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HANIF
KUREISHI

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HANIF KUREISHI

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THE BODY





He said, 'Listen: you say you can't hear well and your back hurts. Your body won't stop reminding you of your ailing existence. Would you like to do something about it?'

'This half-dead old carcass?' I said. 'Sure. What?'

'How about trading it in and getting something new?'

It was an invitation I couldn't say no to, or yes, for that matter. There was certainly nothing simple or straightforward about it. When I had heard the man's proposal, although I wanted to dismiss it as madness, I couldn't stop considering it. All that night I was excited by an idea that was – and had been for a while, now I was forced to confront it – inevitable.

This 'adventure' started with a party I didn't want to go to.

Though the late 1950s and early 1960s were supposed to be my heyday, I don't like the assault of loud music, and I have come to appreciate silence in its many varieties. I am not crazy about half-raw barbecued food either.

Want to hear about my health? I don't feel particularly ill, but I am in my mid-sixties; my bed is my boat across these final years. My knees and back give me a lot of pain. I have haemorrhoids, an ulcer and cataracts. When I eat, it's not unusual for me to spit out bits of tooth as I go. My ears seem to lose focus as the day goes on and people have to yell into me. I don't go to parties because I don't like to stand up. If I sit down, it makes it difficult for others to speak to me. Not that I am always interested in what they have to say; and if I am bored, I don't want to hang around, which might make me seem abrupt or arrogant.

I have friends in worse shape. If you're lucky, you'll be hearing

about them. I do like to drink, but I can do that at home. Fortunately, I'm a cheap drunk. A few glasses and I can understand Lacan.

My wife Margot has been a counsellor for five years, training now to be a therapist. She listens to people for a living, in a room in the house. We have been fortunate; each of us has always envied the other's profession. She has wanted to make from within; I need to hear from without.

Our children have left home, the girl training to be a doctor and the boy working as a film editor. I guess my life has had a happy ending. When my wife, Margot, walks into a room, I want to tell her what I've been thinking, some of which I know she will attend to. Margot, though, enjoys claiming that men start to get particularly bad-tempered, pompous and demanding in late middle age. According to her, we stop thinking that politeness matters; we forget that other people are more important than ourselves. After that, it gets worse.

I'd agree that I'm not a man who has reached some kind of Buddhist plateau. I might have some virtues, such as compassion and occasional kindness; unlike several of my friends, I've never stopped being interested in others, or in culture and politics – in the general traffic of mankind. I have wanted to be a good enough father. Despite their necessary hatred of me at times, I enjoyed the kids and liked their company. So far, I can say I've been a tolerable husband overall. Margot claims I have always written for fame, money and women's affection. I would have to add that I love what I do, too, and it continues to fascinate me. Through my work I think about the world, about what matters to me and to others.

Beside my numerous contradictions – I am, I have been told, at least three different people – I am unstable, too, lost in myself, envious and constantly in need of reassurance. My wife says that I have crazinesses, bewildering moods and 'internal

disappearances' I am not even aware of. I can go into the shower as one man and emerge as another, worse, one. My pupils enlarge, I move around obsessively, I yell and stamp my feet. A few words of criticism and I can bear a grudge for three days at a time, convinced she is plotting against me. None of this has diminished, despite years of self-analysis, therapy and 'writing as healing', as some of my students used to call the attempt to make art. Nothing has cured me of myself, of the self I cling to. If you asked me, I would probably say that my problems are myself; my life is my dilemmas. I'd better enjoy them, then.

I wouldn't have considered attending this party if Margot hadn't gone out to dinner with a group of women friends, and if I hadn't envied what I saw as the intimacy and urgency of their conversation, their pleasure in one another. Men can't be so direct, it seems to me.

But if I stay in alone now, after an hour I am walking about picking things up, putting them down and then searching everywhere for them. I no longer believe or hope that book knowledge will satisfy or even entertain me, and if I watch TV for too long I begin to feel hollow. How out of the world I already believe myself to be! I am no longer familiar with the pop stars, actors or serials on TV. I'm never certain who the pornographic boy and girl bodies belong to. It is like trying to take part in a conversation of which I can only grasp a fraction. As for the politicians, I can barely make out which side they are on. My age, education and experience seem to be no advantage. I imagine that to participate in the world with curiosity and pleasure, to see the point of what is going on, you have to be young and uninformed. Do I want to participate?

