out.

'Or we are gone. Of course you're right,' says Hector. 'We are on the train, which is moving ahead at speed, uninterrupted. It appeared as if he was pulled away from us, backwards, snatched into the night, only because we continued to travel forward at the full speed of the train.'

‘There was a defiant, violent attempt at stillness—what else is a sudden exit from a moving train?—but momentum pulled at him as if he was bound to us at the waist. So he didn’t bounce backwards as it appeared. In that first bounce he was moving forward, and at speed. He was moving forward faster, in that moment, than he had ever before moved, outside of being in a car, or on a horse if we imagine he had ever ridden one, or on a train.’

‘One of the rush of new experiences that came to him all at the end.’

‘All at the end, all at once. And then the second bounce and any that followed it in the dark—’

‘There will have been some.’

‘—were quickly slower, as his body resisted movement beyond its capacity to resist, breaking and turning, torn apart by the effort.’

Hector and Charles share in the loud silence of train travel, the exertions of the engine reduced by their regularity to a calming sidewise cradling.

The man had dropped something as they lifted him to the railing.

Hector kneels, inspecting the object where it trembles, insectile, from the movement of the train.

## PART I

When \_\_\_\_\_ arrived in the city I was sitting outside a cafe. It was raining but not hard and I had been smoking a cigarette and patting the ash onto the shoes of a sap at the table next to mine, a man whose moustache I had taken a disliking to. The sap left promptly, leaving me with no one to pat ash on and not much of a cigarette when \_\_\_\_\_ arrived.

\_\_\_\_\_ arrived thrown from a car. He led with his face, following with his knees, his arms back and up as if tied to his sides. When he hit the ground he somersaulted, and ended like a corpse on parade—flat on his back, legs and arms stiff-straight. The car that furnished him never completely stopped, so all that remained of it, when his hat had done spinning like a coin in the dirt, was whatever of its exhaust still lingered. He was thrown more or less at my feet. Somehow \_\_\_\_\_ managed to look down his nose at me, as if I was lying in his gutter.

I offered him a cigarette and he took it, pulled himself up, cleared the grit from his hat and his face, and it came about that we got to talking.

I admired the way he could make an entrance like that and not take it too sore. He admired my height. Or anyway, he said he could use a man like me, and when people

talk about me like that, as if I was a ladder or an adjustable wrench, it's usually my size they mean.

\_\_\_\_\_ spat a little blood and said that he could only stay in a city if it had a fairground and rollercoasters, and I said we had a fairground with three rollercoasters, so that's where we went.

We were told to remove our hats at the first rollercoaster, and we held them to our chests as it clack-clack-clacked us up high and then shook us all the way down again. I felt like a penny thrown down a drain or a man thrown from a moving car. \_\_\_\_\_ seemed to take it worse. When it was done he sat on a bench with his head between spread knees, a finger at each upper eyelid, compressing the sides of his eyeballs at a steady pace. He said it helped, he needed a reliable impression to attend to.

I asked him why we'd come to the fairground if he didn't like the rollercoasters, and he said he did like rollercoasters, and also that that was one of the better ones he'd been on.

Once he'd recovered we rode it again, and then tried the others. Our first time on the tallest of the three it happened that I sat in the front carriage, in front of \_\_\_\_\_. As we turned the tallest peak, the city seemed to tip out in front of me like dark paint down a glass hill. This view struck me like I just woke up, as if I'd never seen the city before, or else never really believed it real—three times the ride took us round and each time as we went over the

peak, this same feeling charged me, as if I'd taken some of \_\_\_\_\_'s love for these rides from him. I was still sharp with the feeling as we got back on dull ground. Only then did I find that on account of my height, \_\_\_\_\_'s view had been impeded and his enjoyment impaired.

As we walked away from the rollercoaster, \_\_\_\_\_ with his drunkard's stagger, he didn't touch me or look at me, but he was speaking, and I realised he was talking to me, telling me that he would find me when I was asleep, he would stand over me and kick through my head, described the ear ripping off and the skull creasing then giving beneath his shoe. On the bench, as he pressed at his eyes, he finished snarling, then it was done, and we went back to riding the rollercoasters.

We rode each of the three rollercoasters in turn for the next four hours. Every half hour or so \_\_\_\_\_ would need to sit on the bench and press his eyes, looking like a man who'd been poisoned, but as we made our way to the next ride he'd be lit with glee.

That night, as he had no money and no other place to go, \_\_\_\_\_ came home with me.

I got into bed next to him—an inverted \_\_\_\_\_, already snoring—and inches from my face were his naked toes, and I thought about his promise to drive this foot into my head. The hours at the fairground had left me slightly nauseous, I was in the tired, sense-drained final pull into sleep, and still charged by seeing the city tipped out below, and

the threat too became part of a warm, muddled calm that was still there when I woke up.

The next day I made us breakfast and we went together to find \_\_\_\_\_ an apartment.

It was \_\_\_\_\_ that gave me the name Box. He never really explained it to me, and I never asked, not wanting to confront his generosity, but it spoke to me of an unassuming usefulness—and it stuck, and I was glad to have it.