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**ASYLUM**

Prison more like, said Madeleine.

Come now, said Mr Kramer.

If I run away they bring me back, said Madeleine.

Yes but, said Mr Kramer.

Mr Kramer often said, Yes but to Madeleine. Something to concede, something to contradict. Now he said again how kind everyone in the Unit was, all his visits never once had he seen any unkindness and couldn’t remember ever hearing a voice raised in anger against any girl or boy. So: not really like a prison.

Then why’s she sitting there? said Madeleine, nodding toward a nurse in the doorway. The nurse did her best to seem oblivious. She was reading a women’s magazine.

You know very well, said Mr Kramer.

So I won’t suddenly scratch your face and say you tried to rape me, said Madeleine. So I won’t suddenly throw myself out of the window.

That sort of thing, said Mr Kramer.

The window was open, but only the regulation few inches, as far as the locks allowed. Mr Kramer and Madeleine looked at it. She’d get through there, he thought, if she tried. Not that I’d ever get through there, said Madeleine, however hard I tried.

The walls of the room were decorated with images, in paintings and collages, of the themes and infinite variations of body and soul in their distress. A face shattering like a window. A range of mountains, stacked like the hoods of the Klan, blocking most of the sky, but from the foreground, in a red zig-zag, into them went a path, climbing, and disappeared. Mr Kramer liked the room. Waiting for Madeleine, or whoever it might be, he stood at the window looking down at a grassy bank that in its seasons, year after year, with very little nurture or encouragement, brought forth out of itself an abundance of ordinary beautiful flowers. At this point in his acquaintance with Madeleine it was the turn of primroses. The air coming in was mild. Behind the bank ran the wall of the ancient enclosure.

Asylum, said Mr Kramer. What is an asylum?

A place they lock nutters up, said Madeleine.

Well yes, said Mr Kramer, but why call it an asylum? Because they’re liars, said Madeleine.

All right, said Mr Kramer. Forget the nutters, as you call them, and the place they get looked after or locked up in, and tell me what you think an asylum-seeker is.

Someone from somewhere bad.

And when they come to the United Kingdom, say, or to France, Germany or Italy, what are they looking for?

Somewhere better than where they’ve come from. What are they seeking?

Asylum.

And what is asylum?

Sanctuary.

Sanctuary, said Mr Kramer. That’s a very good word. Those poor people come here seeking sanctuary in a land of prisons. An asylum, he said, is a refuge, a shelter, a safe haven. Lunatic asylums, as they used to be called, are places where people disordered in their souls can be housed safely and looked after.

Locked up, said Madeleine. Ward 16, they took Sam there last week.

So he’d be safer, said Mr Kramer. I’m sure of that. Madeleine shrugged.

OK, said Mr Kramer. A bit like a prison, I grant you. Sometimes it has to be a bit like a prison, but always for the best. Not like detention, internment, real prison, nothing like that.

Madeleine shrugged.

Mr Kramer’s spirits lapsed. He forgot where he was and why. His spirits lapsed or the sadness in him rose. Either way he began to be occluded. An absence. When he returned he saw that Madeleine was looking at him. Being looked at by Madeleine was like being looked at by the moon. The light seemed to come off her face as though reflected from some far-away source. Her look was fearful, but rather as though she feared she had harmed Mr Kramer. Rema says Hi, she said. Rema said say Hi from me to Mr Kramer.

They both brightened.

Thank you, Madeleine, said Mr Kramer. Please give her my best regards next time you speak to her. How is she?

Can’t tell with her, said Madeleine. She’s such a liar. She says she’s down to four and a half stone. Her hair’s falling out, she says, from the starvation. She says she eats a few beansprouts a day and that is all. And drinks half a glass of water. But she’s a liar. It’s only so I’ll look fat. She phones and phones. She wants to get back in here. But Dr Khan says she won’t get back in here by starving herself. That’s blackmail, he says. She might, however, if she puts on weight. Show willing, he says, show you want to get better. Then we’ll see. She says if they won’t let her back she’ll kill herself. Thing is, if she gets well enough to come back here, she thinks they’ll send her home. Soon as she’s sixteen they’ll send her home, her aunty says. But Rema says she’ll kill herself twenty times before she’ll go back home.

