

Stevie, my love, how can I explain it?

It was the love and the pain. Both together. In a single moment there was an absolute separation of past and present. A total dislocation. It was as if... But this is not a story to tell a child. Ah! But Stevie, you are no longer a child, you are an immortal.

How can I explain it?

Imagine a man walking down a road. He is not going anywhere important. Just walking, not thinking. Then suddenly, something happens. For a second he has a superconsciousness of some absolute, irrevocable event taking place... of something that is inescapable, that is going to happen before it all clarifies in his mind. There is no time for action. Only time to acknowledge. Somewhere between one beat of his heart and the next he is aware of a dialogue; a dialogue, he senses, between the person he was a moment ago and the person he is about to become.

And then there is the explosion. A cosmic roar. Here, in the middle of the sound, he knows he is being ripped apart. Sound and pain are one. He knows that now, finally, he has been given his own fate.

Then, as he attempts to escape the pain, slowly, grudgingly, uncomprehendingly, he becomes aware that he is holding something. He turns his head to see if this is true, that he is indeed grasping something. His mind is operating in a dull fashion. It

appears he is able to take hold of only one thought at a time – and each thought gives way to the next most reluctantly. He turns his head and fixes his gaze on his hand. It is true that it appears to be clasping something. What he is clasping he cannot imagine. Whatever it is, it is hidden within the fist that is gripping it tightly with an almost spastic intensity. Slowly he understands that he needs to send a command to his fist to relax and then for the fingers to ease open like a flower blossoming. First he sees the problem. Then he sees what he must do. Then, he realises he must do it. And then he does it. He issues an instruction and somewhere along the chain of command a switch is thrown and his hand is told to bring forth the fruit. Only then does the hand unfurl.

He opens his hand and there in the palm of his hand, resting in the leathery creases, is a large glittering stone as large as a small bird's egg and filled with light.

At first he doesn't give the object a name. It is simply something that draws him in. For a long time, the very longest time, he is not aware of anything else apart from this clear, etched, limpid stone rich in all the colours of the rainbow in their deepest and most profound form. He sinks into the shifting whorls of light and colour. He feels lightened, unburdened. His cares are stripped from him. And as he sloughs them off like a heavy winter coat, he feels his heart pumped full with love – a beating ecstasy, an overflowing richness of emotion. How can he explain this feeling? It fills him and overflows. He cannot contain it. He is aware that he is floating in a sea of pain and love, a pain that screams obscenities and a love that sings like birdsong. There he is, he says to himself, silently, wonderingly, because he has an image of it inside his mind as if it

were outside his body, there he is floating on this terrible sea. How can this be? He hardly knows how to frame the question. He asks himself another question. How do I feel?

Indeed, how does he feel? Feel now? Now? What does now mean? This moment? This moment which has already escaped to become another moment, just another fleeting moment of the past? Focus on feeling, he tells himself. Love and Agony? Annihilation and completion. Emptiness and fulfilment. Both torn apart and put together. Mended and destroyed. Yes, yes, the pain. But also the love and laughter that poured out of his heart and didn't stop pouring out. A pure fountain of loving love. And the whole world was suddenly different. And the whole world and the rest of his life was made new again. And meaningful.

And Stevie, my dear Stevie, that man was me. And I was never able to separate the pain from the love. I did not know it then but the love was the key to the pain. The pain, of course, was the key to the love. And the name of the stone was Stevie. It was you. Did you already guess that? The life transforming diamond of love and pain.

And, yes, Stevie, you too knew about pain and love and laughter.

What stories do little girls want to hear? Not stories of pain. You want to know how it all began. How did your mummy and I meet so that we could come together to have you as our baby?

Well, let's start at the beginning. I fell in love with your mother's perfect feet. It started with the toes – that perfect fan of strong even toes – and then moved back along the broad expanse of the foot to the neat ankle, then her calf. My love moved upwards

slowly – thighs, buttocks, belly, breasts – until I loved all of her. Some people fall in love the other way round. They love the face first and only later discover the feet. But that's the way it was with me. I fell in love feet first.

When I think back on those days I ache for the beauty of your mother's body and her movements against mine. Two young eager bodies desiring each other, giving fleshy pleasures to each other. There are whole afternoons that should be cryonically preserved.

But it wasn't just a matter of the hungers of flesh. Recently, looking through some photo albums I came across a photograph of your mother leaning back against a railing, wearing just T-shirt and shorts. The photograph was electric with her energy and the amused love light in her eyes. And I fell in love with her again.

And not just energy but spirit too. One day it was raining and we were down by the beach. It was deserted. We had a ball. And we started to throw the ball at each other, getting wet in the rain. And laughing. Fully dressed. Getting soaked. Throwing a ball. Being young and enjoying it.

Stevie, one of my favourite photographs of your mother was taken the night we were celebrating our engagement with a dinner to introduce both sides of the family to each other. Your mother wore a yellow-gold trouser suit with the high Chinese collar. There is the look of a fox in her eyes and such spirited beauty.

