

By the National Gallery I Sat Down and Wept

Susan Jordan

I am late. My hair is still damp from washing and will probably stick out as it dries. My corduroy coat hangs loose on me and makes me look smaller and shorter than I am. Its double row of buttons is flat over my embryonic breasts. The material, dull olive green, smells as though someone has been sick on it.

My stockings are stuck to my legs, damp from the bath. I am out of breath and sweat pours from my well-deodorised armpits into my jumper. There are white patches of talc on my clothes. Tassels broken from chestnut trees lie miserably in black puddles hollowed in the grey pavement. There is a smell of early evening rain, and businessmen with boring briefcases hurry home from the station. I hear my train leaving.

I met him in the National Gallery, looking at Dutch interiors which I found small, dark and complacent. He is Indian, and talked to me then in fluent long words. He must know about painting, I thought, he is clever. I am sixteen and know nothing. My body feels out of joint and my back hurts. I have been reading *The Waves* and its black words on yellowish paper drag through my mind like chains binding it into nothingness.

In my word-insulated state the slam of

the train door does not shock me. Trafalgar Square has no size, no area, yet crossing it is infinitely slow. We have been studying infinity in Maths: infinity is nothing, for ever. I know it. Clouds in the sky conceal endless emptiness.

He is waiting for me on the National Gallery steps. His black hair is long and greasy and he has a beard. He wears glasses with metal frames. He is respectable, he has a tie. His name is John Alexander — not an Indian name. We walk towards St James's Park and he first takes my hand, then puts his arm round me — I wonder why. The evening is warm and my coat dangles open, still smelling of sick. Chestnut trees oppress me; grass and burden too great to bear.

We sit down by the lake on thick green canvas deckchairs. I feel the canvas give as I sit down and I sprawl back, helpless. He puts his chair on the highest notch so that he is taller than me and more alert. We begin to talk. He is a student at the London School of Economics — how old that makes him seem. There are ducks in the water and a swan, ducklings and cygnets too, and in front of us a willow tree dipping down. As he talks I stare at the willow tree through the abyss of my emptiness. *The Waves* aches inside me, accuses

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me of lack of feeling, lack of imagination, lack of response. I cannot describe this willow tree, it is not poetry. It is only a tree in a park. It is not Virginia Woolf's tree; I am not Virginia Woolf. I have tried and tried to write but nothing reaches me, nothing cuts through this catastrophic emptiness. Words rattle through my mind all the time like trains, but they are not my words. They are only black words on a yellowing page, Virginia Woolf's words, anyone's words. On the cover of the book is a portrait of her — beautiful, coloured boldly because it's a painting (I wish I could paint) and reflecting the colours of the book's beautiful words. The willow tree lives behind that painting, but not in me. I am empty, I am sick. The spring flowers are edged with death and decay; their colours nauseate me. Pink of blossom is evil; it persecutes me with what I do not feel.

He is talking about himself, his plans. His Indian accent annoys me, but he is cleverer than I could ever be. For I have nothing inside. I am sixteen, my hopes have collapsed. I will never read all the books there are to read; I have no mind, only words. He is interested in cricket, he says. I once knew about cricket, and could see in my mind men in white on the field and the hard red ball. Now cricket recalls only another page of *The Waves*: an author's experience and not mine: I have no experiences, I am dry, grey and old; I am sixteen.

He takes my hand. 'Let me read your palm', he says. I do not believe in it, but surrender my pink schoolgirl hand to his larger brown and beige one. A man's hand. I have not known many men's hands.

