

ME (NOW)

It's a heavy day, and it hangs all over me. I'm deep in it. I'm so far in it, I'm technically invisible, unless you're extremely near to me, and very few people are. I doubt that will change today, but tomorrow could be different. Days like this – the ones that stay heavy from beginning to end – are rare here. Yesterday, for example, started heavy, but became very light and boldly colourful, then was just a tiny bit heavy for the final part, in spurts and streaks. During the light, boldly colourful middle part everything radiated cleanliness, was so thoroughly fresh and laundered that you wondered where all the bad stuff it had washed away had disappeared to, what vast drain or waste tank the world could possibly possess that could have so efficiently put it out of sight and smelling distance. Small creatures woke up in the freshness, and were hungry, in a ferocious way. 'Hangry' I believe it is called nowadays by the young folk. A man walked through a dark corridor cut diagonally across a field of high late summer barley and got seriously messed up by horseflies, to such an extent that he increased his speed to a trot and then a run through the last third of the corridor, waving his arms like a crazy person who believes he is being attacked from both flanks by ghosts, until he reached a shady, thistle-dotted copse, which he decided, incorrectly, might offer some respite. The small mercy for him in all this was his confident belief that he had remained unobserved. The belief was misguided. I saw him and, I have to admit, I did have a good old cackle.

There's a painting which I very much admire. I think it's obvious that it's of, or very much inspired by, the village, but I doubt the person who now has it on their wall knows that, unless they have ever visited here, which I happen to know for a fact that they haven't. I doubt they even know the name of the artist, which was a faint scrawl in the bottom right-hand corner of the painting in the first place and became fainter when the second of the painting's four owners carelessly left it directly opposite a large south-facing picture window in a bungalow overlooking the Derbyshire spa town of Matlock Bath. The painter's name was Joyce Nicholas, and she lived here in Underhill between 1958, when she arrived in Devon from the north of England as a widow and retired teacher, and 1969, when her daughter Eva installed her in a retirement complex close to the stretch of coast known, jokingly by some and more seriously by others, as the English Riviera. She completed the painting in 1960 and, although she did sell one or two other similar expressionist works at that point via small local galleries and a short-lived bookshop owned by a friend, Joyce – always very hard on herself – decided it was not a success, and put it away in the loft. It did not leave her family until 1983 when, after his wife had fled from him and their legal union in a state of antimaterialist haste, Eva's daughter Jane's ex-husband Gerry gave it to the owner of a junk shop in Whitby, Yorkshire, free of charge. Gerry had hoped to receive a small sum for the painting but was hit with an uncharacteristic attack of guilt when, in examining a rug that Gerry was also hoping to rid himself of, the junk shop proprietor's hand came into contact with some still quite damp excrement that had come out of the arse of Gerry's bulldog The Fonz that morning, but which Gerry, in haste not dissimilar to Jane's upon leaving him, had not spotted. The proprietor stared off into the middle distance of a deep back room full of broken clocks, grumbled inaudible

quarter words and exhaled spouts of air from both corners of his mouth, and stated he wasn't much interested in the painting. 'The bottom has dropped right out of the market for this stuff,' he said. 'I've got a ton of it in my garage at home and can't shift it for love nor money.' He was, however, playing it cool, having quickly marked the painting out as something a little out of the ordinary and Gerry as an easily manipulated man whose main goal was to exit the building as quickly as possible. The proprietor had been the first to see any merit in Joyce's landscape since a lodger who was living with Joyce, eight years after its creation. It now hangs above the stairway in a house in Edinburgh owned by two retired surgeons. Visitors remark on it more often than anything else in the house, apart from their cat, Villeneuve, who is white, fluffy and comically large.

I should probably pause to point out here, for those wondering, that I don't know everything. I have big gaps, moments of doubt and humility, just like everyone else, just like Joyce. But I do know a hell of a lot.

