Far more important than what we know or do not know is what we do not want to know.

– Eric Hoffer
SWEET DREAMS,
LITTLE ONE
On New Year’s eve, like every year, I called on my godmother to take her to see Mum.

My godmother is a piece of antique furniture in a very good state of conservation. She lives on her own in a house filled with sunlight, where she spends her time reading detective novels and chatting to the framed photographs of her husband. Occasionally she changes shelf and talks to the photograph of Mum, mostly about me.

I imagine she omits the more unwelcome news. Such as the fact I’ve had two wives – though not, it’s true, at the same time. And that I never did become a lawyer.

While I was helping her into her coat, she brought up the subject of the novel I had given her for Christmas.

“‘I finished it last night.’”

“‘Did you enjoy it? It’s not a detective novel.’”

“‘Of course I did: you wrote it.’”

“‘And the passages about Mum?’”

“‘That’s the part I wanted to talk to you about.’”

“‘It’s the only part which is autobiographical. I put a bit of the story of my own life into those pages.’”

“‘Are you sure it’s your story?’”

“‘And why wouldn’t it be?’”

“‘It wasn’t exactly like that… I want to give you something, dear.’”

I watched her fumble with dwarf-sized keys at the drawers of the bureau. Her lovely, gnarled old hands drew out a brown envelope. She handed it to me with a quivering voice: “After forty years, it’s time that someone told you the truth.”
FORTY YEARS EARLIER
Forty years earlier, on New Year’s Eve, I woke up so early I thought I was still dreaming. I remember the scent of my mother in my room and her dressing gown at the foot of the bed. What was it doing there?

And then the snow on the window sill, the lights all on throughout the house, a sound of feet dragging along and that howl, like some wounded animal:

“Nooooo!”

I pushed my slippers onto the wrong feet, but there was no time to correct the mistake. The door was already creaking open as I pushed it with my hands, until I saw him in the middle of the hallway, next to the Christmas tree – Daddy.

The great oak tree I looked up to as a child, bent double like a willow by some invisible force, with a pair of strangers holding him up under the arms.

He was wearing the purple dressing gown my mother had given him – the one held together with a curtain cord instead of a belt. He jerked about, kicking and twisting.

As soon as he saw I was there, I heard him murmur: “He’s my son… Please, take him over to the neighbours.”

His head fell backwards and bumped against the Christmas tree. An angel with glass wings lost its balance and toppled to the floor.
The two strangers didn’t speak, but they were kind, and they left me with Tiglio and Palmira, an elderly married couple who lived in the flat on the opposite side of the landing.

Tiglio faced life armed in the striped pyjamas he always wore and comforted by a stubborn deafness. He communicated only in writing, but that morning he refused to reply to the questions I scrawled in block letters in the margins of the newspaper:

WHERE’S MUMMY?
HAS DADDY BEEN ROBBED?

Thieves must have got in during the night... perhaps they were the two men who’d been holding him by the arms?

Palmira came in with the shopping.
“Your Daddy had a bit of a headache. He’s all right now. Those two men were the doctors who came to see him.”
“Why didn’t they have white coats on?”
“They only put them on when they’re in the hospital.”
“Why were there two of them?”
“The emergency doctors always go around in pairs.”
“I see – so if one of them feels ill the other one can look after him. Where’s Mummy?”
“Daddy’s gone out with her. They had something to do.”
“When is she coming back?”
“She’ll be back soon, you’ll see. Do you want a cup of hot chocolate?”

In the absence of my mother, I made do with the chocolate.

A few hours later Giorgio and Ginetta, my parents’ best friends, came to take charge of me.

I’m not sure I ever thought of them as two separate people. My parents had met at their wedding, a circumstance which never failed to set my little head whirring.

“Mummy, if Giorgio and Ginetta had forgotten to take you to their wedding, would you still be my mummy or someone else who was there?”

Even though it was patched and torn like a workman’s overalls, my tongue was never still.

“It’s a miracle with a tongue in that condition your son can speak,” the paediatrician had told my mother.

“It would be a miracle if I could get him to be quiet every now and then, doctor,” my mother had replied. “He talks non-stop… he’ll end up becoming a lawyer.”