On this particular evening, with some semi-senile vacillation and nothing better to do, I showered, put on a white shirt, opened the front door, and trotted out. It was the height of summer and the streets were baking. Although I have lived in

London since I was a student, when I open my front door today I am still excited by the thought of what I might see or hear, and by who I might run into and be made to think about. London seems no longer part of Britain – in my view, a dreary, narrow place full of fields, boarded-up shops and cities trying to imitate London – but has developed into a semi-independent city-state, like New York, and has begun to come to terms with the importance of gratification. On the other hand, I had been discussing with Margot the fact that it was impossible to get to the end of the street without people stopping you to ask for money. Normally, I looked so shambolic myself the beggars lost hope even as they held out their hands.

It was a theatre party, given by a friend, a director who also teaches. Some of her drama school pupils would be there, as well as the usual crowd, my friends and acquaintances, those who were still actively alive, not in hospital or away for the summer.

As my doctor had instructed me to take exercise, and still hoping I had the energy of a young man, I decided to walk from west London to the party. After about forty-five minutes I was breathless and feeble. There were no taxis around and I felt stranded on the dusty, mostly deserted streets. I wanted to sit down in a shaded park, but doubted whether I'd be able to get up again, and there was no one to help me. Many of the boozers I'd have dropped into for a pint of bitter and a read of the evening paper, full of local semi-derelicts escaping their families – alcoholics, they'd be called, now everyone has been pathologized – had become bars, bursting with hyperactive young people. I wouldn't have attempted to get past the huge doormen. At times, London appeared to be a city occupied by cameras and security people; you couldn't go through a door without being strip-searched or having your shoes and pockets examined, and for all your own good, though it seemed neither safer nor more dangerous than before. There was no possibility

of engaging in those awful pub conversations with wretched strangers which connected you to the impressive singularity of other people's lives. The elderly seem to have been swept from the streets; the young appear to have wires coming out of their heads, supplying either music, voices on the phone or the electricity which makes them move.

Yet I've always walked around London in the afternoons and evenings. These are relatively long distances, and I look at shops, obscure theatres and strange museums, otherwise my body feels clogged up after a morning's desk work.

The party was held not in my friend's flat, but in her rich brother's place, which turned out to be one of those five-floor, wide stucco houses near the zoo.

When at last I got to the door, a handful of kids in their twenties turned up at the same time.

'It's you,' said one, staring. 'We're doing you. You're on the syllabus.'

'I hope I'm not causing you too much discomfort,' I replied.

'We wondered if you might tell us what you were trying to do with -'

'I wish I could remember,' I said. 'Sorry.'

'We heard you were sour and cynical,' murmured another, adding, 'and you don't look anything like your picture on the back of your books.'

My friend whose party it was came to the door, took my arm and led me through the house. Perhaps she thought I might run away. The truth is, these parties make me as anxious now as they did when I was twenty-five. What's worse is knowing that these terrors, destructive of one's pleasures as they are, are not only generated by one's own mind, but are still inexplicable. As you age, the source of your convolutedly self-stymieing behaviour seems almost beyond reach in the past; why, now, would you want to untangle it?

'Don't you just hate the young beautiful ones with their vanity and sentences beginning with the words "when I left Oxford", or "RADA"?' she said, getting me a drink. 'But they're a necessity at any good party. A necessity anywhere anyone fancies a fuck, wouldn't you say?'

'Not that they'd want either of us too close to them,' I said.

'Oh, I don't know,' she said.

She took me out into the garden, where most people had gathered. It was surprisingly large, with both open and wooded areas, and I couldn't see the limits of it. Parts were lit by lanterns hung from trees; other areas were invitingly dark. There was a jazz combo, food, animated conversation and everyone in minimal summer clothing.

I had fetched some food and a drink and was looking for a place to sit when my friend approached me again.

'Adam,' she said. 'Now, don't make a fuss, dear.'

'What is it?'

My heart always sinks when I hear the words 'there's someone who wants to meet you'.

'Who is it?'

I sighed inwardly, and, no doubt, outwardly, when it turned out to be a young man at drama school, a tyro actor. He was standing behind her.

'Would you mind if I sat with you for a bit?' he said. He was going to ask me for a job, I knew it. 'Don't worry, I don't want work.'

I laughed. 'Let's find a bench.'

I wouldn't be curmudgeonly on such a delightful evening. Why shouldn't I listen to an actor? My life has been spent with those who transform themselves in the dark and make a living by calculating the effect they have on others.

My friend, seeing we were okay, left us.

