



MAXWELL'S DEMON

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Roses

When I was little, my father was famous. Dr Stanley Quinn was a man of letters, a man of words, a man who'd built himself from clattering keys and spooling ribbon – and a firm yank on his own bootstraps – to become the greatest poet, journalist and war correspondent of his generation.

In real terms, this meant that I grew up without my father around, although as I remember it, he always seemed strangely present. Throughout his many absences, my father endured as an active part of my life – his picture in the press, his thoughts in broadsheet black ink that rubbed off on my fingers, his disembodied voice from inside our kitchen radio.

To a child of perhaps three or four, it seemed as if my father only ever left home by degrees. His name, his voice, his picture were always there for me, always around to watch over us. Even now, almost thirty years later, my father returns, although far less frequently. His voice comes back in television documentaries about the old conflicts. Beirut, Suez, Muscat.

Live sound recording, original tape says the caption, and then he's in the room, reporting through hiss and static, my father still.

And it's no small thing, you see, the way a child sees a parent. The world comes in through our mothers and our fathers like light through a stained-glass window, and our infant selves can't help but be coloured by it, then and for ever. To me, Dr Stanley Quinn was always a man

dismantled, and Alexandra Quinn – well, she was always a woman fading away.

As a child, it never occurred to me as strange that my mother spent all of her days in bed. Not until years later. At the time, I simply assumed that it was how things should be and, to tell you the truth, I liked it. The mornings and evenings of my very early life would be spent upstairs with her in our home in the country, talking and listening to her read from one of the many books that filled every corner of our house.

My mother was a beautiful woman, pale and delicate, with the kind of hair that lights up like a halo in the sun. Even as an adult, I've never been able to equate the knowledge of what was happening to her, that her illness was growing ever more severe, with how I remember the changes she underwent. She simply became softer, paler, lighter. More *other* somehow, more somewhere else. As far as I can remember, there were no bad days, no coughing fits, no unpleasant deterioration, simply the impression of her becoming less of one thing, and more of another. She spoke quietly, and read to me every day in that gentle voice; we soon exhausted all the children's books we had in the house, and moved on to the heaped shelves of my parents' collection. Before long, I was a child of Greek tragedies, Darwinian struggles and of bright, burning tygers. She read aloud the words of great thinkers, writers and artists from all across history and, as she did, she read them into me.

Oh, don't misunderstand me when I say this – I know I'm nothing special. What I am, I've often thought, is a little garden shed, a rickety box of old, reclaimed planks lifted from the great houses of Dickens and Darwin, topped off with cracked and fallen slates from Herman Melville's home. My latch doesn't work, my window doesn't open, and if it rains, everything inside me gets wet in less than half an hour. And,

well – that’s okay, you know? That’s just how it is, and I mind it a lot less than I could. Because here’s the thing – learning and growing were never what kept me climbing up those creaky old stairs with the next heavy hardback clutched tight to my chest all that time ago. All that mattered were the quiet hours with my mother, sitting on the bed, listening to her gentle words as they came. It was only years later that I understood how the stories that she read had become a part of me, worked into my skin and my blood by the quality of her voice, and the uncomplicated love that illuminated and defined those times.

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I remember two seasons from this very early part of my life, a summer and a winter, although, of course, there must have been an autumn in between. That summer was an extraordinary one, because Dr Stanley Quinn made one of his rare extended visits home.

I remember how the physicality of my father seemed magical to me. I’d become used to him as a picture, a voice, as the smell of clothes in a wardrobe, and as a hundred other single-sensory avatars. But now, it was as if some force had pulled all of him together, as if, for the shortest of times, these fragmented elements had condensed to make a man, and that man could suddenly exert his physical will upon the world. The simplest of things – that my father could respond to spoken words, could move from one part of the house to another, could cut back the roses, could be touched and felt and had a real hand that could hold mine – these things were miracles, magic, amazing events that left me full of wonder.

I have a clear memory of one specific conversation with my father from this time.