I didn’t agree. I wanted to stop talking and start writing instead. Whenever I felt some adult had been unfair towards me, I would shake a biro in their face: “When I’m grown up, I’ll write it all down in a book called Me as a Child.”

The title could be improved, but the book itself would be explosive.

The truth was I would have preferred to be a painter. By the age of six I had already painted my last masterpiece: Mummy Eating a Bunch of Grapes. The bunch was twice the size of my mother, the grapes looked like the baubles on a Christmas tree, and my mother’s face resembled a grape.
She had put it up in the kitchen and would proudly point it out to visiting relatives. Seeing the puzzled looks on their faces, life dealt me its first blow: I was never going to succeed as a painter. I would have to try to draw the world inside me in words.

Back in Giorgio and Ginetta’s home, the saddest New Year’s Eve dinner ever took place. Despite my efforts to enliven the conversation, their thirteen-year-old son and myself were hurried off to our bunk beds at nine o’clock, after a bowl of pasta and a veal cutlet, both cooked in butter.

There was no way of getting a slice of panettone or a decent explanation out of them. Mummy and Daddy had something to do – perhaps the same thing they’d had to do in the morning or perhaps something else, but equally mysterious. And we boys had to head for the Land of Nod as fast as our legs would carry us.

I remember the regular breathing of my cellmate in the bunk above me. And the fireworks at midnight, which stained the dark of the room through the only partly lowered blinds.

Buried beneath the blankets, my eyes wide open and my head in a whirl like some top which couldn’t stop spinning, I kept asking myself what I could possibly have done during the Christmas holidays to deserve a punishment like this.

I’d told two fibs, answered my mother back once and given Riccardo, the boy from the second floor who was a Juventus supporter, a kick in the backside. None of them seemed to me like capital offences – especially the last.
II

On New Year’s Day, Giorgio and Ginetta told me that when she’d returned from doing her errands my mother had had to go to hospital for a few tests. The last few months had been full of things she’d had to do and tests she’d had to take. Tests in hospital that is: if she’d come to school with me, I could have shown her how to copy the answers.

I imagined her tackling one of the problems our teacher had set us for the holidays. A little boy walks three kilometres and every two hectometres he drops two balls: how many balls will he drop after 1,900 metres?

I hated that word – hectometres – just as I hated that stupid little boy who kept dropping balls all over the place and yet went on walking as if nothing had happened.

In the afternoon my father reappeared to take me to the hospital to see my mother. He’d gone back to being an oak tree.

“Let’s buy her some flowers first,” I suggested.

“No. Let’s first go and see Baloo. He needs to tell you something important.”

I dug my heels in. Baloo was the priest who ran the local Cubs, the under-tens section of the Scouts, which I’d been going to for some months. I didn’t mind saying hello to him, but he should wait his turn, instead of cutting in front of my mother.
Giorgio and Ginetta intervened and proposed an honourable compromise: we would still visit the hospital after we’d called on Baloo, but we would go and buy the flowers first.

I turned up at the church hall used by the Scouts holding an entire garden’s worth of red roses in my arms.

Baloo had the same physical clumsiness and goodness of heart as his namesake in the *Jungle Book*. He took us into the Cubs’ meeting room and straight away cracked a joke about football. Even though he’d been born in Buenos Aires and lived in Turin like us, he was a fan of Cagliari and their star player Gigi Riva.

He wanted to show me some Panini cards of footballers, but Dad stopped him.

“Show him another time, Baloo.”

He gave a sigh and asked me to look up at the ceiling: a heaven of blue chalk drawings which I had helped to colour in. Baloo plonked his huge hand down on my shoulder while pointing at the ceiling with the other.

“You know your Mummy is your guardian angel, don’t you? For a long time she’s wanted to fly up there so she can look after you better – and yesterday the Lord called her to join him…”

An icy spoon turned in my stomach and hollowed it out. I spun round to my father, looking for some hint of a denial, but all I saw was his red eyes and pale lips.

“Let’s go and pray,” said Baloo.

“Eternal rest grant unto her, O Lord. Let perpetual light shine upon her. May she rest in peace. Amen.”
Baloo’s warm voice echoed through the nave of the empty church.

