Let me begin in my father's house.

I grew up in an asylum, a manicured madhouse. The lawns were kept trim and the flowerbeds in bloom all year round. My father Kenneth Marsden was the chief medical officer, meaning he was a psychiatrist, and unlike his colleagues who were happy to escape the institution as soon as their roster hours had expired, Ken chose to live within the compound. I say compound but in fact Melton Park was more like a country estate, with grand Victorian edifices, barrack-like courtyards, a tall clock tower and banks of exotic flowers. And bulbs in spring that bloomed beneath massive oak and sycamore trees that offered shade from the punishing sun, not for the inmates but for the nurses who sat under them on short breaks, smoking and gossiping. There was of course a security system but it was concealed to the outside observer. There were no bars on windows, though a dry moat ran around a certain high-walled enclosure.

Today I am returning for the first time. The sky is

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a washed-out blue and the narrow road in is flanked on either side by bleached pastureland, the grass faded to straw, the sheep clustering under a Lebanese cedar. The great iron gates of the asylum stand permanently open, for the asylum is decommissioned and popular with visitors in search of antique horror. A minibus loaded with Chinese tourists cruises past and I follow it down the long avenue of silky oaks towards the grand clock tower. How abject it looks now, its sandstone face crumbling at the edges, the big round face with the hands stopped at a quarter to nine.

I park beside an abandoned building, its windows broken, its tin guttering left to sag and flap in the breeze. After a long drive I am hungry, and I look for the asylum church that has been converted into a café. Its rustic timber cladding is weathered but the roof looks new, its eaves and finials freshly painted white.

This is the place where I knew my mother, knew her for the first and last time.

Behind the church, next to a pair of dilapidated tennis courts is a sandstone cottage, its windows boarded up with rough wooden planks. Here I lived with my father and my younger brother, Axel, until I was nineteen. My mother, Irene, ran away the week before my tenth birthday. When I found the courage to ask my father why she hadn't taken me with her, Ken seemed unperturbed. 'She was in a hurry,' he said. 'She will be back.'

He was wrong. Not long before Irene disappeared

I had overheard a heated exchange between my parents in which my mother expressed her unease at the recent admission of a man who had murdered his wife and chopped her up in a blender. He was a botanist (said to be a genius) and had asked for a small plot of land in the security zone where he could grow flowers. Ken had authorised the purchase of seeds.

In that first year of my mother's absence there were many nights when I could hear Axel sobbing, hear him through the attic bedroom wall that separated us. If the crying persisted I would climb into his bed, and he would turn his back to me and we would nestle together like spoons, and I would smell his boy smell and lie with him until we both fell asleep.

The inside of the church is humid. Flies buzz around the door and are shooed away by a young waitress in a black singlet, tight black shorts and red Doc Martens. I order from the blackboard and carry my plastic number-on-a-stick to the outdoor tables, where a band of ageing musicians is setting up under a canvas awning. It's all so familiar. The small meeting room at the back of the church, now the café kitchen, is where my brother and I had attended Sunday school with the Reverend James Harwood, a lumbering giant of a man in whose meaty fingers the Bible looked like a fragile thing. The Reverend was near-sighted to the point of blindness, and the lenses of his spectacles so thick that they magnified the pupils of his eyes into two milky orbs, like marbles. All through

the Bible lesson he would squint over our heads at the light coming in through the small Gothic window above the door. Jesus is hungry but the fig tree has leaves and no fruit. The Messiah is enraged and curses the tree so that it withers. 'This is the one time that Jesus performs a miracle devoid of mercy, and he did this my dear ones to confound our expectations, to show us that He knows more than we do. Remember that, children, when you are tempted by Satan into doubt. It's a mistake ever to try to second-guess the Lord.'

I remember this because I had never heard the term 'second-guess' and had to ask my father what it meant. But Ken had laughed, and said: 'I wouldn't worry about that.' I asked him once about God the Father and why we had to have two fathers, one invisible. Again he laughed, and said he would explain when I was older.

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