I said, 'I can't stand up for long.'

'May I ask why?'

'A back problem. Only age, in other words.'

He smiled and pointed. 'There's a nice spot over there.'

We walked through the garden to a bench surrounded by bushes where we could look out on the rest of the party.

'Ralph,' he said. I put down my food and we shook hands. He was a beautiful young man, tall, handsome and confident, without seeming immodest. 'I know who you are. Before we talk, let me get us more champagne.'

Whether it was the influence of Ralph, or the luminous, almost supernatural quality that the night seemed to have, I couldn't help noticing how well groomed everyone seemed, particularly the pierced, tattooed young men, as decorated as a jeweller's window, with their hair dyed in contrasting colours. Apart from the gym, these boys must have kept fit twisting and untwisting numerous jars, tubs and bottles. They dressed to show off their bodies rather than their clothes.

One of the pleasures of being a man has been that of watching women dress and undress, paint and unpaint. When it comes to their bodies, women believe they're wearing the inside on the outside. However, the scale of the upkeep, the shop scouring and forethought, the possibilities of judgement, criticism and sartorial inaccuracy as, in contrast, the man splashes water on his face and steps without fear into whatever he can find at the end of the bed and then out into the street, have never been enviable to me.

When Ralph returned and I busied myself eating and looking, he praised my work with enthusiasm and, more importantly, with extensive knowledge, even of its obscurer aspects. He'd seen the films I'd written and many productions of my numerous plays. He'd read my essays, reviews and recently published memoirs *Too Late*. (What a dismal business that final addition and subtraction had been, like writing an interminable will, and nothing to be done about any of it, except to turn and torture it in the hope of a

more favourable outlook.) He knew my work well; it seemed to have meant a lot to him. Praise can be a trial; I endured it.

I was about to go to the trouble of standing up to fetch more food when Ralph mentioned an actor who'd played a small part in one of my plays in the early 1970s, and had died of leukaemia soon after.

'Extraordinary actor,' he said. 'With a melancholy we all identified with.'

'He was a good friend,' I said. 'But you wouldn't remember his performance.'

'But I do.'

'How old were you, four?'

'I was right there. In the stalls. I always had the best seats.'

I studied his face as best I could in the available light. There was no doubt that he was in his early twenties.

'You must be mistaken,' I said. 'Is it what you heard? I've been spending time with a friend, someone I consider Britain's finest post-war director. Where is his work now? There can be no record of how it felt to watch a particular production. Even a film of it will yield no idea of the atmosphere, the size, the feeling of the work. Mind you,' I added, 'there are plenty of directors who'd admit that that was a mercy.'

He interrupted. 'I was there, and I wasn't a kid. Adam, do you have a little more time?'

I looked about, recognizing many familiar faces, some as wrinkled as old penises. I'd worked and argued with some of these people for more than thirty years. These days, when we met it was less an excited human exchange than a litany of decline; no one would put on our work, and if they did it wasn't sufficiently praised. Such bitterness, more than we were entitled to, was enervating. Or we would talk of grandchildren, hospitals, funerals and memorial services, saying how much we missed so-and-so, wondering, all the while, who

would be next, when it would be our turn.

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Why would I be in a hurry? I was only thinking recently that after a certain age one always seems to be about to go to bed. But it’s a relief to be done with success. I can lie down with the electric blanket on, listening to opera and reading badly. What a luxury reading badly can be, or doing anything badly for that matter.’

Two young women had stationed themselves out of earshot, but close enough to observe us, turning occasionally to glance and giggle in our direction. I knew that the face out of which I looked was of no fascination to them.

He leaned towards me. ‘It’s time I explained myself. Let’s say . . . once there was a young man, not the first, who felt like Hamlet. As baffled, as mad and mentally chaotic, and as ruined by his parents. Still, he pulled himself together and became successful, by which I mean he made money doing something necessary but stupid. Manufacturing toilet rolls, say, or a new kind of tinned soup. He married, and brought up his children.

‘In his middle age, as sometimes happens, he felt able to fall in love at last. In his case it was with the theatre. He bought a flat in the West End so he could walk to the theatre every night. He did this for years, but though he loved the gilt, the plush seats, the ice-creams, the post-show discussions in expensive restaurants, it didn’t satisfy him. He had begun to realize that he wanted to be an actor, to stand electrified before a large crowd every night. How could anything else fulfil him?

‘But he was too old. He couldn’t possibly go to drama school, without feeling ridiculous. He was destined to be one of those unlucky people who realize too late what they want to do. A vocation is, after all, the backbone of a life.