The memory starts with roses in a basket.

‘Why are you doing that?’

My father glanced down at me, a freshly cut rose stem in one hand, a pair of bright silver secateurs in the other.

‘So we can take them inside to your mother. She loves the roses.’

‘She likes the red ones best.’

‘That’s right.’ My father clipped another stem. ‘She does.’

‘But they’ll die now they’ve been chopped off.’

I must have sounded very serious as I said this because Dr Stanley Quinn stopped what he was doing and knelt down in front of me.

‘But if they weren’t chopped off, how would your mother see them?’

I thought.

‘We could take her a picture,’ I said.

‘And would that be the same?’

I thought again.

‘No.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘The roses are bright; they’re beautiful, but they don’t last very long. And that’s all right; it’s an important part of what they are.’

We took the roses inside.

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My next memory is of the following winter, of being led into my parents’ bedroom to see my mother’s body, to *say my last goodbyes*.

I remember snow piled up against the windowpane and the blizzard blowing outside, but the room itself was still and quiet. Dust particles hung like stars, fixed points in unchanging space. My mother’s head looked so light on her pillow; she seemed to be barely there at all.

I walked across to her bedside, unafraid.

I felt no sudden pain of separation. Like my father, though in a different sense, my mother had always been leaving home by degrees.

I remember feeling that it was not as if her life had ended, but more

that she'd arrived at the natural conclusion of some motherly process. Since the beginning of time, her voice had been growing steadily quieter and her movements more slow. In the last few weeks she'd read to me in a barely audible whisper, and in the last few days she had read in silence, her mouth forming words I'd been unable to hear. She moved less and less until her movements became imperceptible, until, finally, there were no movements at all. One thing becoming another – this was how it had always been, and in the end, it was no more complicated than that.

I stood quietly beside the bed, my hand on my mother's, watching the snowflakes swirl and pile against the windowpane. I could feel snow falling inside me too, I realised, a settling white blanket that made my thoughts quiet and edgeless, a cosy sort of numb.

After a little while, my eyes drifted down and found a large book, *Brotten's Encyclopaedia of British Plants and Trees*, sitting on the edge of my mother's bedside table. We'd read this book together and the hundreds of descriptions, etchings and colour plates were all very familiar to me. I hauled myself up onto the mattress beside her, reached out and heaved the encyclopaedia onto my lap, and then opened it.

It fell open, and there, between two pages of text, was something I couldn't remember having ever seen before.

A real, red rose, pressed completely flat – flat almost to transparency. I put out a hesitant finger and found that I could move it.

Carefully, very carefully, I slid the rose loose from the lines of type.

I stayed like that for a long time, sitting quietly, just holding it in my hand.

Thirty Years Later

Broten's Encyclopaedia of British Plants and Trees is the first book on my bookshelf, but you wouldn't know what it was if you saw it. It's cocooned in bubble wrap and the sort of UV-resistant plastic that keeps old Superman comics from falling apart in the sun.

The thirty-year-old rose inside is only slightly the worse for wear. One petal is gone, plucked from it by my scruffy-haired sixteen-year-old self. The idiot. He felt the need to carry that petal around and show it to girls at the sort of parties where they're always playing The Cure. Eventually, of course, he gave it away to one of them as they sat in a locked park, late one summer night.

There are other, lesser, damages. A leaf folded and split accidentally here, a thorn come loose and picking at the book's bindings there. With each exposure, these things build up. That's why, nowadays, my mother's rose stays firmly pressed between its pages, safe in the pitch-black care of etched hawthorns and hyacinths, swaddled in its bubble wrap and Superman's special plastic.

The next book on my bookshelf – and this is assuming we're travelling east, as all young readers here learn to do ✦ – the next book is a big hardback edition of my father's *Collected Works*.