Recently, I came across an Indian story that describes the creation of womankind. God, said the creator of the story, took the beauty of flowers, the song of birds, the colours of the rainbow, the kiss of a light breeze, the laughter of the sea's waves, the gentleness of lambs, the cunning of the fox, the waywardness of the clouds

and the fickleness of spring showers and wove them all together to make a wife for the first man.

This myth leaves out some important ingredients: a temper hot as fiery flames, a temper slow as burning embers, the obstinacy of stone.

That's what your mother was like.

And then there's the story about how it was that I came to ask your mother to marry me. This is a story that you must close your eyes to listen to. Yes, Stevie, even you.

Looking down from the rock. Sunlight skitters off the surface of the flat sea. The water is so inviting. So clean. The afternoon shivers with stillness. The moment becomes tense with expectation. It has taken many years to reach this moment of – no, not yet clarity, not yet. Not yet beginning. This is ending. Standing on top of the rock jutting out from the beach. Sunlight, silver and gold speckles on the slight ripples of the water that waft lazily in to the beach. A thought beckons. I am tempted.

That morning I had got on a boat that had headed out from the shore towards unseen islands. The heat of the day scorched down. I could smell the dirt sweat stink of my self-disgust. How to get rid of it. How to become clean again. I longed to plunge into the crystal, sparkling aquamarine water that the flimsy boat put-puttered through. Occasionally there was a spray and dance of flying fish. Just to stop the inevitability of time's onward rush. Just take one step and throw myself into the cooling, cleansing water. There would after all be no danger. The boat would stop. The captain – to dignify the burnt-black boat operator – would curse and mutter but what of it. But I didn't have the courage.

Then somehow, from the boat to a crowded conveyance to a point on the road and a long dirt path that led eventually to the beach and the small huts for rent and the rock that jutted out into the water a short way. And now here I was. Here I was at the ending that was about to end.

Why I had climbed up on to the rock I can't remember. I must have thrown myself into the sea the minute I could. I had taken a lean-to at the edge of the beach under the less than secure canopy of a coconut tree – a small raised floor and the ceiling just high enough to crouch in. Thinking back on it now I see myself tearing off the sweat-stained clothes, putting on a swimming costume and then running down to the water and plunging in. Of course. The ecstasy. The cleanness of the coolness, wetness, saltiness and the hot, glaring sunlight.

And then...?

And then, a little later, as the heat of the day lost its edge, I had gone to investigate the rocks. Up here I was a good fifteen feet up. The afternoon sun came glancing off the smooth mirror of the sea's surface. I remembered a game we had played at school. There had been an outdoor swimming pool, six foot deep at the deep end. At the side there was a roofed changing area. The kick was to dive in off the roof into the deep end of the pool. From eight or nine feet high you got to palm yourself off the bottom of the pool. There was no real danger to it. The only way you'd get hurt was not having your arms out in front of you – or maybe if you slipped your footing and hit the side of the pool. That was what gave the game an edge.

But now I was thirty years old and at the end of my tether.

I stood on the rock. Now that the idea had come to me that I might dive into the sea I looked down at the water to judge it. Down below there was a natural rock pool. From the way the lines of the rocks below bent, I guessed the water was about six feet deep. Deep enough if I just had the courage. But fifteen foot up, I was higher than the roof of the changing rooms. Could I do it?

I had arrived on the rock but my mind was still restless, on the move, running from the sense of distaste that had been with me for the last few days, weeks, months – this feeling that I wanted to wash off. Like an itch it had to be scratched. Couldn't ignore it. Still this momentum for doing things, for moving. The rock was too high. Even I could see that. Just a bit too high. It would need guts to do it. I hadn't even had the guts to throw myself off the boat into the deep smooth, clear, bluey-green sea. I was a coward. I was running away. Running away from what? Myself? Destiny? Fate? What did these words really mean? Just running aimlessly, going nowhere, not having the courage to reach out and choose, to just do something – something for myself that might define myself. Do something to prove to myself I was...what? Something to respect myself for afterwards, not the things that I had been doing that gnawed away at my self-respect. I looked down again. I could get hurt. If I was younger, perhaps? Coward, I told myself.

I was beginning to feel a bit silly now standing up there on the rock squinting down at the water, measuring, always measuring. Assessing the depth, assessing my courage, assessing the wellsprings inside that could opt for life and adventure, pride and glory, solid

plain affirmation... or the continuing sense of failure and disgust. Was life going to go on as it had done, steadily eating away at the soul?