‘At the same time,’ he went on, ‘something terrible was happening. His wife, with whom he had been in love, suffered from a degenerative illness that destroyed her body but left her mind

unharméd. She was, as she described it, a healthy driver in a car that wouldn't respond, that was deteriorating and would crash, killing her. She said that all she needed was a new body. They tried many treatments in several countries, but in the end she was begging for death. In fact, she asked her husband to take her life. He did not do this, but was considering it when she saved him the trouble.'

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'These days, dying can be a nightmare. People hang on for years, long after they've got anything to talk about.'

He went on, 'The man, who had been looking after his wife for ten years, retired and went on a trip to recuperate. However, he didn't feel that he had long to live. He was exhausted, old and impotent. He was preparing for death too.

'One day, in South America, where he knew other wealthy but somewhat dreary people, he heard a fantastic story from a young man he trusted, a doctor who, like him, was interested in the theatre, in culture. Together – can you imagine? – they put on an amateur production of *Endgame*. This doctor was moved by the old man's wish for something unattainable. He confided in him, saying that an amazing thing was taking place. Certain old, rich men and women were having their living brains removed and transplanted into the bodies of the young dead.'

Ralph became quiet here, as if he needed to know my reaction before he could continue.

I said, 'It seems logical that technology and medical capability only need to catch up with the human imagination or will. I know nothing about science, but isn't this usually the way?'

Ralph went on, 'These people might not exactly live for ever, but they would become young again. They could be twenty-year-olds if they wanted. They could live the lives they believed they'd missed out on. They could do what everybody dreams of, have a second chance.'

I murmured, 'After a bit you realize there's only one invaluable commodity. Not gold or love, but time.'

'Who hasn't asked: why can't I be someone else? Who, really, wouldn't want to live again, given the chance?'

'I'm not convinced of that,' I said. 'Please continue. Were there people you met who had done this?'

'Yes.'

'What were they like?'

'Make up your own mind.' I turned to him again. 'Go on,' he said. 'Have a good stare.' He leaned into the light in order to let me see him. 'Touch me if you want.'

'It's all right,' I said, prissily, after stroking his cheek, which felt like the flesh of any other young man. 'Go on.'

'I have followed your life from the beginning, in parallel to my own. I've spotted you in restaurants, even asked for your autograph. You have spoken my thoughts. My audition speech at drama school was a piece by you. Adam, I am older than you.'

'This conversation is difficult to believe,' I said. 'Still, I always enjoyed fairy stories.'

He continued, 'As I told you, I had made money but my time was running out. You know better than me, an actor walks into a room and immediately you see – it's all you see – he's too old for the part. Yet one's store of desire doesn't diminish with age, with many it increases; the means to fulfil it become weakened. I didn't want a trim stomach, woven hair or less baggy eyes, or any of those . . . trivial repairs.' Here he laughed. It was the first time he hadn't seemed earnest. 'What I wanted was another twenty years, at least, of health and youth. I had the operation.'

'You had your brain removed . . . to become a younger man?'

'What I am saying sounds deranged. It is unbelievable.'

'Let us pretend, for the sake of this enjoyable fantasy, that it really is true. How does it work?'

He said the procedure was terrifying, but physically not as

awful as open-heart surgery, which we'd both had. When you come round from the anaesthetic in this case, you feel fit and optimistic. 'Ready to jump and run', as he put it. The operation wasn't exactly common yet. There were only a handful of surgeons who could do it. The procedure had been done hundreds of times, perhaps a thousand, he didn't know the exact figure, in the last five years. But it was still, as far as he knew, a secret. Now was the time to have it, at the beginning, before there was a rush; when it was still in everyone's interest to keep the secret.

He went on to say that there were certain people whom he believed needed more time on earth, for whom the benefit to mankind could be immense. To this, I replied that although I didn't know him, it was his mildness that struck me. He didn't seem the type to lead some kind of master-race. He wasn't Stalin, Pol Pot or even Mother Teresa returning for another fifty years.

'That's right,' he said. 'Needless to say, I don't include myself in this. I had children and I worked hard. I needed another life in order to catch up on my sleep. If I'm back, it's for the crack!'

I asked, 'If you really were one of these women or men, what would you want to do with your new time?'

'For years, all I've wanted is to play Hamlet. Not as a seventy-year-old but as a kid. That is what I'm going to do,' he said. 'At drama school, first. It's already been cast and I've got the part. I've known the lines for years. In my various factories, I'd walk about, speaking the verse, to keep sane.'