Home’s not a war-zone, if I remember rightly, said Mr Kramer.

Her family is, said Madeleine. They are why she is the way she is. So quite understandably she’ll end it all before she’ll go back there.

Rema told me a lovely story once, said Mr Kramer.

Did she write it?

No, she never wrote it. She promised she would but she never did.

Typical, said Madeleine.

Yes, said Mr Kramer. But really it wasn’t so much a story as a place for one. She remembered a house near her village. The house was all shuttered up, it had a paved courtyard with a sort of shrine in the middle and white jasmine growing wild over the balconies and the wooden stairs.

Oh that, said Madeleine. It was an old woman’s and she wanted to do the Hajj and her neighbours lent her the money and the deal was they could keep her house if she didn’t come back and she never came back. That story.

Yes, said Mr Kramer, that story. I thought it very beautiful, the deserted house, I mean, the courtyard and the shrine.

Probably she made it up, said Madeleine. Probably there never was such a house. And anyway she never wrote it.

Mr Kramer felt he was losing the encounter. He glanced at the clock. I thought Rema was your friend, he said.

She is, said Madeleine. I don’t love anyone as much as I love her. But all the same she’s a terrible liar. And mostly to get at me. Four and a half stone! What kind of a stupid lie is that? Did she tell you she wanted to do the Hajj?

She did, said Mr Kramer. Her owl eyes widening and taking in more light, passionately she had told him she longed to do the Hajj.

So why is she starving herself? It doesn’t make sense.

I told her, said Mr Kramer. I said you have to be very strong for a thing like that. However you travel, a pilgrimage is a hard experience. You have to be fit.

Such a liar, said Madeleine.

Anyway, said Mr Kramer. You’ll write your story for next time. About an asylum-seeker, a boy, you said, a boy half your age.

I will, said Madeleine. Where’s the worst place in the world? Apart from here of course.

Hard to say, said Mr Kramer. There’d be quite a competition. But Somalia would take some beating.

I read there are pirates in Somalia.

Off the coast there are. They steal the food the rich people send and the people who need it starve.

Good, said Madeleine. I’ll have pirates in my story.

Madeleine and Mr Kramer faced each other in silence across the table. The nurse had closed her magazine and was watching them. Mr Kramer was thinking that from many points of view the project was a bad one. Madeleine had wanted to write about being Madeleine. Fine, he said, but displace it. Find an image like one of those on the wall. I have, she said. My image is a war-zone. My story is about a child in a war-zone, a boy half my age, who wants to get out to somewhere safe. Asylum, said Mr Kramer. He seeks asylum.

Tell me, Madeleine, said Mr Kramer. Tell me in a word before I go what feeling you know most about and what feeling the little boy will inhabit in your story.

The sleeves of Madeleine’s top had ridden up so that the cuts across her wrists were visible. Seeing them looked at sorrowfully by Mr Kramer she pulled the sleeves down and gripped the end of each very tightly into either palm.

Fear, she said.

Mr Kramer might have taken the bus home. There was a stop not far from Bartlemas where that extraordinary enclosure, its orchard, its gardens, the grassy humps of the ancient hospital, touched modernity on the east-west road. He could have ridden to his house from there, almost door to door, in twenty minutes. Instead, if the weather was at all decent and some days even if it wasn’t he walked home through the parks and allotments, a good long march, an hour and a half or more. That way it was late afternoon before he got in, almost time to be thinking about the cooking of his supper. Then came the evening, for which he always had a plan: a serious television programme, some serious reading, his notes, early to bed.