I stood on the rock and stared down at the clear pool of water below me. It was clear right to the bottom. Perhaps six foot deep. I wasn't used to looking at water this clear. I was twelve, fifteen feet up. Did I dare dive into six foot of water? I knew I could do it. It was a matter of curving the back as soon as you hit the water and padding yourself off the bottom with the palms of the hands. Was I scared? Yes, I felt the butterflies flutter in my stomach as I stared at the water. It was just a matter of taking a deep breath and doing it. Too much thought made you scared. Just do it. I wanted to do it. I wanted to prove myself. Confirm myself. Prove that this flight from fear was an aberration, that it hadn't undermined me. I was scared of being scared. Scared at how my being scared of life had stumped me. I was at a dead end. But don't think about that, I told myself, just the water. It beckoned me and I felt its pull. I readied myself on the rock's edge and stared down the fear that was rising. Before it could reach my brain and make me back down, make me fail again, I thrust myself away into the air, away from the land. It wasn't a high jack-knifing dive as much later I would recall it but a headlong plunge towards the water and the sand bottom...

If there is a beginning, this is it. I see myself caught in mid air. Behind me there is a long sandy beach. Nearby are rocks and coconut palms. The sky is a shocking dark blue. The sea stretches out, going from sandy green to ruffled dark. Beyond is the silence of death.

Caught in mid air I suddenly understood something very clearly.



I saw I was going to die. The water in the pool wasn't six foot deep. How silly of me. I could see that now as I plunged down. It was two, maybe three feet deep at most. I was going to die. I braced myself against death. I hit the water with my arms slightly bent to break the fall.

My hands ripped through the silvery sheen of the water's surface. The surface ruptured at the head's plummeting passage. I could see all this quite clearly. I was both inside and outside the experience. The forearms took the main brunt of the impact as I slammed against the sand. The body continued its descent. Another foot of water and I would have been alright. My forehead slammed against the sand bottom. My body jarred and fell around me. And then I rose to the surface and breathed in clean air.

Yes. Imagine it. I rose to the surface. I was conscious of the wonder of this fact. Conscious too that I was conscious. I breathed in the air. Clean, salty, sun filtered air. I was aware that a miracle had happened. I had broken my neck for sure. It was bent forward, I couldn't straighten up. But I was alive. I moved my arms and legs. I hadn't been crippled but I had busted my neck and I had to be very very careful. I had been immeasurably close to death and now I was alive, still among the living. I AM alive. Jesus Christ, I swore in amazement. Jesus.

When I was sure I wasn't dead – I was clutching my head half in amazement and half in pain – when I was absolutely, incredulously sure, I waded through the rocks surrounding the pool to the shore. Shock got to me quickly. I started to shiver. There was someone nearby. I called for help. Hands took hold of me and walked me to the thatched hut I had rented. Voices expressed concern.

“I’m alright,” I assured them, “I just need to lie down.”

I seemed to know what I was doing. I was helped to lie down. I found a position that did not induce muscular spasms. I was made comfortable. Then they left me. The babble of concern receded. After a while the shivering stopped.

It was late in the afternoon. At first there was nothing. No thoughts. Just awareness. I felt the breeze. I heard the residual muttering from the restaurant not far away. I remembered what I had done. I had done something of incomparable stupidity. I looked down again from the rock in my mind’s eye. I wondered how I could ever have thought the pool was six foot deep. I could see how the curve of a rock had misled me into imagining I was looking at a diffracted image. How very silly. I smiled. It didn’t matter now. I forgave myself. The best thing to do now was to lie still – as still as I could. Tomorrow I would go to the hospital. My neck was busted for sure. What a really dumb thing to do. I wiggled my toes and fingers from time to time to reassure myself. I couldn’t stop the grin spreading right across my face.

I shivered a while from the shock and then the shivering went and I was wrapped in an envelope of peace and simplicity. I listened to the sea and the sky. I heard the air breathe. I saw the exquisite wonderfulness of the crimson streaks of sunset flush deep in the sky. I heard the stars sigh. I heard the beauty of the sea’s rustling against the sand and I lay and listened to the voices in my heart. It took a while before I was fully aware of them. I felt no volition. I felt no desire for volition. Words arose from the depths and sank back into the depths. I listened to the words. They came and they went. I did nothing to detain them. It took a

while for understanding to come – but understanding did come. I came to understand something very well. I had never understood anything quite as strongly as I now understood this new feeling. I understood that everything had become very, very simple – and I understood that I was very, very happy.

It was the most remarkable feeling, lying under the thatched roof of the beach hut, knowing that pain lurked in the back of my neck. That a spasm would hit me if I made any incautious move. From time to time I checked if I could still move my fingers or toes. I would have to be very careful. The neck was certainly broken. Any incautious move might shear the nerves that held being in place. Death was still very near but it was no longer a threat. I was at peace. Such ease and peace! All burdens had been lifted. How wonderful it was simply to be, to be alive, without doing, without thinking, without having. Yes, wonderful. The sound of the wind. The steady rhythmic surge of the surf on the sand. The lilac and orange sunset exploding in the sky timelessly.