✦ In English, the literary arrow of time travels to the right. This is our law of pages, lines, words and letters. Left is a past left behind, and right is an unknown future. Of course, you know this. You're travelling along with that arrow at this very moment. But be careful, these words might appear to be rattling by like scenery glimpsed from a train window but – just like that scenery – nothing on this page is really moving at all.

The inscription on the title page reads, 'I'll always be here for you, Tom', and if you asked me to, I could reproduce every curl and line of that note from memory, even now. It's a solid book with a lot of wear, pages thumbed, corners folded, passages underlined. A collector's bookshop might describe it as 'heavily used', but if it were a teddy bear, you wouldn't hesitate to call it 'well loved'.

After the *Collected Works*, we come next to three books from my early teens. A handsome hardback of *Don Quixote*, a paperback of *It*, and a dog-eared copy of *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*.

These books are survivors, remarkable because they still exist. At the age of thirteen, on one long-forgotten day in July, I took each one down from its shelf in our country home and put it into a suitcase (along with *Collected Works* and the encyclopaedia of plants and trees, which went everywhere with me) to take to my aunt's place by the sea for summer holiday reading. Because of this, these books were not in our house when my father's second wife, the poet Margery Martin, burned it down and destroyed everything else that we had.

Let's move on.

After the survivors, there's another book by my father, *The New Collected Writing*. This is a thin, black book, a line of soot and desolation dividing the shelf like the K-T boundary. Its inscription reads 'To Thomas, my son'. Dr Stanley Quinn left room for more words to follow, but must've reconsidered, or never got around to adding them. The rest of the page is untouched. And marks an ending, this book, a scarred and blasted Maginot Line between me and my father. A line that neither of us would reach across for the many long years that followed.

The books continue along the shelf, more than a decade passing with them, until finally we arrive at *The Qwerty Machinegun* by Thomas Quinn, my own first novel. I posted this particular copy to my father on publication day, only to have it come back a week later with a curt note from someone I'd never met – 'Too little, too late', it said.

Too little, too late. The obituaries began to appear a few days later. My timing has always been lousy. My father – my talking, speaking, moving, breathing, hand-holding father – had come apart for good.

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Just beyond *The Qwerty Machinegun*, standing behind my own first novel like the Empire State Building stands behind that little church in New York, is another first novel – *Cupid's Engine*.

This huge book sits at the absolute centre of my shelf like a great, dark keystone, every inch of its creased and battered cover plastered with praise: ‘The crime novel of the decade’, ‘An intricate puzzle-box of delights’, ‘addictive and astonishing’, ‘a feast for whodunit fans’, ‘flawless’, ‘remarkable’, and somewhere in amongst it all, “A uniquely talented writer” –Stanley Quinn’. My father rarely supported other writer’s books in this way, but then, *Cupid's Engine* is remarkable in at least half a dozen different ways. The book’s author, Andrew Black, barely gets a mention on this particular cover, but that hasn’t stopped the name looming large in the imaginations of the literary press and reading public in the nine long years since *Cupid's Engine* first found print. ‘A mysterious and elusive mastermind’ says the quote from the *Independent*. And they would know. They, like everyone else, had been unable to land an interview, or even an author picture to run alongside their five-star review. No details about Andrew Black were available at the book’s publication; nobody talked to Black; nobody met Black, and that remains the case even to this day. Conspiracy theories, hoaxes, blurry author photos and doctored documents all did the rounds and were debunked and dismissed in turn. Black’s publishers offer nothing but coy smiles and upturned palms when questioned, knowing that that mystery does nothing to hurt book sales, and Black’s agent, Sophie

Almonds, continues to issue the exact same statement, year on year, in response to any and all enquiries: ‘Andrew Black is not available for comment or interview, but he thanks you for your interest in his work.’

One of the few concrete details to be unearthed and verified by Black hunters concerned that unusual cover quote from my father. I hadn’t been the only one to find a quote from Stanley Quinn surprising, and pulling on that particular thread yielded results for those hungry for details on the mysterious author.

Andrew Black had been my father’s assistant and, later, his protégé.