I love Joyce's use of colours in the painting. I suspect when she was mixing her palette she was thinking of a light day, or perhaps the light part of a day that had earlier been heavy, but certainly not an all-heavy day like today. The gradation of burnt umber to asparagus in the top left corner, then a suggestion of something darker, where the moor begins and stretches on for the next twenty miles or so. There's a hint of something black and jagged here, some shapes that remind me of rusty barbed wire. And beyond, above this kaleidoscopic hillscape that could just as easily be California as Britain's West Country, a swirling heaven or hell, a definite 'beyond place'. Below that, I think I can make out the familiar valley, the way it funnels down into the village and the lane that becomes the steep high street. There's no obvious sea or river in the painting but there is a suggestion

that both are close. Houses? Joyce doesn't paint anything as literal as houses, but there are shapes that we could decide are buildings where people live. There's some interesting yellow and white blotching to the right, below that, which makes me believe Joyce was a big fan of the lichen you get on the rocks and older buildings – and even some of the newer ones – around here. The colours of the lichen are answered by the colour of the sun, in the top right-hand corner, or is it the moon... or is it some combination of both, some other unknown ethereal body representative of both day and night. Above this is what seems to me the most literal part of the painting of all: a patchwork quilt of what are surely farmers' fields. What makes it less literal is the fact the patchwork is *above* the sun/moon, and I wonder if this is Joyce's comment on the topsy-turvy nature of the region, the habit the hills have of disorientating you, the knack weather has here of frequently being below you, as well as, or even instead of, above you, or if Joyce was just feeling a bit like tearing down the walls and breaking the rules that day. I like this side to Joyce a lot, the hidden side that only the brushes and canvas saw, beneath the scrupulous account books, the perfectly plumped cushions, the always-mown-on-time grass. Joyce was a person with more layers than her family and neighbours realised, I think, and much wilder, toothier nightmares. In the middle top of the canvas, if you look into that greeny-black, celestial moorscape, you'll see what you might interpret as a wide, beatific, somewhat hirsute face. This is the part of the painting that possibly interests me the most.

I never did get any of the several art critic jobs I applied for.

Where does the moor start? That's a highly debatable question. Where does the true north start? Where do moths end and butterflies begin? Where is the border between 'sometimes fancies members of the opposite sex but doesn't actually want to

touch their sexual organs' and 'is definitely gay'? Who decides what's soulful funk and what's funky soul? There's always some hard-bitten unimpressable bastard who'll tell you, when you're on the moor, that you're not on the proper moor, no matter how far into the moor you are. But let's not piss about. This – whether or not it's 'technically' on the moor, as the map defines it – is a moorland village. You know, very firmly, when you're in it, that you're not in London, or Kettering, or Ipswich. You're in Underhill. As you pass from the high ground down that funnel, so exquisitely depicted by Joyce, the air of the uplands remains in your nostrils, the trees have beards, the lanes have ferny green sideburns, and your hair is made of rain. *It's the bloody moor*, you pedantic bastards. I should know. I've been here long enough.

For many years, the first sign of life you'd see when you came down that funnel in Joyce's painting was an old blacksmith's cottage, but that fell into disrepair several decades ago, the more interesting parts of its structure gradually appropriated by passing opportunists in or around the building trade. The road bends sharply just at this point, with no warning, and once every couple of years you'll see a mangled, abandoned bike, formerly owned by someone who got carried away with the gradient and didn't quite judge the turn. The blacksmith's cottage was replaced during the 1970s by the Molesting Station. Despite society's disapproving eyes and the nature of its purpose being far less fashionable than it was during its outset, the Molesting Station isn't shy about telling you what it is. It even announces it publicly. 'MOLESTING STATION' it says in big letters, on the front of the building. OK, I'm not giving you all the facts here. It's actually a garage, owned by Phil Spring, who took it over when his father Brian Spring retired in 2013, and it in fact has 'MOT TESTING STATION' written outside. But as you approach from the north, the split trunk of a beech tree on the side of the road