Night came. No possibility of sleep. I sank into a dream. I became aware of myself dreaming. I pictured myself as a dream. Was I just a dream? Was it possible I could be dreamt and then forgotten? It seemed silly that now, just as I had found myself, I might die. But maybe that was when you did find yourself – as you were dying. I didn't really mind. I would be happy to sink into death if that's what was lying in wait at the other side of the night. I would not resist. Would death be that easy? Would I simply undream myself? Surely death would be harder than that? It wouldn't be a fading away. It wasn't like sleep. Or was it? I had always imagined it to be a violent wrenching not rest and easefulness. I played with these

thoughts until it occurred to me that I could feel my life force in me still very strong. Life? Could you call it life? This thing I had been leading was not a life. It wasn't living. It was drifting. It was sinking under the weight of an endless, meaningless, meaning-not-mattering existence. I tasted the failure of matter not meaning anything. But meaning was vital. Life without point – what value could it have? There had to be point: something that held it all together. What was it that made up a person, a life? Distressingly few fragments. Over the years flavours were added, subtracted. Cracks appeared. Time passed. Everything definitively finite. Was that how you made sense of a life? By adding up the facts: that endless list of accidental happenings? But what did the facts matter if they made no sense? If they could not be added up to a summation? Only meaning made sense. Only the mind could make meaning. Only the interior workings of the self had point. Imposed point. Dreams. Dreams. Dreams alone could create existence. Yes. Only dreams.

The idea that I was being dreamt amused me. Then I saw beyond the edge of the idea. I saw that only I could dream myself. I had been waiting, always waiting. I could see that now. Waiting for someone to dream me – to take hold of me and give me a ready-made dream. Now it was the end of waiting. Now was the beginning of creating. Of doing. Of imposing. Insisting. Insisting on myself. Myself most of all and the things that I myself wanted to do for the sake of doing them and for the sake of fulfilling that dark desire that came from god-knows-where to do them. Yes.

Thoughts streamed through me and I smiled at them. They did not belong to me. They had their own existence. I could touch them

and make them mine if I chose to do so but otherwise they were like ducks in a shooting gallery – except no-one was shooting. The anguish had gone. The fear-sweat had gone. Only the incomparable beauty of this moment remained – the incomparable beauty of still being alive and not dead as a part of me had wanted – the part of me that had hurled the rest of me off fifteen foot of rock into three foot of water. This moment was filled with wonder at having any thoughts at all. It was wonderful to have a mind. A mind that could skip and scamper playfully among the dreams and memories and thoughts and images and ideas as if there were no difference between them all. The stars were so crisp and clear. Was there a moon? I couldn't see one. I didn't care. I had been scrubbed clean. No. Pounded clean.

Later the moon appeared somewhere to my left, a pregnant three-quarter moon. I forgot about it and then remembered it later, noting with no great surprise that it had moved. Time moved and yet time was timeless. It moved frictionlessly at its own inevitable speed. The moon was in this place. Then it was in that. If I were to die now I would die happily. But I was glad – how mightily glad it was beyond the power of words to say – to be alive. The words sang in me. Such a precious thing. Not to be wasted. Why had I not realised this before? It was such a simple truth? But it could not be reached through reason. Only blessedness. Only love could bring this happiness. To be detached from the flow and watch it pass and to let it wash through the mind for the mind to savour it and to bless it. That was all that was needed.

I lay there and knew that all I had to do to redeem myself was to choose. I chose. There and then I chose to love. And the smile I

smiled cracked open my face. For I had in mind the knowledge of who it was I was in the act of choosing to love. Ah yes. Of course. Why had I not seen this before? How perfect she was for me. Not that it would necessarily be so easy. She might not agree, after all, to play her ordained part, to say yes.

And then, much later, unsought-after, dawn lightened the sky and I rose from the bed a new person. It had been so easy.

And at the hospital, miraculously, they found the neck hadn't broken – though the bouncing and banging in the bus to get there would, I thought, achieve what the dive had not. The neck was bent and I would need traction, but what did I care? I wasn't crippled. And I was alive.

And then, Stevie, later, cautiously, not quite convinced I meant what I was saying, your mother said yes.

Many years later I took her back to the rock. It took two days to track it down, I had such a vague idea where it was. I found it eventually in the grounds of an up-market but secluded area of beach bungalows. I was disorientated. I saw a rock that might have been the rock. But it was clearly too high. No one in their right mind would have dived off the top of that. But when at last I had discounted all the other rocks, only this one was left. With a strange sense of foreboding I climbed to the top and looked down. From lower down one could see clearly how shallow the water was but from here the sun glittered off the surface and seemed to suggest greater depths – yes, this was it. I felt the fear again, a flutter in my stomach, as I contemplated just how lucky I really had been.

And I have met this rock again in other circumstances. Flying

on Thai Airways, I picked up the in-flight magazine. There was a full-page advertisement for this little boutique hotel – and a picture of it, with my rock in the foreground. This little rock on a remote bay on a remote island in Thailand has a powerful genie.

