

The Radio

He settled down in his armchair and pulled the rug about his legs. There was not a sound to be heard. The curtains were closed against a quiet winter's night. There was not a breath of wind and the night-sky, before he had pulled the curtains, was sharp and clear, filling up with stars, near and distant, self-effacing and bright. A thick covering of snow lay on the ground and damped down every possible sound. But now all that freshness was closed out, as was right and proper.

The two bars of his electric fire glowed a dull red and filled the air of the room with the smell of burning dust. Every so often the bars would tick rapidly and then fall silent again. A small lamp gave off the only white light in the room. It stood on a small table at his elbow, the bulb heavily muffled by an old, fringed lampshade that had a pattern of faded green and red Chinese dragons. Underneath it lay a small glass of whisky, photograph and a book. The book had lain there undisturbed for several weeks. He remembered he had started it and then had decided he no longer wished to read it again. It was a book he had read once when he was much younger. The first few pages had told him that some memories are best left unopened. The photograph was of two people, smiling, faces close together. It was old and crumpled and had a crease across one wide corner where it had been bent back. Its edges were curled up.

The glass of whisky was there simply to provide symmetry. It was left untouched.

He sat for a few minutes, listening, wondering what it would be like to be deaf, with not a sound to be heard. Outside, an aeroplane began to cross the sky. It was not a jet, but a propeller-driven one, and the long, low, uninterrupted hum took him right back to the days of his early youth, when a sound like that signalled adventure. Adventure, for no reason that he could think of, since he had never made any long journeys, such as that one aeroplane suggested. Iceland, he thought to himself, and smiled. In his youth, planes such as that were, for some reason, said to be going to or coming from Iceland: *Lofleidir*. Strange names that sparked a boy's imagination, took him to a land halfway to the pole and halfway to Canada. He had never been there and never would he go there now.

It was curious: the memories that came to him sometimes seemed so ephemeral, inconsequential, formless almost. They came and went like smoke in shadow. But, in their passage, he felt their grip of iron. Even the most unfocussed memory - barely a hint of remembrance, encapsulated in a distant sound, a smell or a taste, a phrase of music - even that exercised a mastery over his emotions that he could not explain.

The sound of the aeroplane abruptly snapped out of focus again, five or six faint echoes rolling back like waves on a beach. The electric fire ticked a few bars. He sat and listened some more, but there was not a sound. Not the passing of a car on the road, nor the sound of footsteps crunching on the icy snow.

He savoured the silence, much as another might savour a wine or a malt whisky or the taste of chocolate or the sight of a full moon. It had its shallows and depths, it had its own views of - no, not of eternity: it had its views simply of distance. It was possible, he knew, to listen to silence and hear it. You could not listen to noise in the same way.

He looked at his watch. It was almost eleven o'clock. He turned to his left and switched on the old radio that stood on the shelf behind the table. He had had it for

years, and used it more often in these later days. It still had all the old radio-stations marked on it - Hilversum, Brussels, Oslo, Madrid, Reykjavik - Iceland again - and sometimes he would run the tuner backwards and forwards across the wavelengths, picking up the most curious sounds. Other languages which he could not understand. Some he did not want to understand, for the words were brash, harsh, hectoring. Others he listened to as he might listen to the notes of some obscure musical instrument - elegant in tone, if without obvious meaning. He had never learned a foreign language, not since school - and what he had learned there he had long forgotten. His old radio gave him an outsider's view of a world that he could never understand. Somewhere, perhaps, in a foreign country, there was a man just like him, sitting, curtains closed against the night sky, idly running the tuner up and down, hearing English words that held no meaning for him. All those solitary listeners, unaware of each other, entirely ignorant of the grey days and the blue days in some other's native land.

He shook his head gently and tuned the radio to the station he wanted to hear.

A man's voice came on, low-pitched, slow, steady, measured like a bishop's progress in a cathedral. The old radio had a beautiful mellow tone to it: the sound of wood, you would think. But it was made of plastic, Bakelite maybe, not wood. The single loudspeaker was a full hand's-breadth across. It gave off a sound that was as dark as treacle and reached down into the body, beyond the bones. The voice came out through the grille much as if there was someone just behind it, speaking directly to the listener in his armchair. He settled himself down again and pulled the rug more closely round his legs, to shut out a slight draught that had crept in as he turned back from the radio.

'This,' said the man on the radio, 'is the story of my life, from the day I was born to the moment I shall die. It is a long story, but I hope you will stay with me from the very beginning to the very end.'

The man in his armchair nodded without moving his head. He had been waiting for this broadcast for several hours now. He knew he would listen through to the very end, he knew beforehand and he knew it for sure now, just hearing that man's voice flow into his left ear. He closed his eyes, the better to listen. He wished now he had put out the lamp, but to do that he would have to uncover himself, bend down to the wall-socket and flick the switch. It would disturb him and it would disturb the speaker. It was not worth the risk.

