

The Ice-cream Vendor

To eat, to sleep, to shit, to wait.

An unwinding of days.

I sit in my chair, feet in slippers, out again, eyes lidded before the television, the morning's paper rumpled between taut ankles, windows rattling, the elms creaking, the howl of winter swallowed up in the crash of waves, disgorged again, closer to the ear, bringing with it the sting of swirling seaweed and bitter salt.

The temper of it! Black in colour, black in mood. Encroaching upon memory's summers velveteed in brilliant greens and goldens and blues. Behind me, the splintered sea shimmering, the sun iridescent, to right and left, the moist plantations, beyond, tall buildings of concrete and glass vibrating, now silver now crystal, changing texture with sleight of illusion.

But no illusion the bell, *my* bell. Ting-a-ling-a-ling, ting-a-ling-a-ling, high pitched far-extending, calling the children, generations of them, who run to Freddie's cart to yield up their fathers' pennies for an ice-cream, coated with chocolate, the hundreds and thousands a generous sprinkle of colour and sweetness at no extra cost.

When did I cease the rounds? Six years ago? Eight? Ten? The tedium. The fragility. At this age of waiting, a day is a month is a year, yet . . . yet each a mere blinking of the eyes shutting in another image, and another colour, that impinges on memory's retina to fuse there with images and colours that have

come before. Particularly the colours. Motley ribbons tied gift-wrapped around milestones: marriage to Amelia – silken white; Judith's birth – brittle pink; a new home – mahogany, green, sky-blue; anniversaries – silver, sapphire, ruby, gold; and loathesome mourning (no gift, no package this) – black, black, ebon black. Would that gold were followed by diamond's iridescent spectrum. But red – vile menace – strongest among the colours, crushed, stifled, simple hope. Red, scarlet, crimson. The colour of a traffic light changed too soon, of Amelia's coat caught under wheels, of liquid blood streaking asphalt, of the cross on the white of the ambulance, of the carnations, still-unopened, young and fresh, rocked by wind upon her tombstone.

Memory is colour.

And colour is breath and triumph and pain.

And youth.

Behind me, her purposeful step on the carpet, the rustle of her dress, the muffled thud of a chair set back into place. Joanne. Precious. Child of my child. Complexion of ripe nectarines, auburn hair, eyes dappled hazel. Grown tall, poised, assured, alive. Where have the years gone?

Full her presence, her voice buoyant.

'Looks like we're in for a nice storm, Granddad, and your blanket's slipped down again.'

The present returns. Squall over the sea. A crashing. Rattling. Creaking. The television flickering with outside lighting. Thunder. Over my back, my shoulders, Joanne's hands, light, dexterous, steady, as she draws up the blanket.

'There, that'll keep you warm . . . And, oh, you've dribbled again.'

Those dimples at the reaches of her smile as she bends over me. Those fugitive creases beside her eyes. Freshness. Artlessness. And nectarines. Jonathans. Her mouth – no, not strawberries, but something sweeter, juicier as, tongue transversing her lips, she wipes my own with a tissue.

'I just came in to see if you needed something. Your nightcap before going to bed? Or are you still watching a show?'

Humphrey Bogart, is it? Must have been great in his day. You're nodding.'

Hand on my hand. – Velvet on leather. Vibrancy on deadness. What is now on what has been.

'Mum and Dad will be home late tonight. If you need me, Graddad, ring the bell, won't you? It's here, on your left, as always. I'm just in my room brushing up on Louis sixteenth for my history exam.'

How wholesome she has grown. Blue dress, slender waist, gilded buckle on her belt, perfume of peaches, her breasts firm, ready, her hair lustrous streaming over her shoulders. Fortunate man who will be her husband.

'Here's your paper, Granddad. It must have slipped to the floor.'

Don't go, Joanne. Sit with me. It's you, your colour, your voice, not the paper, not the television I want. Tell me about Louis sixteenth. About the university. Your tutors. Your boy-friends. My words are trapped, my sounds garbled, I know. But I can listen, understand, appreciate. That much is left to me.