'I hope you don't mind me pointing this out, but what's wrong with Lear or Prospero?'

'I will approach those pinnacles eventually. Adam, I can do anything now, anything!'

I said, 'Is that what you are intending to do after you've played Hamlet?'

'I will continue as an actor, which I love. Adam, I have money, experience, health and some intelligence. I've got the friends I

want. The young people at the school, they're full of enthusiasm and ardour. Something you wrote influenced me. You said that unlike films, plays don't take place in the past. The fear, anxiety and skill of the actors is happening now, in front of you. If performing is risky, we identify with the possibility of grandeur and disaster. I want that. I can tell you that what has happened to me is an innovation in the history of humankind. How about joining me?'

I was giggling. 'I'm no saint, only a scribbler with an interest, sometimes, in how people use one another. I don't feel entitled to another go at life on the basis of my "nobility".'

'You're creative, contrary and articulate,' he said. 'And, in my opinion, you've only just started to develop as an artist.'

'Jesus, and I thought I'd had my say.'

'You deserve to evolve. Meet me tomorrow morning.' As he picked up his plate and glass from the floor, the two observing women, who had not lost patience, began to flutter. 'We'll take it further then.'

He touched me on the arm, named a place and got up.

'What's the rush?' I said. 'Can't we meet in a few days?'

'There is the security aspect,' he said. 'But I also believe the best decisions are taken immediately.'

'I believe that too,' I said. 'But I don't know about this.'

'Dream on it,' he said. 'You've heard enough for one evening. It would be too much for anyone to take in. See you tomorrow. It's getting late. I really want to dance. I can dance all night, without stimulants.'

He pressed my hand, looked into my eyes as if we already had an understanding, and walked away.

The conversation had ended abruptly but not impolitely. Perhaps he had said all there was to say for the moment. He had certainly left me wanting to know more. Hadn't I, like everyone else, often thought of how I'd live had I known all that I know

now? But wasn't it a ridiculous idea? If anything made life and feeling possible, it was transience.

I watched Ralph join a group of drama students, his 'contemporaries'. Like him, presumably, but unlike me, they didn't think of their own death every day.

I got up and briefly talked to my friends – the old fucks with watery eyes; some of them quite shrunken, their best work long done – finished my drink, and said goodbye to the host.

At the door, when I looked back, Ralph was dancing with a group of young people among whom were the two women who'd been watching him. Walking through the house, I saw the kids I'd met at the front door sitting at a long table drinking, playing with one another's hair. I was sure I could hear someone saying they preferred the book to the film, or was it the film to the book? Suddenly, I longed for a new world, one in which no one compared the book to the film, or vice versa. Ever.

In order to think, I walked home, but this time I didn't feel tired. As I went I was aware of groups of young men and women hanging around the streets. The boys, in long coats and hoods that concealed most of their faces, made me think of figures from *The Seventh Seal*. They made me recall my best friend's painful death, two months before.

'It won't be the same without me around,' he had said. We had known each other since university. He was a bad alcoholic and fuck-up. 'Look at your life and all you've done. I've wasted my life.'

'I don't know what waste means.'

'Oh, I know what it is now,' he had said. 'The inability to take pleasure in oneself or others. Cheerio.'

The chess pieces of my life were being removed one by one. My friend's death had taken me by surprise; I had believed he would never give up his suffering. The end of my life was approaching, too; there was a lot I was already unable to do, soon there would be more. I'd been alive a long time but my life, like most lives,

seemed to have happened too quickly, when I was not ready.

The shouts of the street kids, their incomprehensibly hip vocabulary and threatening presence reminded me of how much the needs of the young terrify the old. Maybe it would be interesting to know what they felt. I'm sure they would be willing to talk. But there was no way, until now, that I could actually have 'had' their feelings.

At home, I looked at myself in the mirror. Margot had said that with my rotund stomach, veiny, spindly legs and left-leaning posture I was beginning to resemble my father just before his death. Did that matter? What did I think a younger body would bring me? More love? Even I knew that that wasn't what I required as much as the ability to love more.