I grew up, said the man on the radio, in a family of average means, in a suburb of average respectability. I went to a school that embraced children of the very poor and of the quite well-off. I mingled with children whose clothes smelled rank, whose hair was filthy, and I mingled with others who were smartly brushed and clad. We did not care, only our parents cared. I was happy - there were green places to run about in, and hide. Places now, I suspect, where children would be forbidden to go, for fear of molesters and other strange causes of death and misery. We ran wild on the railway-lines that passed through the suburb; we hid in the grounds of the lunatic-asylum, we lay in ditches and climbed up trees and sat in piles of crashed cars on a scrap-heap.. We learned our lessons and we made our friends for life. And then another year would turn, another summer, and after the summer we would make other friends for life, and forget almost all of those we had envisaged setting up home with, in all childlike innocence.

Life was easy then, said the man on the radio in his unhurried voice.

Life grew more difficult at the higher school, where you had to challenge the adult world, or go down underneath it. And the challenges and the temptations did

not always work. I could tell you of moments both wild and embarrassing, but tonight I do not have quite enough time for all that - perhaps some other evening, when you and I can sit here like old friends, and chat when the spirit takes us, and be silent in each other's company too.

The listener nodded, and tucked his chin down into his cardigan, and smiled a little to himself.. He was with the speaker at every moment, it was as if his own story was being told.

After the higher school, there was work, of course, years of it that stretched away into the distance for forty and fifty years. An unimaginable span, and, what's more, never once thought of. Work was work. Struggling to be a man with responsibilities, making a fool of myself with the managers, making a fool of myself with the ladies. Work was five days a week, and after the fifth day, I felt so out of joint, so ruffled this way and that, it was impossible to see beyond the end of my nose. But on the sixth and seventh days I could go out and see places that massaged the soul back into position.

The speaker paused and then asked: Do you have any old photograph albums? He waited barely a moment for an answer. The listener nodded, and then remembered that he had not looked into those albums for years now. Where were they? He must look them out.

Once, not so long ago, continued the speaker, I came across a pile of old photograph albums, some that I had inherited from his mother, some that I had compiled for myself. Do you know, there was so much in there that I had completely forgotten. But, once recalled, not easily forgotten. Ill-remembered, perhaps, but not forgotten. Is there a difference? I don't know, but these thoughts are not for you and I to discuss tonight. There had been a series of photographs in those albums, taken one long June evening some thirty years ago, of a sunset that seemed now like the end of the world, glorious in all shades of red and gold, huge shafts of light piercing the clouds and illuminating the turbulent sea and the black land. Have you seen the God of William Blake, I wonder?

The listener was puzzled by this question, and murmured that he had not seen such a thing.

Long ago I stopped taking photographs. What would be the point, I thought to myself? I might not remember the details, but I would surely remember enough. In any case, like many of us, I had no one to show them too.

Still, there were many things throughout my working life that gave me satisfaction - many of them, indeed, at my work where, if I had made a good job of something, and if I felt in control of what I was doing, it was pleasure enough. You know of these things yourself, I expect?

You and I, he said, we are said to be fortunate that we have lived in a time of peace. Sometimes that good fortune was hard to comprehend, but even harder was it to appreciate. In our time, there was always talk of war, which I never experienced first-hand. There was talk of famine and revolution. All the while, I lived in a city where there had been no war, no famine, no revolution. And yet I lived them all, was angry like many another, boiled with rage, cursed the folly and cruelty of my fellow-men and women. And yes, we have been favoured by the accident of our birth. I look back on my life and I find that it has been long - too long in places; it has been secure - too secure in places; it has been healthy - but I cannot say that it has been too healthy in places, for what is there except health?

The listener stirred in his seat and pondered those questions of longevity, security and health. And nodded his agreement. The bars of the electric fire ran a

brief arpeggio, then fell silent again. The dim lamp cast a red glow through his eyelids. He was warm and comfortable, and the words of the speaker held him like a ghost: invisible and yet tenacious.

So we sit now, in our comfortable chairs, chatting as I imagine old friends might chat. I have little idea of friendship. Perhaps I set my sights too high, perhaps I am not a likeable man, but I have no friends except those of you who listen to me out there. How fine it would be, do you not think, to visit a friend, sit down with him - or her - and talk when talking is required, or gaze uninterrupted at the fire or at the clouds when that was required?

There now: I have reached the end of my talk this evening. I will be back next week at the same time, if you will too, just like old friends. Good night.

Good night, breathed the listener, taking a deep breath of satisfaction. He sat for a while, listening to the hiss of the radio that now gave out no more, now that that voice had slipped away. After a while, he opened his eyes and blinked against the light. He stretched out his left arm once more and turned off the radio. A sharp click and the hiss died, leaving only the silence, the fire and the lamp, the book, the photograph and the untouched glass of whisky.

'There now' said the helper, 'that's that Mr. Jones fallen asleep again.' She went over to where the old man was slumped sideways in his chair, like a rag-doll that a child had suddenly abandoned. The chair was enormous and stood on its own in the very centre of the day-room, observed from all sides by ranks of the elderly.

'Mr. Jones, Mr; Jones!' she called in his ear, shaking him gently. 'Wake up. I've a nice cup of tea for you.'

The old man opened his eyes suspiciously, then complained in a weak voice at being disturbed when he was listening to his favourite programme.

The helper shook her head disapprovingly and pushed a mug of tea into his hands. 'You just drink that nice cup of tea that I've made for you, Mr. Jones, and then we'll get you out into the sunshine. It's a lovely, lovely day outside.'