'You have a lot of scientific curiosity',

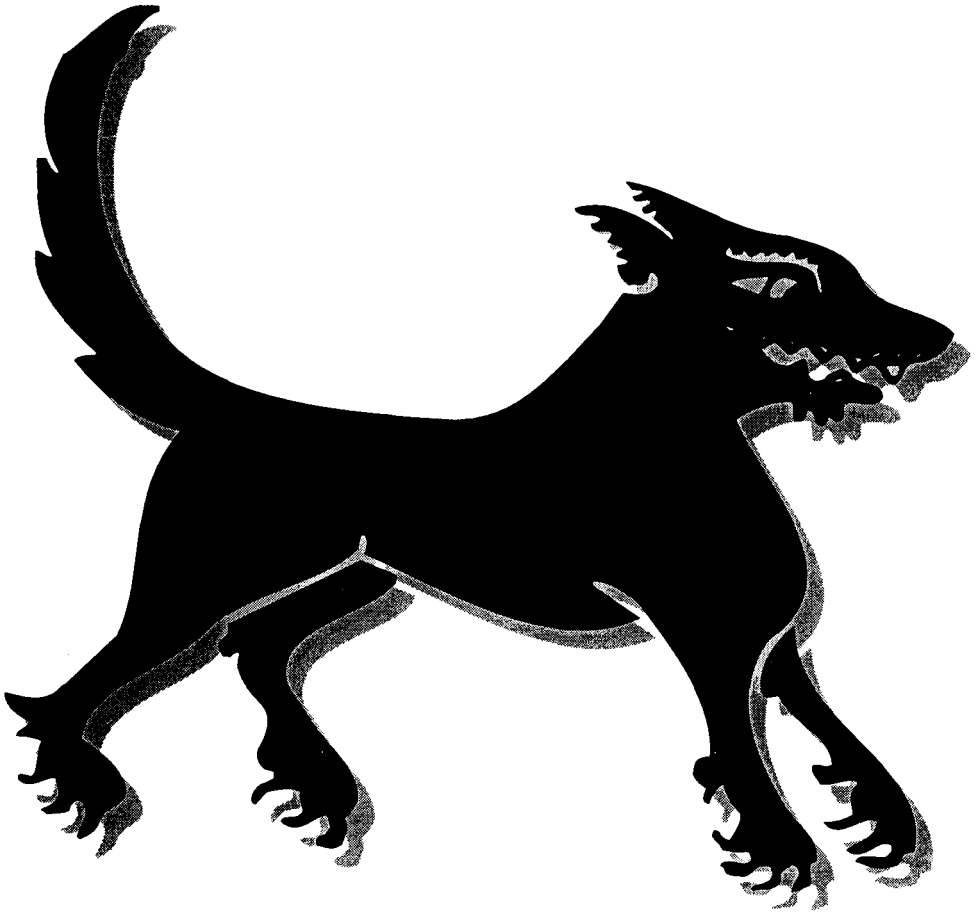
he says, pointing to my incurved little finger. These days my hands are always curled up on themselves. 'That means an inquiring mind. You should be doctor or something.' A doctor. Yes. He means I have no imagination, no originality.

'You will have one — two — three children. See these little lines here.' I am not interested. I hate children. I want to be a famous writer, not someone's mother. My mother is in hospital, she has had meningitis. The hospital smells of disinfectant and death, as it did when I was in it. I know she might have died but I can feel nothing about it. She has not died. She will come home again to make us chicken soup and fried fish and tell us who we are. Meanwhile we are in chaos.

'Come here.' His arm creeps round me. It is warm and I can smell his sweat. A man's sweat, different from mine. I feel the nylon cloth of his suit against my cheek.

'Don't be afraid. Don't be so scared. Why are you scared?'

I wriggle and say nothing, not knowing why I'm scared. He moves closer, as close as the awkward deckchairs will allow. I am detached. I do not even feel it is my body that he is touching. How can it matter? It does not belong to me. As he leans over me I smell his bad breath, a man's breath. His mouth closes over mine, glutinous and moist like a jellyfish, and his teeth bite into my lips. I can taste his breath now, and his beard is rough like a brush round my mouth. So this is a kiss. His tongue tries to probe between my teeth but I do not let it in. He presses hard, stifling my disgust, not seeing or feeling it. I open my eyes and see the willow tree filthy and evil, fraught with the ugliness of the world.



He finishes. I do not push him away. What has happened does not belong to me.

'Shall we go?' he says. I realise he is angry. 'Why didn't you enjoy it? You're meant to enjoy this. All girls do.' I do not look at him. The path is muddy and full of pebbles. I am a failure. All girls enjoy it and I have not. I am disgusting.

He takes my hand as we walk back to Trafalgar Square. I cannot talk, I have no love. I only have the words, the black words on the yellowing page. The words

cannot tell me what I feel. Slowly, without my knowing it, the tears come. Once he has left me the sobs jerk from me. I have not cried for months, but tears pour from my eyes. Empty tears, rising from an empty pain. There are people everywhere, in the street, on the steps of the National Gallery. I cry and cry. They may see me but we are not in the same reality. I am alone, sobbing in an empty world. They do not exist.

At home nothing has changed. There is no beauty in the world.