I waited up for my wife, watched her undress and followed her instruction to sit in the bathroom as she bathed by candle-light, attending to her account of the day and – the highlight for me – who had annoyed her the most. She and I also liked to discuss our chocolate indulgences and bodies: which part of which of us, for example, seemed full of ice-cream and was expanding. Various diets and possible types of exercise were always popular between us. She liked to accuse me of not being 'toned', of being, in fact, 'mush', but threatened murder and suicide if I mentioned any of her body parts without reverence. As I looked at her with her hair up, wearing a dressing gown and examining and cleaning her face in the mirror, I wondered how many more such ordinary nights we would have together.

A few minutes after getting into bed, she was slipping into sleep. I resented her ability to drop off. Although sleeping had come to seem more luxurious, I hadn't got any better at it. I guess children and older adults fear the separation from consciousness, as though it'll never return. If anyone asked me, I said that consciousness was the thing I liked most about life. But who doesn't need a rest from it now and again?

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Lying beside Margot, chatting and sleeping, was exceptional every night. To be well married you have to have a penchant for the intricacies of intimacy and larval change: to be interested, for instance, in people dreaming together. If the personality is a spider's web, you will want to know every thread. Otherwise, after forty, when the colour begins to drain from the world, it's either retirement or reinvention. Pleasures no longer come to you, but there are pickings to be had if you can learn to scavenge for them.

Later, unusually – it had been a long time – she woke me up to make love, which I did happily, telling her that I'd always loved her, and reminiscing, as we often did, about how we met and got together. These were our favourite stories, always the same and also slightly different so that I listened out for a new feeling or aspect.

For the rest of the night I was awake, walking about the house, wondering.

2

The following morning there was no question of not meeting Ralph at the coffee shop he'd suggested. At the same time I didn't believe he'd show up; perhaps that was my wish. He had made me think so hard, the scope of my everyday life seemed so mundane and I had become so excited about this possible adventure and future that I was already beginning to feel afraid.

He arrived on a bicycle, wearing few clothes, and told me he'd stayed up late dancing, woken up early, exercised and studied a 'dramatic text' before coming here. It was common, he said, that people living a 'second' life, like people on a second marriage, took what they did more seriously. Each moment seemed even more precious. There was no doubt he looked fit, well and ready to be interested in things.

I found myself studying his face. How should I put it? If the body is a picture of the mind, his body was like a map of a place that didn't exist. What I wanted was to see his original face, before he was reborn. Otherwise it was like speaking on the phone to someone you'd never met, trying to guess what they were really like.

But it was me, not him, we were there for, and he was businesslike, as I guessed he must have been in his former life. He went through everything as though reading from a clipboard in his mind. After two hours we shook hands, and I returned home.

Margot and I always talked and bickered over lunch together, soup and bread, or salad and sandwiches, before our afternoon nap on separate sofas. Today, I had to tell her I was going away.

Earlier in the year Margot had gone to Australia for two months to visit friends and travel. We needed each other, Margot and I, but we didn't want to turn our marriage into more of an enclosure than necessary. We had agreed that I, too, could go on 'walkabout' if I wanted to. (Apparently, 'walkabout' was called 'the dreaming' by some Aboriginals.) I told her I wanted to leave in three days' time. I asked for 'a six-month sabbatical'. As well as being upset by the suddenness of my decision, she was shocked and hurt by the length of time I required. She and I are always pleased to part, but then, after a few days, we need to share our complaints. I guess that was how we knew our marriage was still alive. Yet she knew that when I make up my mind, I enter a tunnel of determination, for fear that vacillation is never far away.

She said, 'Without you here to talk about yourself in bed, how will I go to sleep?'

'At least I am some use, then.'

She acquiesced because she was kind. She didn't believe I'd last six months. In a few weeks I'd be bored and tired. How could anyone be as interested in my ailments as her?

It took me less time than I would have hoped to settle my

affairs before the 'trip'. I had a circle of male friends who came to the house once a fortnight to drink, watch football and discuss the miseries of our work. Margot would inform them I was going walkabout and we would reconvene on my return. I made the necessary financial arrangements through my lawyer, and followed the other preparations Ralph had insisted on.

When Ralph and I met up again he took one look at me and said, 'You're my first initiate. I'm delighted that you're doing this. You live your life trying to find out how to live a life, and then it ends. I don't think I could have picked a better person.'

'Initiate?'

'I've been waiting for the right person to follow me down this path, and it's someone as distinguished as you!'

'I need to see what this will bring me,' I murmured, mostly to myself.

'The face you have must have brought you plenty,' he said. 'Didn't you see those girls watching you at the party? They asked me later if you were really you.'

'They did?'

'Now – ready?'