On his walk that mild spring afternoon Mr Kramer thought about Madeleine and Rema. It distressed him that Madeleine was so scathing about Rema’s story. How cruel they were to one another in their lethal competition! For him the abandoned house had a peculiar power. Rema said it was very quiet there, as soon as you pushed open the wooden gates, no shouting, no dogs, no noise of any traffic. The courtyard was paved with coloured tiles in a complicated pattern whose many intersecting arcs and loops she had puzzled over and tried to follow. The shrine was surely left over from before Partition, it must be a Hindu shrine, the Muslim woman had no use for it. But there it stood in the centre of the courtyard, a carved figure on a pedestal and a place for flowers, candles and offerings, and around it on all four sides the shuttered windows, the balcony, the superabundance of white jasmine. The old woman never came back, said Rema. It was not even known whether she ever reached Mecca, the place of her heart’s desire. So the neighbours kept the house but none had any real use for it. Sometimes their cattle strayed into the courtyard. And there also, when she dared, climbing the wooden stairs and viewing the shrine from the cool and scented balconies, went the child Rema, for sanctuary from the war-zone of her home.

Mr Kramer was watching a programme about the bombings, when the phone rang. Such a programme, after the cooking and the eating and the allowance of three glasses of wine, was a station on his way to bed. But the phone rang. It was Maria, his daughter, from the Ukraine, already midnight, phoning to tell him she had found the very shtetl, the names, the place itself. He caught her tone of voice, the one of all still in the world he was least proof against. He hardly heard the words, only the voice, its peculiar quality. Forest, memorial, the names, he knew what she was saying, but sharper than the words, nearer, flesh of his flesh, he felt the voice that was having to say these things, in a hotel room, three hours ahead, on a savage pilgrimage. The forest, the past, the small voice from so far away, he felt her to be in mortal danger, he felt he must pull her back from where she stood, leaning over the abyss of history, the pit, the extinction of all personal relations. Sweetheart, said Mr Kramer, my darling girl, go to sleep now if you can. And I’ve been thinking. Once you’re back I’ll come and stay with you. After all I cannot bear it on my own. But sleep now if you can.

Mr Kramer had not intended to say any such thing. He had set himself the year at least. One year. Surely a man could watch alone in grief that long.

The Unit phoned. Madeleine had taken an overdose, she was in hospital, back in a day or so. Mr Kramer, about to set off, did the walk anyway, it was a fine spring day, the beech trees leafing softly. He walked right to the gates of Bartlemas, turned and set off home again, making a detour to employ the time he would have spent with Madeleine.

In the evening, last thing, Mr Kramer read his old notes, a weakness he always tried to make up for by at once writing something new. He read for ten minutes, till he hit the words: Rema, her desire to be an owl. Then he leafed forward quickly to the day’s blank page and wrote: I haven’t thought nearly enough about Rema’s desire to be an owl. She said, Do you think I already look like one? I went to the office and asked did we have a mirror. We do, under lock and key. It is a lovely thing, face-shaped and just the size of a face, without a frame, the bare reflecting glass. I held it up for Rema. Describe your face, I said. Describe it exactly. I was a mite ashamed of the licence this exercise gave me to contemplate a girl’s face whilst she, looking at herself, never glancing at me, studied it as a thing to be described. Yes, her nose, quite a thin bony line, might become a beak. Pity to lose the lips. But if you joined the arcs of the brows with the arcs of shadow below the eyes, so accentuating the sockets, yes you might make the widening stare of an owl. The longing for metamorphosis. To become something else, a quite different creature, winged, feathered, intent. Like Madeleine’s, Rema’s face shows the bones. The softness of feathers would perhaps be a comfort. I wonder did she tell Madeleine about the mirror. Shards, the harming.

