

This is a story that I'm going to make a story out of

I don't like parties. I don't like parties but I go. I go because of him whose birthday it is. I go because of her. I like the idea of a party but ideas are different to experience. I go to the party and, because I don't like them, I drink too much. On the way to drinking too much, I exchange some words with some people. Some of these people I like. Some... I despise. And, as I have said, I like him and I like her. There are a few others. A couple. This couple, who are not together when I talk to them, tell me what they have been doing since I last saw them. He tells me. And then, in a different part of the room, she tells me. They tell me the same things in different ways. They use different words and she uses her arms and hands. He doesn't. When he tells me, one hand is by his side, the other holds a glass of red wine. I like listening to her tell the same stories I have just heard, her arms and hands flapping and flying before me. Letting me know how she feels and to make sure I am listening. I talk to a man whose cheeks have taken exception to his eyes and are forcing them into slits. I can't really see his pupils and irises so I know I must be boring him. He speaks in a strange way. He leaves long gaps between each word as if he is expecting someone, me in this instance, to fill in the gaps. I don't. I wait. I listen to his strange voice. I don't listen to what he's saying. I want to. Or, at least, think I want to. He sounds like a machine. Like parties, I don't like machines. I catch someone else's eye and move away from the man machine. A smile and we start to talk to each other. As soon as we start talking, I, and him as well, no doubt, realise that we have nothing to say, to share. Because we have nothing to share, I ask him what he does. He works with other people's money but wants to be a rock star. He has made enough of his

own money from using other people's money to make money for them to build a recording studio. In the studio, he records songs he has written. When he tells me this, I take another look at the clothes he is wearing. A mauve silk scarf draped over his cream linen jacket. I wouldn't want to listen to his songs. The conversation is awkward. Then it becomes more awkward. Our eyes acknowledge this by darting around the room, desperate and in need of rescue. We want to catch something that will separate us. My jaw aches. We make eye contact, smile, and I turn away. Or maybe he turns away first. I wish it had been me. Me, that had turned and strode from him, but it wasn't. I'm standing alone. I hope that nobody sees. I hope that nobody notices that I am standing alone, having been abandoned by the man who made a lot of money from other people's money and that I didn't want to talk to anyway. I think about running away. Not saying goodbye to anyone, pushing open the door that stands a few feet from me. Leaving. No protracted outpourings and embraces. I don't. I have never been bold. I go to get another drink.

The boy behind the bar knows what I'm drinking so I change it. He doesn't care. I take a glug of red wine. A woman comes to the bar. She smiles, I speak. Somehow, and it may be the white wine before the red, or the prosecco before the white, or the shot of brandy at home before the prosecco, white and red, we start to talk about her Shakespeare evenings. Not evenings that she has spent with him. That would be odd. These are monthly congregations that she and her husband go to where they read a Shakespeare play. They read all of it, even the boring bits. The last one was *The Merchant of Venice*. She tells me how she got the speech. The famous one. Shylock. *If you prick me, do I not bleed, tickle, laugh, blah blah*

blah. She says that her husband was devastated. He wanted that speech. He had read Shylock earlier, and then the part was given to her. He was furious. She tells me how much she enjoyed reading the speech. The man, her husband, who was Shylock, then wasn't, when he wanted to be, comes to the bar in search of his drink. He doesn't look like Shylock. That would be odd. I realise I don't know what Shylock looks like, but this is definitely not it. He tells me how, when he was young, he wanted to be an actor. That he tried to get in to the schools where they teach people how to act. He didn't get in and couldn't understand why. Twenty years later, when he saw tears flow down a young actors face, he realised why the schools didn't want to show him how to act. He tells me how angry he is that he didn't get the Shylock speech. *The tickling, the bleeding, blah blah blah*. I order another drink. I see an old friend and make for him through the crowd. We embrace. I feel okay. What he gives me, apart from the hug and familiar love, is a story. A story that, as he is telling it, I know I am going to use.

This is the story that I will shape in to a story.

My friend has been working in China. The company that he works for put on spectacular shows to unveil a product to the world, a car usually but it could be an aeroplane. I may have made that bit up. I don't think they have ever unveiled a new aeroplane. They might have done, because what they do is a high-tech light, sound, and visual spectacle da dah, and that would be good way to launch a plane. Five days before they are about to perform their latest

extravaganza, one of the directors, H_____ has a heart attack. He drops down dead at home. He is still wearing the clothes that he wore to work. When he is dying at home and the paramedics are pummelling his chest to bring him back from wherever he is going, his three-year-old daughter comes in to the room. She tells her mother, his wife, *Don't be sad mummy. I can do that to you too.* The mother who cannot think straight, cannot think at all, says, *Yes you can,* and lies on her back and lets the child press her small hands in to her chest. The child keeps looking across at the paramedics to ensure she is doing it right. The little hands tickle the mother and she laughs. The paramedics cannot bring her husband back to life. The child stops when they do and says, *That's better mummy, isn't it?*

The funeral is arranged for the following week, the day before the big presentation. The presentation has not been cancelled because the show must go on. Although it must, it has not been cancelled because it has taken months to put together with hundreds of people involved in its preparation and construction. It has not been cancelled because it is worth hundreds of thousands of pounds. And, it has not been cancelled because it is for a big global company. The director was a very popular man and had lived in China for the last eleven years. His wife is Chinese. My friend tells me, it is with heavy hearts and moments of disbelief and crying that they continue to work until the day of the funeral arrives.