He was already walking to his car. I followed. Ralph was so solicitous and optimistic, I felt as comfortable as anyone could in the circumstances. Then I began to look forward to 'the change' and fantasized about all that I would do in my new skin.

By now we'd arrived at the 'hospital', a run-down warehouse on a bleak, wind-blown industrial estate outside London (he had already explained that 'things would not be as they seemed'). I noticed from the size of the fence and the number of black-uniformed men that security was tight. Ralph and I showed our passports at the door. We were both searched.

Inside, the place did resemble a small, expensive private hospital. The walls, sofas and pictures were pastel coloured and the building seemed almost silent, as if it had monumental

walls. There were no patients moving about, no visitors with flowers, books and fruit, only the occasional doctor and nurse. When I did glimpse, at the far end of a corridor, a withered old woman in a pink flannel night-gown being pushed in a wheelchair by an orderly, Ralph and I were rapidly ushered into a side office.

Immediately, the surgeon came into the room, a man in his mid-thirties who seemed so serene I could only wonder what kind of yoga or therapy he had had, and for how long.

His assistant ensured the paperwork was rapidly taken care of, and I wrote a cheque. It was for a considerable amount, money that would otherwise have gone to my children. I hoped scarcity would make them inventive and vital. My wife was already provided for. What was bothering me? I couldn't stop suspecting that this was a confidence trick, that I'd been made a fool of in my most vulnerable areas: my vanity and fear of decline and death. But if it was a hoax, it was a laboured one, and I would have parted with money to hear about it.

The surgeon said, 'We are delighted to have an artist of your calibre join us.'

'Thank you.'

'Have you done anything I might have heard of?'

'I doubt it.'

'I think my wife saw one of your plays. She loves comedy and now has the leisure to enjoy herself. Ralph has told me that it's a short-term body rental you require, initially? The six-months minimum – is that correct?'

'That is correct,' I said. 'After six months I'll be happy to return to myself again.'

'I have to warn you, not everyone wants to go back.'

'I will. I am fascinated by this experiment and want to be involved, but I'm not particularly unhappy with my life.'

'You might be unhappy with your death.'

'Not necessarily.'

He countered, 'I wouldn't leave it until you're on your death-bed to find out. Some people, you know, lose the power of speech then. Or it is too late for all kinds of other reasons.'

'You're suggesting I won't want to return to myself?'

'It's impossible for either of us to predict how you will feel in six months' time.'

I nodded.

He noticed me looking at him. 'You are wondering if –'

'Of course.'

'I am,' he replied, glancing at Ralph. 'We both are. Newbodies.'

'And ordinary people going about their business out there' – I pointed somewhere into the distance – 'are called Oldbodies?'

'Perhaps. Yes. Why not?'

'These are words that will eventually be part of most people's everyday vocabulary, you think?'

'Words are your living,' he said. 'Bodies are mine. But I would imagine so.'

'The existence of Newbodies, as you call them, will create considerable confusion, won't it? How will we know who is new and who old?'

'The thinking in this area has yet to be done,' he said. 'Just as there has been argument over abortion, genetic engineering, cloning and organ transplants, or any other medical advances, so there will be over this.'

'Surely this is of a different order,' I said. 'Parents the same age as their children, or even younger, for instance. What will that mean?'

'That is for the philosophers, priests, poets and television pundits to say. My work is only to extend life.'

'As an educated man, you must have thought this over.'

'How could I work out the implications alone? They can only be lived.'

'But –'

We batted this subject back and forth until it became clear even to me that I was playing for time.

'I was just thinking . . .' said Ralph. He was smiling. 'If I were dead we wouldn't be having this conversation.'

The doctor said, 'Adam's is a necessary equivocation.' He turned to me. 'You have to make a second important decision.'

I guessed this was coming. 'It won't be so difficult, I hope.'

'Please, follow me.'

The doctor, accompanied by a porter and a young nurse, took me and Ralph down several corridors and through several locked doors. At last we entered what seemed like a broad, low-ceilinged, neon-lit fridge with a tiled floor.

I was shivering as I stood there, and not only because of the temperature. Ralph took my arm and began to murmur in my ear, but I couldn't hear him. What I saw was unlike anything I had seen before; indeed, unlike anything anyone had ever seen. This was no longer amusing speculation or inquisitiveness. It was where the new world began.

'Where do you get them?' I asked. 'The bodies.'

'They're young people who have, unfortunately, passed away,' said the doctor.