The Unit phoned, Madeleine was well enough, just about. Mr Kramer stood at the window. The primroses were already finishing. But there would be something else, on and on till the autumn cyclamens. It was a marvellous bank. Then Madeleine and the overweight nurse stood in the doorway, the nurse holding her women’s magazine. Madeleine wore loose trousers and a collarless shirt whose sleeves were far too long. She stood; and towards Mr Kramer, fearfully and defiantly, she presented her face and neck, which she had cut. Oh Maddy, said Mr Kramer, can’t you ever be merciful? Will you never show yourself any mercy?

The nurse sat in the open doorway and read her magazine. Madeleine and Mr Kramer faced each other across the small table. All the same, said Madeleine through her lattice of black cuts, I’ve made a start. Shall I read it? Yes, said Mr Kramer. Madeleine read:

Samuel lived with his mother. The soldiers had killed his father. Some of the soldiers were only little boys. Samuel and his mother hid in the forest. Every day she had to leave him for several hours to go and look for food and water. He waited in fear that she would not come back. There was nothing to do. He curled up in the little shelter, waiting. One day Samuel’s mother did not come back. He waited all night and all the next day and all the next night. Then he decided he must go and look for her or for some food and water at least because the emergency supplies she had left him were all gone. He followed the trail his mother had made day after day. It came to a road. She had told him that the road was very dangerous. But beyond the road were fields and in them, if you were lucky, you might find some things to eat that the farmers had planted before the soldiers came and burned their village. Samuel halted at the road. It was long and straight in both directions and very dusty. A little way off he saw a truck burning and another truck upside down in the ditch. But there were no soldiers. Samuel hurried across. Quite soon, just as his mother had said, he saw women and girls in blue and white clothes moving slowly over the land looking for food. Perhaps his mother would be among them after all? At the very least, somebody would surely give him food and water.

Madeleine lifted her face. That’s as far as I got, she said. It’s crap, isn’t it? No, said Mr Kramer, it is very good. Crap, said Madeleine. Tell me, Madeleine, said Mr Kramer, did you write this before or after you did that to your face? After, said Madeleine. I wrote it this morning. I did my face two nights ago, after they brought me back here from the hospital. Good, said Mr Kramer. That’s a very good thing. It means you can sympathise with other people’s lives even when your own distresses you so much you cut your face. I know the rest, said Madeleine with a sudden eagerness. I know how it goes on and how it ends. Shall I tell you? – Will you still be able to write it if you tell? – Yes, yes. – You promise? – Yes, I promise. – Tell then.

She laid her sleeves, in which her hands were hiding, flat on the table and began to speak, rapidly, staring into his eyes, transfixing him with the eagerness of her fiction.

In among the people looking for food he meets a girl. She’s my age. Her name is Ruth. The soldiers have killed her father too. Ruth’s mother hid with her and when the soldiers came looking she made Ruth stay in hiding and gave herself up to them. That was the end of her. But Ruth was taken by the other women and hid with them and went looking for food when it was safe. When Samuel came into the fields Ruth decided to look after him. She was like a sister to Samuel, a good big sister, or a mother, a good and loving mother. When it was safe to light a fire she cooked for him, the best meal she could. After a while the soldiers came back again, the fields were too dangerous, all the women hid in the forest but Ruth had heard that if you could only get to the coast you could maybe find someone with a boat who would carry you across the sea to Italy and the European Union, where it was really safe. So that’s what she did, with Samuel, she set off for the coast, only travelling at night, on foot, by moonlight and starlight, steering clear of the villages in flames.