On my knees in the front pew, clasping the mass of red roses tightly to my chest, I moved my lips in time to his, but the words welling up from my heart were different. “Lord, give Mummy a short rest. Wake her up, make her some coffee and then send her back to me immediately… She’s my mummy, so either bring her back here or take me up there. Please hurry up and choose. I’ll close my eyes, and when I open them promise me you’ll have made up your mind, all right? Amen.”
III

My mother was laid out in the sitting room on view to the curious glances of the grieving neighbours.

I refused to go and look at her. I was sure she would come back. It’s not in my nature to accept defeat. In the films I like best, the hero loses everything, but then, stepping away from the brink of the abyss, he begins his comeback.

Only as an adult would I learn not to shun open coffins. I’d also learn that the dead get smaller, almost as if their clothing of bones shrinks a couple of sizes when the spirit no longer fills it.

The dead grow smaller and the survivors turn sour like rejected lovers. They take offence when they see the world doesn’t share their grief.

My grief made me impossible to deal with. It had happened two years before when I’d come round from an operation to remove my tonsils with my throat on fire and shouted at the doctors and relatives crowding round my bed: “Go away, all of you, I only want Mummy!”

This time I directed my snarls at the visitors to the apartment. But far from annoying them, my rudeness only made them even more keen to show their pity.

I couldn’t bear their faces put on for the occasion, the compassionate caresses, the stupid phrases drifting through the room.
What a tragedy.
She was so young.
Poor little boy.
It’s a terrible thing to get.
As if you could get a pleasant thing, one which did you the favour of leaving you alive.

Tonsillitis must have been a very pleasant thing indeed then. During the weeks I was convalescing, I had no school homework to do, Mummy brought me ice creams and I was free to enjoy my secret hideaway, the Submarine.

At a certain point in the afternoon I would lower the blinds and get back into bed with my head at the bottom and my feet under the pillow.

I would usually plunge down on my own, but on the trickier missions I got Nemecsek to come along with me. He was one of the Paul Street boys – the one who, even when he was dying, still dragged himself out of bed to go and help his companions in the decisive battle. The page was all tear-stained in the book my mother had read to me.

Enemies encircled the submarine on all sides but, protected by the magic bedsheets, I held out against their attacks until it was tea-time and my mother came in with the tray. The fantasy gave me a feeling of security I’ve only found, since then, in the act of writing.

On the morning of the funeral I shut myself in my room and waited for the coffin to be taken out of the house. I lowered the blinds, got into bed head downwards and climbed aboard the Submarine wanting to declare war on the entire world. But there were no longer any enemies out there to be found: they were all inside me.
I started to hate her because she didn’t come back. I tried not to think about her, but hard as I might my thoughts would automatically take over whenever I was tired, and I would drift off into memories – the taste of the veal cutlets she used to cook in butter, the pleasant smell of her hair whenever I gave her a hug, the last time we’d been happy together.

They’d been showing an adaptation of the *Odyssey* on the television and I’d been transfixed by the sight of the cyclops Polyphemus flinging Ulysses’s companions against the walls of his cave and then popping them into his mouth like chips.

I imagined Polyphemus’s voice to be harsh and alarming like that of the narrator of the series, the poet Giuseppe Ungaretti. He could be heard at the beginning of each episode reciting Homer’s verses. As soon as his grating tones died away, a montage from previous episodes was shown summing up the story so far – which meant that the following week I again saw the scene with Polyphemus munching away.

Today’s children are inured to scenes of killing and bloodshed on the television screen and would doubtless regard Polyphemus’s grisly meal as a light snack. But I started to wake up in the middle of the night feeling like a particularly appetizing chip Polyphemus’s single eye had greedily caught sight of. After
putting up a brief struggle against the darkness I would give up and go and take refuge in my parents’ bed.

In order to put a stop to these nightly migrations – I was, after all, a manly eight-year-old – my mother put an energy-saving nightlight on my bedside table. Even so, we all knew another sight of the Cyclops would prove fatal.

On the evening of the final episode, just before the summary montage started to be shown, I fled into the kitchen with my mother, holding her tight, my nose in her blond hair – until my father, stationed by the TV set in the sitting room, gave the all-clear.

