

## Prologue

A few feet away the river is hurling by in a fury. Wild, accelerating gusts throw rain back and forth amongst the trees as if a piece of natural machinery has broken loose and is tearing the whole world apart. It's a day without limits.

A slap of spray rocks the window so violently that David throws his hand up to protect his face. White horses ride on the river's surface a few feet away, but beyond the vanished far bank the fields are flooded and the water moves like a shifting landmass of metal, nullifying hedgerows, fence posts, telegraph poles, even fully grown trees, beneath its obliterating current.

Neither David, nor Billy Jr, nor their mother, says a word at breakfast. The telephone is cut off, the electricity is cut off. *It is*, as David's father would say were he here, *what it is*, and what it is, has shut down the house and deprived the inhabitants of speech.

An hour after Jen Bright and the boys finish breakfast, she takes advantage of a lull in the wind to set off for the town. Of course she'd have preferred to go back to bed, shut out the din, bury her nose in the book and wait until they are rescued, but they need food, firewood, toilet paper, Calor gas, fuel for the Rayburn, bottles of ginger, crisps, Smirnoff, sweets, the chemical toilet its chemicals, and the household half a boatload of general supplies. She attempts to cajole Billy Jr into joining her as expedition Sherpa, but Billy's having none of it.

"I'm working on my film," he says.

She casts off and the little mahogany skiff flails out into the river, oars thrashing against the relentless current. She loses control for a moment, as she does invariably on these journeys, and within moments the boat turns its bow downstream, carrying her away, out of sight of the island. Ten or fifteen minutes later she reappears, straining at the oars, forcing the skiff back upstream through sheer will, galvanised by her deep-seated urban terror of the natural world and its inexplicable paroxysms. David stands out of the rain beneath the willow tree where Billy Jr is setting up the tripod and the umbrella, and waves hopefully as she struggles by. She looks over and a smile appears in the midst of her hair-and-rain-lashed face. He walks down to the dock and watches her until the wind picks up again and blows rain into his eyes. The last he sees of her and the skiff is the silhouette of a demented water-boatwoman skimming over black waves into a towering, saturated weather front that bears down on her from on high, in the blackening sky above the town.

That was five hours ago and now there's little remaining by way of daylight. Since the year moved into October there has only been twilight or darkness after five in the afternoon, exacerbated this year by storms and the flood which is now in its second week. The unnerving howls, generated by winds rampaging through the small acreage of land and vegetation that still remain above water, have assumed the power of a Bacchic incantation, as if now, submerged in darkness, the island spirits have discovered their tongue. As he stands at the back door, David feels the inhuman world enter his bones and sing to him, a terrifying and prophetic lamentation, and all magical thinking aside, it sounds to him like a national anthem for the Republic of Catastrophe.

Billy Jr has meanwhile been at his post amongst the lashing willow branches since lunchtime, tinkering with the Aaton and the Nagra, attempting with each change of position to maintain his grip on the umbrella, while arranging and adjusting the equipment to a point where he seems happy. It's impossible really, but this very impossibility will play a crucial role in Billy Jr's later *succès d'estime*. Everything that should have made his first attempt at filmmaking a complete disaster; the shuddering of the viewfinder, the storm rain lashing every few seconds across the lens, the quick sweep of the cloth that follows, the sound that cuts out as the faulty crystal lock breaks loose from its mooring on the camera so that the last few minutes of action take place in silence apart from the pre-recorded whispers of wind, river, vegetation – all narrative coherence leading to the enigmatic *Blow Up* style conclusion that will later cast a spell over one eccentric Jury in the Salle Debussy in Cannes and give Billy, at nineteen, his single tantalising, never-to-be-repeated experience of fame.

David pulls his parka up around his head, makes a dash across the lawn into the willow's shade and shouts in his brother's ear, "Egg roll?"

Billy nods and mimes the drinking of tea.

"It's after four!" David shouts. "Are you gonnae to be out here much longer? She won't come home in this. She'll stay at that woman's house, you know, the one with the specky son?"

"I'm fine, man," Billy Jr bellows back, still tinkering and fiddling, "Just bring me somethin' to eat. I want to get her when she comes back. Especially when she's trying to tie up the skiff. I mean, that water's pure mental, man. It'll be like a fight to the death. Nature versus our radge mother!"