Bern and I got married Chinese style. Early in the morning I arrived with my ‘brothers’ to kidnap the bride. The metal grille across the flat entrance was locked. Inside Bern, your mother, sat silent while her ‘sisters’ loudly refused to open the door. Brothers and sisters bargained until a sum of money was agreed on – a lucky combination of threes and nines. Eventually we were let in and I kneeled on the floor to offer tea to Bern’s parents and older brothers and sisters, and pour wine before the family altar. Then it was off to the registry office. Here, in a cold formal room, we were placed beside each other at a long table. Our prompts were printed with bureaucratic efficiency onto a slab of perspex that read: “I \_\_(name)\_\_ take you \_\_(name)\_\_ as my lawfully wedded wife/husband.” Bern stuttered through her words and I found that she had taken me as her lawfully wedded wife... er... husband.

We travelled a lot in those first years before you arrived in our lives, Stevie. A three-month honeymoon driving around Europe. Just driving and driving. Hong Kong is a small place and to have the chance to contemplate space and distance and miles passing into the rear-view mirror was a sumptuous pleasure in itself. Bern learnt to map-read, going from near incomprehension to fine precision in a matter of days. France (where all I could remember was a smattering of Spanish), Spain (where my French returned and my Spanish deserted me), Portugal (where my Spanish was adequate), France again (where once again I had to struggle, juggling Spanish

and school French), then Ireland (where the English was thick and unforgettable – but what exactly were they saying? “And what countryman are you?” a farmer asked. I admitted to being from the North: a grave mistake in a small town where there was a monument on the pier to three young men who drowned one night during the ‘troubles’ when they backed a truck down the pier at three one moonless morning and fell off the end into the shallow water of the river; they had been intending to land arms from a boat. Silly eejits! The farmer stalked off. I should have said I was Chinese. Then he would have welcomed me.)

Climbing the stairs in an English guesthouse the lady taking us to our room enquired politely where we were from. I told her: Hong Kong. There was a pause and she looked at us both closely, from one to the other. Chinese face. Non-Chinese face.

“No, really,” she said. “I can tell from your accent that you’re not from Hong Kong.”

Oh yes? My accent? Not the colour of my skin and the shape of my eyes. But Hong Kong is a multi-national city with some 300,000 non-Chinese. But it’s also a long way away. Filled with the mysterious vapours of the orient. How did the line go in the film *Prizzi’s Honour*? “Let’s forget about all this. Let’s get away. Let’s go to Hong Kong and change our names and disappear.” Hong Kong is a gateway to the unknown. An alchemical place where people go to change identity, to change their very nature, and disappear. Didn’t we know that? It was something we kept forgetting.

And then the return to England. We were both struck by the lush, rich, green beauty of the English countryside after the drab olives of Iberia. Glorious memories.



One winter, we spent three weeks on a train travelling first class around China. It was cheap then. And what magnificent trains they were, smoke-belching monsters from another age. We passed encampments of railway workers who lived in mat shed lean-tos, often decorated with a wolf pelt. On one remote station platform, high in the mountains, a man catching sight of us welcomed us to China. He thought Bern was Japanese and she was content with that, she felt so remote from her fellow countrymen.

In Taiyuan, we emerged from the railway station in the pre-dawn dark. Inevitably, a crowd gathered around us. Faces pressed close up to ours, blankly puzzled. I smiled but there was no response. None at all. We were objects of great impersonal strangeness. Then suddenly eyes connected, a face creased, a slow laugh. Others smiled. The knot of faces eased away. Taiyuan. Where the pavements were covered with an intricate tracery of frozen spittle. I felt sick to the stomach and was glad to leave.

In Hohhot, in Mongolia, we arrived after being 24 hours on the train to find that there was only one taxi in the whole city, and it had gone off with someone else. And in any case we were not expected by the travel bureau that organised all travel in those days. Dusk fell before five. Scamps in the street outside the station had Stalinesque moustaches of frozen nose drippings. It was clear they lasted all winter. I imagined the spring thaw. The railway guards took pity on us and allowed us into their cabin. With the lambswool leggings and vests that we wore, the heat from the boiler was unbearable. Outside the temperature dropped to minus twenty or more. We made telephone calls. Promises were made but nothing happened. It was five hours before the taxi returned

and took us to a state guesthouse.

In Datong, a grim, dusty, frontier mining town, we took a bus to the Buddhist caves hollowed out of the cliff that ran along the bank of a wide river. On the other bank there was the black smudge of open cast coal diggings. The river was iced up and children in the distance played on it, straight from a painting by Lowry. We ventured out on to the ice a little downstream near a frozen cataract – white water indeed. As I focused the camera we heard the ice cracking. Very gingerly we returned to shore. I remember that evening walking, as dusk fell, from the bus station to the hotel down a long dusty lane two or three miles long. It seemed to go on for ever. And all around us men tramped home from their work. We were tired. I stared at the dust. We all tramped to the same beat. On, on. The steady tramp of exhausted men going home. Would we never get there? And finally we did. It was six o'clock and the kitchens were just about to close but they gave us some rice and vegetables and a bottle of dark brown ale. It was good. It was heaven. I looked at the label. Bern translated it: Two-headed Bird brand beer.