obscures the first 'T' and the roof of the second one, so it appears to say 'MOLESTING STATION'. I'm surprised more people don't comment on it. Whatever the case, the garage does good business, at competitive prices, and has a reputation for honesty. After Phil realised he overcharged Paul Pike recently for replacement brake pads and discs, when in fact his apprentice Alun had only replaced the discs, not the pads, he called Paul immediately and did a bank transfer for the difference plus a gesture of goodwill, which he suggested at ten pounds. 'Call it twelve?' said Paul. 'OK,' said Phil. I don't have a car for reasons that will in time become clear, but if I did I would definitely take it here, instead of one of those supergarages, where you not only pay for your repairs but for the flatscreen TV in the foyer and the machine next to it that pisses out bad coffee you drink purely because you're there and not sure what else to do with your hands, and the pointless little matching blazers of the employees milling all around you doing you're not sure what. Beyond the Molesting Station is what is, for now, the village's most northerly residential frontier: twenty-five hugely unimaginative terraces built in the 1990s, once going under the preposterous collective title of Otter's Holt, a name now blessedly forgotten, apart from, evidently, by me. I dislike these houses but I like all but two of the families who currently live in them, which softens the architectural anguish a little.

It's definitely not one of the most fashionable villages in the region, and it's not quite the least. One of the results of this 'middle of the table-ish' standing is that we have an Indian restaurant, House of Spice, and it is a good Indian restaurant. I have observed that the better-known villages and small towns nearby, where house prices are highest, either don't have Indian restaurants, or have Indian restaurants that make surprisingly substandard food. I don't personally take my meals in the village, so this is just hearsay, but it's widely recognised that House of Spice's onion

bhajis – judged, at least, by the standards of other onion bhajis made in rural England – are in a class of their own when it comes to taste, shape and accompanying chutney. For a long time, House of Spice was also celebrated for the closing line of its menu, which thanked diners for their costume – a spelling error, rather than a genuine expression of gratitude to those visiting on Halloween or another occasion inviting fancy dress. It took a whole twenty-five months before the printing of a replacement menu, which merely thanked people for their custom, and the length of that gap can no doubt be attributed to the fondness that had grown for the menu in the locality and the resulting reluctance of anybody to point out its imperfections. The story about another misprint on the House of Spice’s menu, offering a ‘15 per cent discocunt on orders over £20’ is, however, apocryphal.

The moor has moods, and because the village is so close to it, it is subject to them. When the sky above the moor is storm-tossed and wretched, you’ll hear more gossip and backbiting across the tables in the two cafés, especially the Green Warlock, where Jason and Celia, who are bored in their marriage, go on Fridays. When everything is heavy and damp, like today, you’ll notice that people don’t say thanks as much in the Co-op. Two almost-friends, who’d normally stop and chat on the street, will keep their eyes down and pretend they didn’t see each other. It’s something purely elemental, not personal, but it spreads. I don’t feel great today, and my not-greatness influences those around me. I made a buddleia visibly ill at ease this morning. The tile warehouse, I think, looks particularly lugubrious and in need of a hug, but who is going to give it one? Colin on Weathervane Avenue just poured a pan of boiling water over some ants on his patio then instantly felt terrible about it, although he tried to transfer his anger with himself in his emotionally unavailable way, instructing his wife Mel, when she arrived home from the

supermarket, to not spend quite so recklessly on fruit. There's a bad atmosphere in the dentist's waiting room. But if we are honest it's never had a great reputation as a dentist. It's doubtful anybody would go there at all, if they knew that on the exact spot where Jill on reception currently sits, in September 1723, a farmer and his two sons murdered a man from Minehead following a drunken quarrel that got out of hand. An orchard was planted in the same place a century later, but didn't take. It's the other side of town where most of the apples grow: partially russeted Nancekuke, Pengelly, King Byerd. Old, old apples. Apples of the insurrectionary underground. Apples which would upset the apples in your local supermarket with their foul mouths and lack of foundation and mascara. Many of their sweet culinary gifts will be wasted next week in the annual Apple Rolling Festival on Fore Street: a 'revived' festival thought by many local historians to date back to as early as the 1600s (it doesn't).