Chosen one. Heir apparent. Disciple. Take your pick from the press clippings. I’d seen *spiritual son* a few times too, which stung just that little bit more than the others, as you can probably imagine. My father was immensely proud of Black, and Black – by several published accounts – idolised my father in return. They were a team, a unit, a literary family of two. My father never revealed a single additional detail about Black, no matter how often he found himself pressed, but he happily confirmed the basics. *Assistant turned protégé. Proud.*

And here’s the thing – my father was *right* to be proud of Black. And yes, it sometimes hurts my insides a little when I think about it, but what does that matter? He was right.

Cupid’s Engine became a global phenomenon, and continues to sell in huge numbers, year after year after year. And it should; *it should*. Andrew Black is a genius. The book is – there is no way to deny it – an out-and-out masterpiece.

This particular copy has been read almost to destruction: the spine is a mass of white fracture lines; its glue is cracked; and dozens of yellowing, dog-eared leaves poke out of it at odd angles. It’s an arresting object, a great, shabby monolith that’s so big, so dominant in fact, that you could easily miss the book behind it.

Tucked away on the far side of *Cupid’s Engine*, sitting so far back

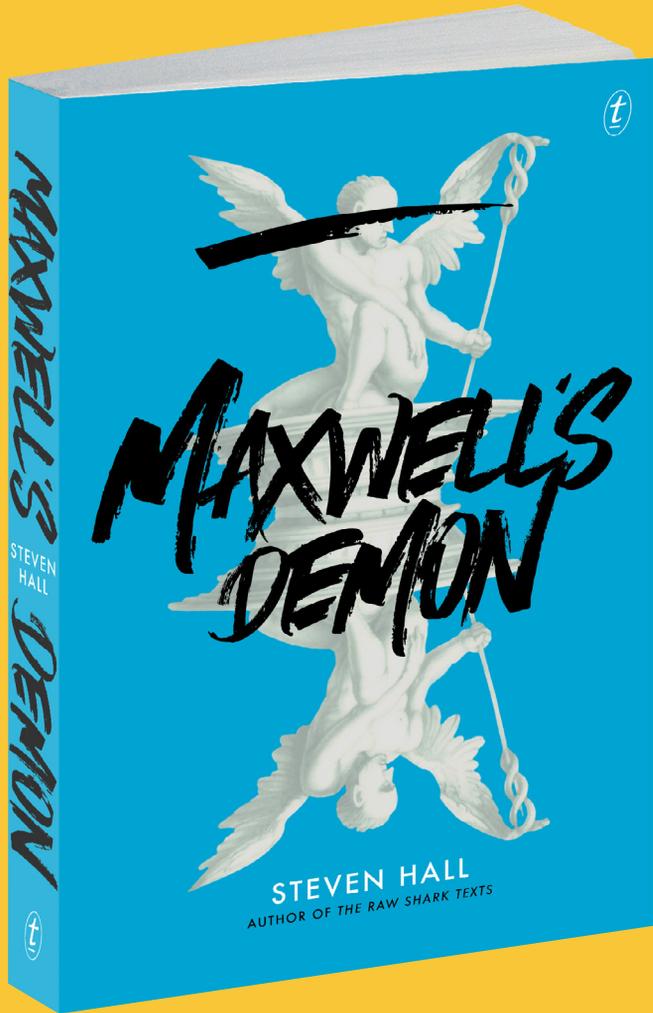
on the shelf as to half vanish into the shadows, is a second copy of my novel, *The Qwerty Machinegun*. This one's damaged, its spine horribly buckled from a collision with something hard.

If you were to take this copy down from the shelf and open it, you'd discover that its pages were crammed almost to obliteration with changes, crossings-out, and hundreds and hundreds of neat, handwritten notes and corrections made with a fine black pen. Flipping to the front, to the title page, you'd find a small, equally neat inscription:

Thomas,

You asked me what I thought of your novel.

Andrew Black



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