In Tibet, I remember once, but it was so typical, there was no traffic worth speaking of as we started to cross a road. Bern took my arm in hers to guide us both safely across. She had an obsessive concern. How strange that this memory should stand out so clearly against the intense images of large men, large women – radiating size in many dimensions – dressed in shaggy yak skins – with nothing underneath, as we discovered when one drunken woman sprawled into a gutter – and the pervasive thick smell of rancid butter. These people radiated strange unnerving energies

that vibrated in the still thin dry air that foreshortened everything so that it seemed everything was just there – right there so that one could just reach out and grasp it. The smooth hills along all sides of the valley looked five hundred feet high, perhaps, not the three thousand they really were. The Potala, that seems so grand and tall in the photographs, is dwarfed by these surrounding slopes which mark the edge of the surrounding Tibetan plateau. And yet, in the front of my mind, I have this image of Bern collecting me by the arm to shepherd me to the safety of the far side of the road. Always looking after other people.

In a stone village in southwest China, I have a picture of Bern and myself under siege from fifty to a hundred girls, all dressed in the local native costume of their tribal minority, waving embroidered shoes, wanting to sell them. Bern had a small curio shop in those days and was stocking up. An hour before, we had passed the word to a local shopkeeper that we were in the market for embroidered goods. He had told us to return after an hour. When we did so we found dozens of girls waiting for us. They mobbed us, waving their embroidered cotton shoes in the air, their very own work, desperate that we might not want them, desperate for the currency. Bern bought every single pair. I don't think she was ever happier than at that moment.

The flitter of random memories. We travelled well together.

At that time we lived in a small flat at the top of a hill on a small island, an hour by ferry from the main island of Hong Kong. It is a very small island. With recent reclamations it is almost exactly one square mile. Two largish headlands of rotten granite joined by

a wasp waist of a sand bar. Geographers call this type of island a tombolo. It is perhaps three hundred paces across at the thinnest point. The shape of it is like a dog, if you look at it in a certain way, or maybe a knotted root of ginger. The sandbar has been concreted over and built upon. This is the village where some thirty, forty or even fifty thousand people live, no-one has been able to agree on the precise figure. Three-storey blocks line the two alleys that run the length of the strip. On the south side of the sandbar, six hundred or so trawlers, fishing junks, shrimpers, sampans, water boats, grain junks, short-haul cargo boats and fibre-glass skips occupy the waters of the harbour area. On the north side is the island's main beach which looks on to the south side of Hong Kong Island – a scatter of lights on a clear night – and beyond it the furnace of the blazing city, alive with evening energies. Sometimes, late in the evening we watched it with a kind of awe. But mostly we faced the other way, looking across the inky harbour to the silent dark shapes of the mountains on the neighbouring island of Lantau, slopes that faded away in shades of grey.

The flat, one of four in the block, stood just below the peak of one of the two hills on the island, overlooking some vegetable plots. One day, instead of going down to the market, I decided to buy directly from the farmer.

“How much do you want?” he asked. We stood facing each other surrounded by the vegetables in the field grappling with this question of quantity.

“A catty,” I suggested tentatively, aware of the stupidity of talking weight when we had nothing to weigh them in. We laughed.

“OK, two dollars worth.”

My Cantonese was up to that. The farmer nodded and started laying the white cabbage along his arm. From wrist to elbow one dollar, from elbow to shoulder two dollars. For two dollars I got an arm's length of Chinese greens.

To the left of the house was the wide bay of the harbour. To the right, rocks fell down to the open sea a stone's throw away. We shared the nights with the croakings of a hundred frogs, rich bellowings like cows' mooings. I loved these frog sounds, each burping like bubbles bursting, that greeted us as we came home in the evening. At night it was sometimes too tiresome to go out into the town at the bottom of the hill. We stayed where we were and closed out the world. Our closest friends were insects and trees. Spiders weaved their cobwebs unmolested, skinks darted out from the wardrobe. Blue tailed skinks – lizards that looked as if they had been designed by Bugatti. They skittered around the room on electric nerves. Sometimes a tail was missing, leaving a glistening red lump. Within a week the tail had grown back. Cicadas grated their legs together in sudden frenzies of sound. In the drains and cracks around the house lived armoured centipedes up to ten inches long. In the grass there were snakes. We were not alone in our solitude.

They were happy times, times of deep contentment and a strange, disquieting need to escape. I recognise this only now, looking back, there were deep currents of energy that felt constrained. And as I look back at this companionable, contented time, I guess Bern too was escaping along her own tracks of wood and stone. Dear Stevie, I loved your mother and she loved me. These are truths that I know absolutely. But perhaps there was – in me, in her – at

the centre, a hard core that could not be dissolved in the acid of love. And, anyway, love isn't all there is to it. There's more. And did we leak away from each other slowly, a slow steady drip-drip-drip of soul and spirit and heart and being? So very slowly we didn't notice it? So slowly that even if we had seen it we wouldn't have thought it mattered? Is that what happened? It's hard to think of it. But then of course the drip, if there was a drip, was small and the reservoir of feeling was deep.

