

## Robert

I have never seen him although I should have done. Not only did I go once a week to the house where he lived, as did my sister, for weekly piano lessons with his mother, I was also frequently in the neighbourhood, as his mother lived across the road from my grandmother who I often visited. My mother, grandmother and, even, my sister, all had seen him. Although in my sister's case, she had glimpsed him only once, and then hadn't seen him in his entirety but only partially, through the half opened slats of a venetian blind which sectioned him into neat slices, like a slab of freshly hacked ~~meat~~ <sup>meat</sup> ~~steak~~. She said that all she could tell about him was that he was wearing just his underpants and vest: navy blue pants they were she told me. My mother, returning from my grandmother at dusk, occasionally saw him walking the streets in the gently settling gloaming.

But I never saw him, not then nor now, fifteen years later. Perhaps this in itself is not so surprising or even a cause for remark: there is no rule which dictates that this should happen, I just assumed it would as a matter of course.

Even then, when I first started piano lessons (being at the time nine or ten) my mother insisted that if I wasn't careful I'd end up like him. Just like him. But how could she tell, she didn't know what he was like: she'd only ever seen him a few times and had never spoken to him and what she knew about him was pieced together from chance disclosures of his mother. From these she ascertained a few facts. He was an only child. The limp he walked with was the result of a childhood injury; a broken leg, badly set. Apparently he had never had a job for longer than two months. This being the length of time it took him to round on his superiors, telling them how the place ~~sh~~ould be run.

Once, in a pause between the scales and chords, his mother told me he had gone abroad, had taken off for a while. She said he did this now and again. Where he'd been, what he'd done and how he'd afforded it, she didn't mention. One thing she did say, however, was that she could always sense when he'd return. She put this down to her 'mother's intuition'. This time, she recalled, she had been compelled to look in the boot of her husband's car and, sure enough, had found him there curled up (like a creature in gestation, ~~I thought to myself~~).

While she told me this I sat, not looking at the piano keys but, having my head half turned, staring at her collection of porcelain bird statuettes that she kept placed in a neat row on a shelf of glass and wrought iron which rested above a radiator. I wondered why the birds weren't fashioned so that they stood supported by slender knarled legs rather than, as they were, with their bodies resting on small, ivory tinted, pottery plinths. On these, wavering legs were painted, like afterthoughts. Feathery deft strokes across stone saddles.