But it is not all folklore and bygone insular sword death. We have a post office! Jim Swardesley, the postmaster, is forty-five. He has his moods, like all of us. The dome of his head is entirely bald, but he says it's been that way since he was twenty-two. His theory is that it was the result of a rugby squad induction ritual in his university days, where he was required to shave his entire scalp with an old, rusty razor and no shaving foam, from which his follicles never recovered. Now a resident of the village for over a decade, Jim's arrival, with his young family, was part of the first wave of incomers to Underhill from more urban areas in the centre of the country: an influx that never fully took off as some expected and dreaded it would, and still happens in fits and starts, usually as a result of people finding that more fashionable villages nearby have become too expensive. Jim is now entrenched enough in local life to be slightly resistant to outsiders himself, if only for their repeated failure to queue for grocery products

at the appropriate counter, despite his many handwritten signs encouraging them to. Two doors down from the post office is the granite cottage where Joyce painted her painting. The rusty wagon wheel that her predecessor dragged down the hill off the moor and into the garden is still there. Her deep red front door isn't, replaced long ago by some now off-white UPVC. It is good that she can't see this. There is a profusion of gravel that would be alien to her. The sports utility vehicle perched upon it would seem to her too big for any practical purpose, incongruous beside the building it belongs to.

Information comes back to me in isolated flurries, like cherry blossom on a strong breeze in spring, and then it's gone if I don't reach out and grab quickly, and grab well. You can never grab much. There's only so much you can know at one time, even if you're me; only so much room to store it. There's so much *to* know. It will never end, I suspect, even when it does. So much in all these lives, so many stories, even in this small place. And I try to keep abreast of the universe beyond it too, if I can. I'm broad and cosmopolitan, despite what many assume.

But I am remembering a little now, from the day she began to paint the painting. I was not feeling fully at my best that day. Some men and their dogs had raced across part of me and ripped an innocent animal into many pieces and the pieces were stuck to me. The rain would not come and wash the pieces off for a while. It was a few years into the era when I first felt new chemicals soaking into me, changing everything. Yet over there was a meadow: corncockle, poppies, yellow rattle. I'd rarely seen so many butterflies in my life. I was confused. I felt I could go either way, emotionally. One of my wicked episodes could easily have happened. They have to happen, sometimes. It's part of the balance. But in this instance I chose purity; namely, the quest to witness some of it. While I searched for the purity, a stallion and

a mare began to mate on my back and I told them to piss off but then apologised, admitted that it was unfair of me, and assured them they were not the ultimate cause of my irritation.

She was in her kitchen, rescuing a moth from a spider's web. (It died two minutes later but it's the thought that counts.) Jazz was playing. That was not a surprise. The type of jazz, though, was. Definitely not grandma jazz, this. Not even 1950s hip grandma jazz. Modal. Louche. A little threatening. The back window was open, which, from where her easel was placed, gave her a good view of the tor and the rocks piled on top of it like a little crude stepstool to nowhere. The breeze was gently blowing in, flapping the net curtains, and a very old grey cat – a satchel of sharp bones, with some fur stuck to them in some places – snoozed on the table, next to a punnet of five strawberries that were on the turn. Joyce flailed a wrist, as if loosening up in preparation for an impressive bit of spin bowling, and in one final move, to achieve a state of ultimate looseness before she began, she lifted her blouse over her head and threw it flamboyantly to the floor. I got a bit shy then (I do!) before watching her go into her artistic trance. I'd never seen anybody paint my portrait before and I was very flattered. She had a glass of wine afterwards, and I can't remember the last time I've wanted to join anyone in that particular activity so much. You'd have to go right back to... Actually, I'm not even going to tell you. Blissful scene to watch, though, even if you couldn't be a part of it yourself. Oh, Joyce. How could you go from a day as carefree and wild as this to the retirement scene in Torquaydos, in less than a decade?