And life, in any case, means friction and people are different, grow differently, react differently. These are simple everyday truths.

And then, Stevie, there was you. A seed planted in the very heart-soil of our lives.

I knew it before she did. I knew the firming of the breast meant more than temporary hormonal dysfunction. I knew what the delay in the menstrual flow must mean but she was confused. She had had the signs before. The signs had been wrong. This time was different. The days passed and the subtle ballooning of her breasts continued. I grew more certain. But she was confused. There had been a slight flow of blood at the proper time and again a few weeks later and again and again, each time after we had made love.

When it was confirmed she said we'd have to stop for a couple of months. It could be dangerous. How did I feel about it? There I was, excluded from the body I loved for the sake of the usurper. I thought of the burden, the irritations, the complications of it all. But that mood didn't last long. I became affectionate of the little

abstraction that daily grew bigger and bigger. You. But I didn't know it then. I felt this nameless fruit of love ripen under the palm of my hand; saw it swell. Her nipples stuck out straight as if at attention. We lay in bed holding hands and contemplating this mysterious child that had chosen to be ours – or had it been chosen for us by some unseen fate? Was it that eons of karma were meeting at this intersection of fate and time? Magical and mysterious being. What were we going to do with you? What were you going to do to us?

We understood a truth. The future had arrived. And what we saw as the future would always be your continuous present.

And looking back, Stevie, as I sometimes do, I feel a kind of horror rise up in me. If we had known then. If we had suspected. If we had had tests. And such tests! Plunging a huge needle into the amniotic sac and drawing out some of the fluid that protected you from the bumps of the world. And analysing the cells of your foetal excretions. With a one to two percent chance of aborting you. If we had done that, then we would never have known you. That thought scares me to the depth of my soul. If I had never known you, why then, then, I would never have become the me I am today.

We become encrusted with the sediments that life throws at us. They become impacted. Layer is laid upon layer. We adapt ourselves. We change. What would happen if these ancient crusts were peeled away? It hardly bears thinking of. We only have the life we are given. It is folly to sit and dream and wish that things could be different, that we could be given different lives. This is a hard, unpleasant truth. But Stevie, when you were with us, thankfully,

you were not aware that there were other putative lives that might have been embraced if only things were just a little different. In the light of your own life this thought takes on a little poignancy.

And the snakes were a worry, the poisonous centipedes for some reason plaguing only the other half of the building and leaving us alone. Mainly, they were harmless rat snakes but more and more, recently, we had seen the small, nearly invisible, bright emerald bamboo snakes – so like the thin leaves of certain trees you had to peer closely to make sure. One night, bathed in bright moon-light, Bern and I sauntered up the path, past the frog pond, up a sudden steep incline, along the cracked concrete path. The harbour put-putted below with the coughing of sampan engines.

“We’ve just passed a snake,” Bern said.

“No, it’s just a crack in the path.”

“It’s a snake.”

“Don’t be silly. It’s just a crack.”

We both stared down. I had a torch in a bag and dragged it out. There in the beam was a young bamboo snake, sitting perfectly still, staring into the light. We had walked one on either side of it. If we had stood on it, it would surely have retaliated. The bamboo is one of the more poisonous of the local snakes. Bern became quite proficient in pouring boiling water over them when they came too close to the house. They jerked and shivered in their frantic death dance throes.

A friend said: “Some people say a pregnant woman mustn’t harm any living being in case the spirit of the animal comes and punishes the baby.”

Is that what happened, Stevie? Did the snake spirit...? I don’t



even know how to finish the thought. I know the friend wishes now she had bitten her tongue. But how can a curse turn out a blessing? I'm sorry. Stevie, you're right. A blessing to who? It wasn't fair on you. Not fair at all. But what has fairness got to do with it in the end?

But as your mother grew heavier, the walk up the hill grew more tiring. We had to move. We took a flat in the village and moved down. I kept the old flat as an office, where I stayed all alone during the day, except for the company of a family of blue-tailed skinks: Every spring they emerged from the nest they had made in some long-forgotten box in one of the cupboards I no longer wanted to open. All summer they skittered and scooted around. Years came and went but we never really became friends, though there came a time when they would tolerate me and no longer react with hair-trigger speed to my slightest movement. I wrote my books and felt secure.

Dear Stevie, your mother took to pregnancy like a rosy red flower to the ripening sun. And then, one day, you arrived. And you were going to be called Patrick if you were a boy and Stevie if you were a girl. Stevie. Not so much after the poet Stevie Smith as because of her. It was a name that conjured up a rugged tomboyishness that I approved of.

Oh Stevie. How little I knew then.

One afternoon, having just got home from having done the shopping, Bernadette felt the cramps coming on so we walked down to the ferry and took the next boat in to Hong Kong. The white three-deck ferry sailed out of the small bay of the island and headed for the western entrance to Hong Kong harbour. It was a

cold day in February.