'And you are doing your hand exercises, aren't you, Granddad?'

Joanne!

'Just ring if you want something. I'm in the next room.'

Lights overhead; five globes shining in their crystal cups. But blackness withal. Blackness of reaching out and grasping void. Of vacuums. Distance. Solitude. Joanne, precious, come back. Listen, hear, even where there are no words. Bring back colour, your perfume, your youth . . .

Youth.

Those commercials on television again. Shampoo, cereals, Coca Cola. Sunny girls, bright dresses, satin skin, shimmering hair. And sturdy fellows, tanned and tanned, straddling surf, leaping high, stirring sand. All smiles and softness; all lure and teasing. Youth. Laughter, intoxication, abandon. The flesh electric, the crotch tingling, ready the breast, the cleft. All thoughts in the present. Concealed the acne, the tooth decay,

the warts. Denied the possibility of disease. Separation, bitterness, law-suits beyond reflection. Not yet conceived the decay to blackness – silent blackness, eternal blackness – of colour, luminosity and laughter.

Joanne, you too? You too, Joanne? . . .

She is back with Louis sixteenth. Studies, examinations, vision to the future.

Before me, Humphrey Bogart once again.

Outside, a swollen lashing of rain, a howling and tumult and a splitting of the skies.

Amelia.

Brittle canations scattered by the wind.

Scatter, too, the blackness. Bring back the gold, the green, the blue. And plantations, the sea, rivers, skies. And ribbons, rainbows, streamers, balloons.

Not for me. My peace is made. To eat, to sleep, to shit, to wait.

But for Joanne. For innocence. For passion. For those flush-cheeked youngsters, generations of them, flying to the cart, pennies in sweaty palms, reaching up, up, lured by quickening summons: Ting-a-ling-a-ling, ting-a-ling-a-ling! 'Ice cream! Chocolate-coated! Sprinkled with hundreds of thousands for colour and sweetness!'

O memory!

Ting-a-ling-a-ling! The bell reverberating. High-pitched. Ringing. Behind me, the sea. Blue, green, splintered sheen. The sun, white flame. Lush plantations to right, to left. Winking silver, winking crystal the quivering glass of the buildings beyond.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling! The bell on my left. As always. Its thin steel cold, resonant, glinting.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling! Lightning glancing. Window rattling. Sudden brilliance seared to blackness.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling! Hold back the blackness, eager children, brittle children!

Ting-a-ling-a-ling, ting-a-ling-a-ling!

Steps behind me. Brisk. Assured. To purpose given.

'What is it, Granddad? I'm here now. You may stop ringing.'

Joanne! Precious.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

Don't age, Joanne. Don't let yourself decay. Cling . . .

'Has Humphrey Bogart finished? Are you ready for bed?'

Cling to colour, Joanne, cling to your youth . . .

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

Hundreds and thousands. Nectarines and peaches. Ribbons and rainbows.

'Do you want me to take you to the toilet?'

Hold fast to smiles and softness . . .

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

. . . to bright dresses and perfume, to every touch of passion, the electricity in your flesh!

'My, you are attached to your bell tonight. Are you uncomfortable, Granddad?'

I love you, Joanne. Listen! Hear!

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

Hear what I'm saying even though I can't get out the words.

'I know what I'll do. I'll bring you your glass of milk. Then take you to bed. Tuck you in.'

Joanne, be spared!

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

Never age, never die, Joanne. Be spared carnations. Be spared cold stone.

'I'll be back in a minute.'

Deny! Defy! Never age! Never Die!

Ting-a-ling-a-ling, ting-a-ling-a-ling!

Blackness, scatter. Eyes, close. Memory, stir!

Sun over oceans, milk clouds in the sky. Come, you children, hurry, run. Ice cream in plenty, chocolate delight, and hundreds and thousands in abundance to make your lives bright . . .

Amelia.

Hundreds and thousands . . .

Carnations . . .

. . . to make your lives bright.

Blackness . . .

Luminosity . . .

Joanne.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!