It was the following day when she had her misgivings and put the painting in the loft, with a little chunter to herself. She was being self-punishing, but perhaps she was only following the most sensible course of action. Ideally, we'd all put any art we created away for a while before we properly evaluated it. Two

weeks? Probably not long enough. Let's call it two years. OK, ten. That will do it. Scratch that. Just to be sure, let's come back and discover our true worth as creators from the afterlife. 'Hi, I'm dead now. What? Yes, fully. I even have the papers to confirm it. Can you finally tell me my true star rating, out of ten?' Joyce, I think, were she able to pop south over the border between the dead and the living, then north over the other one, between England and Scotland, would be pleased at what she saw on the wall of Dr Micklewhite and Dr Micklewhite. But – and I'm not denigrating Joyce's talent for one second here – are enigma and the passing of the years to be given some credit for that? Is it maybe just possible that time itself has changed Joyce's painting? As if some spiritual lichen of its own has grown on and around it, deepening and enriching its texture? And, if so, what good does that do Joyce, now? What we need to do is get her trending online. Death: it's when we decide if everyone is good or bad, right, decide which of the two boxes to put them in, as well as the wooden one they're already in? Let's get her a Wikipedia page, get the conversation going. 'So sorry to hear Joyce Nicholas is no longer with us. I only met her once, for no more than nine seconds, but she was not stuck up at all, and even said hello to my dog.' 'I have always been a huge fan of Joyce, even when nobody was talking about her, and it was super uncool to like her.' 'Graham, can you remind me how much we paid for that picture above the spare bed?' '£300, I think. It was quite a long time ago.' 'Well, I've just found out from this newspaper article that it's worth £55,000 and by someone called Joyce Nicholas. She died in Devon in 1973.' Oh, Joyce, if only you'd have known your artistic worth, been raised in a different generation, and put yourself out there. You could be an influencer now. But you wouldn't have wanted that, you say? Why on earth not? Oh, because the very process itself was the important part of the matter for you? The

feeling of being lost inside it, guided by invisible hands. The trance. The freedom. But what about the ‘likes’, what about the dopamine rush? How *old-fashioned* you are, Joyce. Don’t you realise that even the dead have an Instagram account these days? Don’t do yourself a disservice. Play the game. Everyone must.

I’m sorry; I’ve done something I said I wouldn’t and permitted myself to get flustered. It’s been one of those days. I think I spotted a couple of drones earlier, circling above the boulders. I have a pain in one of my toes and there’s a very unwell, publicity-shy and sensitive ash tree I’m on intimate terms with and this morning someone plastered photos of it all over social media accompanied by the hashtag ‘#sadtrees’. I think the toe pain comes from the fact that a pile of old compost bags and a hubcap are caught on a rock just past where the river emerges on the other side of town, almost but not quite, under the Victorian railway viaduct. It’s bearable, not so painful, not even comparable to the time they found a dead owl down there, tangled up in a sky lantern. I should sleep. The forecast is better for tomorrow. I can see the bats powering over from their roosts. I heard that nineteen buzzards and a kestrel are flying up from Cornwall at dawn. But I will say this final thing, concerning the previous subject: Joyce isn’t the only one. There are a lot of lofts and drawers and cupboards out there. Most of them have stacks of utterly worthless shit in them. But just a few of those lofts and cupboards and drawers contain a piece of art that’s special and true and came from an honest, inspired place, didn’t get shouted about at the time, and it’s probably only going to get more special and true the longer it’s left there. We’re all getting older, and that has its pluses as well as its minuses. Over beyond the back wall of Joyce’s old garden, the river isn’t quite as diamond clear as it once was, and its dauntless song doesn’t always quite succeed in drowning out the dual carriageway, but the lichen and moss on

the rocks have become richer in texture. Quality lichen and moss isn't something you just cheat or shortcut or hack or hashtag your way to.

Here, in my big green hands, I hold some time. Consider it my gift to you. You will probably never receive a finer one.

I'm going to go now. A heavily pregnant ewe just did a very thick and powerful piss on my chin. But I'm OK. To be perfectly honest, I barely even felt it.