Sounds good, said Mr Kramer. Sounds very exciting. All you have to do now is write it. You’ve looked at a map, I suppose? The nearest coast is no use at all. That’s where the pirates are. You need the north coast really, through the desert. And crossing the desert is said to be a terrible thing. You have to pay truckers to take you, I believe. Yes, said Madeleine, I thought she’d do better on the east coast, with the pirates. A pirate chief says he’ll take her and Samuel all the way to Libya but it will cost her a lot of money. When she says she has no money he says she can marry him, for payment that is, until they get to Libya, then he’ll sell her to a friend of his, who will take her and Samuel into the European Union, which is like the Promised Land, he says, and there she will be safe, but she’ll have to marry his friend as well, for the voyage from Libya into Italy. I asked Rema would she do it and she said she wouldn’t, she couldn’t, because of the things at home, but she said I could, Ruth in my story should, it would save the two of them, they would have a new life in the European Union and God would mercifully forgive her the sin. She says Hi, by the way. She asked me to ask you are you all right. She said it seemed to her you were a bit lonely sometimes. Thank you, said Mr Kramer, I’m fine. And guess what, said Madeleine, she doesn’t want to do the Hajj any more, not till she’s an old woman, and she doesn’t want to make Dr Khan have her back here either. No, she’s decided she’ll be a primary school teacher. Plus she’s down to four stone. So it’s all lies as usual.

A primary school teacher is a very good idea, said Mr Kramer. But of course you have to be strong for that. As strong as for a pilgrimage.

I told her that, said Madeleine. So she’s still a liar. Anyway, another thing about Ruth is that when she’s with the first pirate, as his prostitute, all the way up the Red Sea he sends her ashore to the markets – Samuel he keeps on board as a hostage – and she has to go and buy all the ingredients for his favourite meals, I’ve researched it, baby okra and lamb in tomato stew, for example, onion pancakes, fish and peppers, shoe-lace pastry, spicy creamy cheeses, all delicious, up the coast to Suez. So she makes her Lord and Master happy and Samuel gets strong.

Will they stay in Italy, Mr Kramer asked, if the second pirate keeps his word and carries her across the Mediterranean? No, said Madeleine, breathless on her story, they’re heading for Swansea. There’s quite an old Somali community in Swansea. I’ve researched it. They’ve been there a hundred years. At first she’ll live in a hostel, doing the cooking for everybody so that everybody likes her. Samuel goes to school and as soon as he’s settled Ruth will go to the CFE and get some qualifications.

Madeleine, said Mr Kramer, it’s very hard to enter the United Kingdom. Ruth and Samuel will need passports. I’ve thought of that, said Madeleine. The first pirate chief has a locker full of passports from people who died on his boat and because Ruth is such a good cook he gives her a couple and swears they’ll get her and Samuel through Immigration, no problem.

Rema should go to the CFE, said Mr Kramer. I believe the Home Office would extend her visa if she was in full-time education. And if she trained as a primary school teacher, who knows what might happen?

She’s  a  liar,  said  Madeleine,  very  white,  almost translucent her face through the savage ornamentation of her cuts. She’s supposed to be my friend. If she was really my friend she’d come back here. Then we’d both be all right like we were before she left me.

You want to stay here?

Yes, said Madeleine. It’s safer here.

Why overdose? Why cut yourself?

The nurse was watching and listening.

Because I’m frightened.

My daughter was frightened, said Mr Kramer, and she’s twice your age. All the time her mother was ill, four and a half years, she got more and more frightened. And now she’s gone to the Ukraine, would you believe it, all on her own and not speaking the language, to research our family history. She phoned me the other night from the place itself, a terrible place, I never want to go there, all on her own, at midnight, in a hotel. Write your story, won’t you? You promised me. Somalia is very likely the worst place in the world and Swansea is a very good place, by all accounts. What an achievement it will be if you can get Ruth and Samuel safely there!

Madeleine’s white hands with their bitten nails still hid in her sleeves. All the animation had gone out of her. I’ll never get to Swansea from Somalia, she said. Never, never, never. I can’t even want to get out of here.

First the story, Madeleine, said Mr Kramer. First comes the fiction. Get Ruth and Samuel out of the killing fields, get them by the cruelty and kindness of pirates into a holding camp on the heel of Italy, get them north among strangers, not speaking a word of the language – devise it, work out the necessary means. You promised. Who knows what might happen if you get that lucky pair to Swansea?

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