David pauses, looks his brother up and down, shocked at how the world's polarities can shift so quickly, feels the gulf widening between them, Billy Jr already receding into the half-life of memory, so that out of the blue his only sibling has become an interloper from a family he doesn't recognise. In fact, he can't actually remember when Billy Jr last even addressed him by his name. He tells himself that perhaps the weeks of wild weather, the long absence from school, the solitude, the strangeness of the place, have unhinged them but the younger boy's reflective, usually buoyant heart is sinking, and it feels to him as if their souls have been possessed by alternative, incompatible demons. Billy Jr's lips are set together in a line as narrow as a pencil mark on a sheet of paper: he has the look of a warrior steeled for catastrophe. And David is in the presence of something he doesn't understand, a private vision that in the space of three years has, it seems, transformed his brother from jolly, good-humoured clown, to vengeance-seeker.

He hurries back indoors, one hand grasping the hood of his jacket, the other raised against the rain. Inside, the Rayburn wood is crackling and firelight blazes behind the little mica windows. Despite the chilliness of the wind outside, it's warm in here. He takes off the jacket and wet shirt, hangs them over a chair, sets the chair before the stove and does the cooking in his t-shirt.

Five or so minutes later, two egg and onion rolls are complete. He pours Billy Jr's tea, sprinkles tomato sauce on the eggs, takes down another oilskin from a hook in the hallway, wraps it around his bare shoulders, drags open the front door and sets off into the now-fallen night, across the slick grass, keeping himself well clear of the rushing, ravenous-looking river and plunging into the relative shelter of the willow tree where his brother, clenching his umbrella in one hand and a drowning cigarette in the other, gazes upstream into the murk.

Billy Jr tosses away the cigarette, takes the rain-spattered roll from the plate and consumes it with the alacrity of a dog. David takes back the plate, hands him the tea and returns indoors.

He sits down at the kitchen window and listens.

After dozing off and on, he decides to give up the ghost. He leaves the kitchen and shuffles along the hallway to his bedroom. Assuming his brother has returned while he's been sleeping, he's surprised to find Billy Jr's bed empty.

The red alarm clock in his mother's room reads a few minutes after 10 and it's the only sign of life in there. The bed is unmade, unoccupied. There's a Dell paperback on the table by the bed with a cover painting of a black V12 Cadillac and a gangster in a suit. The Cadillac is parked outside a rundown redbrick tenement building and the gangster is standing by the open driver's door holding a gun. In the background a woman leans against a stoop. The top button of her blouse is undone and a mane of auburn hair cascades over her shoulder. Despite the rarity of Billy Bright's written communications from America, regularly every two weeks, a package arrives at the Town's Post Office containing a dozen of these gangster romances, each wrapped in its own lurid, evocative cover. They keep her going, these Manichean *polar* tales of an alternative world where at least you had the opportunity of dying young before you lost your looks. On the way, if you were lucky, you got to drive around in the Cadillac, dress yourself from Sax Fifth Avenue and instead of the gloomy bedlam of the pub around the corner, you passed your evenings at the 21 Club where the clientele sipped Whiskey Sours and the band played samba music that made you dance like a sexed-up salamander. Sometimes you would even see movie stars there, sashaying their way between the tables, bearing their dazzling all-embracing smiles through the crowd like priceless jewellery.

David is naturally timid anyway, but now he's truly afraid. Neither his mother nor Billy Jr are anywhere to be seen.

He reaches the front door, grinds it back over the swollen floorboards and the sodden *Welcome* mat and looks out. Murky, predatory water swirls about. The shed is gone, the clothes pole is bumping up and down in the water, and beyond the green the river has occupied the woodland. The rustlings and grindings and squeakings of branches sound like the cries of animals, and they've been waking him all through the last few nights as the storm gathered and the rain kept falling and the river kept rising.

David undresses and begins to change into his pyjamas, then pauses for a moment wondering whether or not to put his parka back on and make a search for the great cineaste, but he soon realises that not only is he exhausted but he no longer cares what Billy Jr is up to – at least for the moment. His indifference extends to the possibility Billy Jr might have been swept from the bank and drowned.

He gets into bed, turns to the window to watch the rain and within a moment he's asleep.

As anyone who has tried to measure it finds, the duration of a dream in real time is unknowable. The glimpse of a single still image of a face or an empty street, a square of sky or the whisper of a treetop in the wind, can occupy an entire dream-day and attach itself to the memory for years. Over the following hours David dreams his entire life in an arc that rises to a vertex, then sinks and fades like a meteorite. When he wakes up he is sobbing, his face is wet with tears, his body relaxed, his mind at peace and he's completed, solid and wise, as if having returned home from an entire lifetime.

Throughout his remaining years he will recognise certain events intuitively, by means other than sensory; a place, a person, an event that in some way is a manifestation of something crucial in himself or his relations in the world. He will recognise insignificant landmarks – like mossy stones buried in the tall roadside grass, foretelling such-and-such a village, 3 miles, 9 miles, 5 ½ miles ahead – and the people who live there, whom he as yet doesn't know – from his own distant, remote, perspective.