Bern's waters broke ten minutes before we docked at the pier. We managed to get a taxi and with a delightful quiver of near panic we drove to the hospital. No-one was willing to say how long it would be. The idea of spending long hours on a wooden bench, perhaps all night, only to have to be supportive all the next day did not appeal. There was only an even chance that I would be able to observe the birth – the delivery room was a double one and there might easily be another birth that night. And now that it came to the point I felt a certain queasiness about the prospect of blood and pain and feeling useless and in the way. So I left Bern to it, left her to cope on her own with the business of giving birth to you.

The next morning, shortly after seven, I arrived at the hospital to be informed it was all over. A girl had been born at three o'clock. So I crept to Bern's bed and kissed her and then tip-toed away.

The past is a distant country. Some days are clear. Some days are wrapped in obscuring fogs.

She called me mid-morning and said the doctor wanted to talk to us both. The doctor? A formality no doubt. I gave it no thought. But Bern's family were all there. They could smell danger a mile away. A doctor wanted to say something...?

It was three o'clock in the afternoon of the very first day of your existence. The doctor had said he wanted to talk to us and there we were. Bern was worried but I didn't give it a thought. I still hadn't seen you. Not really. You had been pointed out to me through a window. There you were in the babies room. Which one? Small curled-up blobby faces. How could you tell one from

another? And why was it in there anyway? It. It was a public hospital that didn't see why it should have to amend its systems for the individual patient.

The doctor arrived and we went into a side room.

"The first thing I have to tell you is good news. She is a healthy girl."

We nodded and squeezed hands.

"Unfortunately, I also have some bad news. It seems she has Down's syndrome."

What?

"What does this mean? It means she will be slow. She will grow up to be physically weak and she will be a slow learner. Her intelligence may be about half a normal person's intelligence. I am sorry to tell you this but it is better that you know sooner than later."

I had only the vaguest understanding of what this Down's syndrome was.

"All you can do is take her home and love her. She will be very loving and happy."

We were lost. This first baby of our happiness. Our minds froze. We heard the words, we recorded them but they fell into a deep well of horror. Perhaps, he saw the shock on our faces. He wanted to lessen the blow.

"Now, at the moment this is just a suspicion. It is not one hundred per cent certain. But in fact she has some of the signs. But we won't know until we have done some cell tests. We will arrange for you to have genetic counselling."

"Is it something we have done?" Bern asked.

“No. Don’t blame yourself. It was nothing you did.”

“How did this happen?”

“It’s not your fault. No-one is to blame. It is something that happens at random. One in seven to eight hundred babies. Don’t blame yourself.”

Mind blank. Stomach empty and sticky with shock. Stunned, vacant, annihilated. I wanted to comfort Bern who had gone through the pain of birth for this... this further pain. I hugged her as warmly as I could without hurting her. Then we asked the nurse to bring the baby in – and then suddenly there you were.

Up till then it had all been so sudden and so abstract. I looked at this poor lump of flesh – yes, you, Stevie – feeling so sad for it to have its life’s chances blasted so absolutely so early on. And I felt a sudden, very powerful sense of possession. This was my baby and something was wrong with it... her... you. The baby, this baby, was utterly vulnerable and defenceless. It was up to me to fight for it. And it, she, you, looked cute – in fact it – she, you – looked quite normal to me.

One minute you were simply an idea. A something that had gone wrong. An incomprehension. The next minute you were there and as I looked at you all bound up in the white cotton towelling, your face orangey pink and soft, I saw... I felt... There was a sudden rush of feelings and understandings.

First you were just a little baby. You were our little baby. God damn it! You were my daughter. And you weren’t a problem. You weren’t our problem. You were a small, fragile human being and already you had the burden of this problem and who was going to help you if I didn’t help you? And goddamnit! I was going to

help you. I was going to do everything in my power to help you through this problem – whatever that meant. And... and... I fell in love with you completely. In a moment. Just like that. I felt some power in me reach out and embrace you and become one with you. In short we bonded. I felt it as a physical act. It seemed so unfair that you were so new and you had to bear this thing, this pain, this difference, whatever it was. Oh and you were so beautiful.

There was a moment the next day, as I walked to the hospital, when a dark spectral thought loomed in on me. This thought spoke to me something like this: “Your life is a failure. You’re amounting to nothing. Your marriage frankly is in a mess. You have no dreams. The wisps of desire that you call ambition have led you into a cul-de-sac. And now this. A malformed baby. Another failure. God’s... fate’s... sign to you that your life is a swamp of failure. This is just one more failure and it will trap you in your continuing failure for how can you escape this one? A pillow over the face?”

I remember reaching my hand out and pushing this thought away from me hard. I saw the disease in the thought. I knew I had to choose. I chose to see her, it, you, as a person with a problem, not a problem with a face. I chose to see it as her, your, problem not mine. I was part of the solution, not a part of the problem.

And again another question loomed in on me:

“Why? Why me?”

And I saw that this too was an unhealthy question. A question that oozed the viscous jelly of self-pity. And I saw the answer that rang true. If it could happen to anyone, it could happen to me. The right question was not ‘why me?’ but ‘why not me?’