Stupidly, I said, as though I were looking at the result of a massacre, 'All at once?'

'At different times, naturally. And in different parts of the world. They're transported in the same way as organs are now. That's not difficult to do.'

'What is difficult about this process now?'

'It takes time and great expertise. But so does cleaning a great painting. The right person has to do it. There are not many of those people yet. But it can be done. It is, of course, something that was always going to happen.'

Suspended in harnesses, there were rows and rows of bodies: the pale, the dark and the in-between; the mottled, the

clear-skinned, the hairy and the hairless, the bearded and the large-breasted; the tall, the broad and the squat. Each had a number in a plastic wallet above the head. Some looked awkward, as though they were asleep, with their heads lolling slightly to one side, their legs at different angles. Others looked as though they were about to go for a run. All the bodies, as far as I could see, were relatively young; some of them looked less like young adults than older children. The oldest were in their early forties. I was reminded of the rows of suits in the tailors I'd visit as a boy with my father. Except these were not cloth coverings but human bodies, born alive from between a woman's legs.

'Why don't you browse?' said the surgeon, leaving me with the nurse. 'Choose a short list, perhaps. Write down the numbers you fancy. We can discuss your choices. This is the part I enjoy. You know what I like to do? Guess in advance who I think the person will choose, and wait to see whether I am right. Often I am.'

Shopping for bodies: it was true that I had some idea what I was looking for. I knew, for instance, that I didn't want to be a fair, blue-eyed blond. People might consider me a beautiful fool.

'Can I suggest something?' said Ralph. 'You might, for a change, want to come back as a young woman.'

I said, 'A change is as good as a rest, as my mother used to say.'

'Some men want to give birth. Or they want to have sex as a woman. You do have one of your male characters say that in his sexual fantasies he's always a woman.'

'Yes . . . I see what you mean . . .'

'Or you could choose a black body. There's a few of those,' he said with an ironic sniff. 'Think how much you'd learn about society and . . . all that.'

'Yes,' I said. 'But couldn't I just read a novel about it?'

'Whatever. All I want is for you to know that there are

options. Take your time. The race, gender, size and age you prefer can only be your choice. I would say that in my view people aren't able to give these things enough thought. They take it for granted that tough guys have all the fun. Still, you could give another body a run-out in six months. Or are you particularly attached to your identity?'

'It never occurred to me not to be.'

He said, 'One learns that identities are good for some things but not for others. Here.'

'Jesus. Thanks.'

I took the bag but wasn't sick. I did want to get out of that room. It was worse than a mortuary. These bodies would be reanimated. The consequences were unimaginable. Every type of human being, apart from the old, seemed available. The young must have been dying in droves; maybe they were being killed. I would make a good but expeditious choice and leave.

When the others fell back discreetly I walked beside this stationary army of the dead, this warehouse of the lost, examining their faces and naked bodies. I looked, as one might look too long at a painting, until its value – the value of life – seemed to evaporate, existing only as a moment of embodied frustration between two eternities. Then I began to think of poetry and children and the early morning, until it came back to me, why I wanted to go on living and why it might, at times, seem worth it.

I considered several bodies but kept moving, hoping for something better. At last, I stopped. I had seen 'my guy'. Or rather, he had seemed to choose me. Stocky and as classically handsome as any sculpture in the British Museum, he was neither white nor dark but lightly toasted, with a fine, thick penis and heavy balls. I would, at last, have the body of an Italian footballer: an aggressive, attacking midfielder, say. My face resembled that of the young Alain Delon with, naturally, my own brain leading this combination out to play for six months.

What if you were middle-aged and were offered the chance to trade in your sagging flesh for a much younger and more pleasing model? This is the situation in which the main character of **The Body** finds himself. Taking the plunge, he embarks on an odyssey of hedonism, but soon regrets what he has left behind, as the responsibilities he thought he had sloughed off now begin to come home to him. Sinister forces are pursuing him, wanting to take possession of his 'body', leaving him in a no man's land, uncertain which way to turn.

In **The Body**, Kureishi plays with the idea of personal identity and the extent to which it is rooted in our physical being. This volume also contains a selection of stories imbued with the pain – as well as the joy – of relations between parents and their sons, and the anxieties of adolescence.

'Kureishi wields a singularly pure and classical style, at times a dissecting instrument more reminiscent of the French tradition than the English. It is one of the paradoxes that make his art successful, this contrast between the severity of his authorial mind and the luxuriance of much of what he depicts.' **Independent on Sunday**

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