My other memories of her were confused and unsuppressible, and tended to merge with more recent ones. When had she stopped loving me? The light in those blue eyes everyone knew had dimmed after the end of summer. She’d suddenly turned fretful and gloomy. She’d always had a smile for everyone, but it was plain her supply of smiles had been used up.

One morning she wasn’t there – she’d had to go and “do something”. A few days later she came back, even sadder than before. Dad and I divided up our tasks: he caressed her with words and I spoke to her with caresses. But she didn’t respond to either.

My godmother was her closest friend, and every Sunday she and her husband, Uncle Nevio, would come and visit us.

I would show off in front of my father and Uncle Nevio by drawing on my repertoire – reading out imaginary menus (“Would you like the dead-toad lasagne today, sir?”) or improvising football-match commentaries. But as soon as they
started to talk about politics, I would run into the kitchen to complain.

“They’re not listening to me!”

My godmother laughed, but my mother would look at me with a vacant stare which was almost as frightening as that of Polyphemus.

She had become completely dependent on Madamin, the capable woman who helped with the housework. Madamin was a widow with two children: she worked because she needed the money, but seeing her you would have thought she helped out of a disinterested generosity of spirit. Her smallest gestures had a noble dignity about them which gave her an air of authority. In her company my mother behaved like a little girl.

The day before New Year’s Eve I burst into the kitchen with breaking news.

“Mummy, Mummy! Daddy said he’ll take us to see the new James Bond film!”

“I’m not going without Madamin.”

I’d asked her to go with me. Wasn’t that enough for her? Wasn’t I enough for her?

“Go away, I hate you!” I exclaimed.

“I hate you.”

I went and locked myself in my room, turning the key twice, and it took all my father’s authority to get me to unlock it.

My mother clung to Madamin for the entire duration of the film, On Her Majesty’s Secret Service, the first James Bond movie without Sean Connery. He’d been replaced by some bargain-basement imitation.
Perhaps my mother too had been replaced? This woman was no longer the mother I knew, and what happened that evening proved it. It was the last time I saw her.

She’d called me to her bedside to apologize for her behaviour over the Bond film. She’d hugged me in the old way, with her scented hair tumbling over my head.

I thought the mother I knew had come back, but all it took was a sudden bout of coughing and she started to behave like a feeble invalid again. In a plaintive tone of voice, she urged me once again to be good and kind towards everyone – to which my reaction was: “Yes, Mum, OK. Sleep well. Can I go now?”

“Sweet dreams, little one.”

“I’m not little. I’ll soon be taller than you.”

“Of course you will be, taller and stronger. Promise me you will be?”

I couldn’t put up with it any more. I fled back into my room and, in protest, got straight into bed without brushing my teeth and fell immediately into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Madamin solved the mystery of the dressing gown left in my room. “Terrible Thing” had come to wake my mother during the night, but she’d asked him to be so kind as to wait while she came to tuck me up in bed… Afterwards, she’d forgotten to take her dressing gown and left it in my room. At this point the story always ended, as Madamin started to cry.

I had no idea what my mother might have been feeling like when she was confronted with “Terrible Thing” – pretty bad, I guessed, even though mothers had always inexhaustible resources
to draw on. But I knew it wasn’t possible that only my mother had been able to persuade this thug to let her come and tuck me in.

It was clearly a tall story invented by someone with no imagination – in other words, Dad. He was trying to make me believe that my mother had gone on loving us right up to the moment she’d disappeared, whereas it was evident to me that if she’d run off with “Terrible Thing” it was because she’d had enough of us both. I could just about manage to understand how she might have grown tired of him – but of me? How could she have stopped loving me?

We suffer when we’re not loved, but it’s a greater pain when we’re loved no longer. In one-way infatuations the objects of our love deny us their love in return. They take something away from us, which in fact they’ve only given to us in our imaginations. But when a reciprocated feeling ceases to be reciprocated, a shared flow of energy is suddenly and brutally cut off. The person who has been abandoned feels like a sweet that tastes bad and is spat out. We’ve done something wrong – but what?

That was how I felt. I hadn’t been able to make her stay with us. Perhaps she’d gone off to find a son who could do better drawings of her?

And yet I went on thinking she would come back, perhaps with the other son in tow. Never mind. I’d put up with any humiliation, just so long as she’d return.