The taxi pulls up outside the funeral home. When they step from the car in their dark suits they feel the heat of the day. The sun has broken through and smashed apart the darkening

smog that usually hangs about the sky. At the door, a man is taking hold of the mourners left arm and pinning a roughly cut swatch of black material onto their clothing. His hands work with an honest precision. He doesn't prick anyone's arm and he doesn't look at you. Inside it is the smell that hits you. It is the smell of spring. There are hundreds of white flowers. Irises with their cradling hands and strong stems. Lilies and roses. My friend notices that the roses have had the thorns pulled from them. As they step in they are given a flower to hold. They join a queue. Nobody talks. My friend watches the back in front of him to see what he must do. As he moves forward, he sees a young woman leaning against the wall, weeping. She is flanked on either side by two tables, and on these tables are piles of white flowers. It looks like she has wings. He looks away hoping that she might vanish. She doesn't. Her hands, pale and soft, hang at her side. There is a small wooden mallet in her right hand and four or five long iron nails in her left. The line breaks in to another line, five across and facing the coffin. He watches as the five before him tread towards the coffin. They lean in with their flowers and deposit them inside. They file around to the other side of the coffin for a last look, a farewell. This leaning in, bending over, lasts several minutes. Their heads lift in unison, they turn and walk on. He thinks of Busby Berkley. The show must go on. Now it his turn. He walks towards the coffin gripping his iris. He places his iris in the coffin, amidst the other flowers, miniature cars and houses, toy money and the body. He goes to the other side and the look. He thinks that H_____ looks much better dead than he did in life, healthier, as if he has been on holiday. The looking lasts, his head bent, and he feels awkward. He is not crying and he has looked enough. His line of five breaks and his breathing softens. After there are no more people to look in on the body, mayhem. A man, who seems to be in charge, shouts something. Then young Chinese men all in dark suits are running, scooping up handfuls of

flowers, plucking their heads and packing them in to the coffin. It is as if they are racing against a clock. More mosh pit than Busby Berkley. Without a shout, they stop. Like a magic trick, the rabbit from the hat, two men appear with the coffin lid and lay it gently on the casket. They disappear and nothing happens. No one speaks. Then the young woman, the angel, appears, with her mallet and nails. Her shoulders shake as she approaches the coffin. This is H_____’s eldest child, his twenty seven year old daughter from his first marriage. It is her job to seal her father’s coffin. She lifts her left hand on to the coffin lid and lets the nails roll from her palm. She takes one up between finger and thumb, and holds it above the head of the coffin. She lifts the mallet and brings it down on the nail. Her body shakes, sobs escape from her heart. My friend begins to cry.

There is a lunch that follows.

Leaving the car he steps in to a wall of heat. To the side of the restaurant entrance a large stone furnace blazes, below its mouth is a steel bin. He watches as people unfasten their piece of mourning cloth and place it in the bin. He climbs the six tiled steps, and stands before the furnace. He wipes the sweat from his hands on a handkerchief and fumbles with the pin. He holds the black fragment in his hand. Beneath his shoes, there are black fragments stuck to the ground. They have been dropped or spilt or abandoned. He lifts the lid and places his carefully inside. The bin is full of these black swatches. More fragments than there could have been from H_____’s mourners. At the table he asks about the bin, the furnace and the

black material. He is told that these will be burnt so that H_____ can pass in to the afterlife. They eat a twenty-five-course lunch, there is laughter and some weeping. He goes back to work to put the finishing touches to tomorrows unveiling.

When he has finished the story that he has given and I will take, I ask: *what happens if someone else's material is burnt with yours.* He lifts his shoulders, his eyebrows and his hands. I shake my head. My glass is empty so I go to get another drink. I drift through a few more conversations and drinks. The party is almost over. I say goodbye as steadily as I can, and leave. The air outside is cool, the sky's nightshade silken. The moon shines, stars pulse. I should take a taxi but I want to walk. What happens if one person's black is burnt with a piece from the funeral before? Do they wake in the afterlife with a part of them missing? Or do they wake and, not knowing that a small part of them is someone else, think this is what the afterlife is like?

When I get home, I don't have an answer. I undress, climb into bed and kiss my wife's covered shoulder. I close my eyes.