

PAUL BROWNSEY

## THE POSSIBILITY OF ALTRUISM

“THAT IS SO SELFISH, ONORA.”

At last Edward has managed to say such a thing to his sister.

They have been thrown together a certain amount by the worsening news from Southport, where Auntie May is not expected to survive pneumonia. Following the latest call, he has gone downstairs to Onora’s flat and reported that the doctors have injected powerful drugs into Auntie May’s stomach, but have talked with her daughter about what to expect when—not if—the drugs don’t work.

“It is just as well.” Onora’s first response had sounded less heartless than if she’d said only *Just as well*.

“We have to face it,” she’d pronounced, which was less brutal, more tasteful than *Face it* alone. “With someone of ninety-three with her problems, recovering now would only prolong her suffering. And with winter on its way, the next little thing will carry her off anyway.” Elegant in a black linen skirt and a very pale mauve silk blouse, these declaring her indifference to workaday surroundings and, indeed, to all surroundings, she’d been leaning back against her kitchen table, arms folded, and had widened her eyes in a reminder that, though she was younger than Edward, her brilliance, energy and success entitled him to her assent.

“Just now,” she’d continued, “I have a window. But a funeral next month clashing with the Moscow and Shanghai trips would create difficulties.” Edward would not understand the difficulties even if she explained them. She’s CEO and chairman of an investment company that made a fortune after she steered it towards energy, but, as he tells people with a sneer that does not preclude admiration and even pride, it neither manufactures energy nor sells it nor even speculates in it but speculates in other people’s losses or profits on their speculations in other people’s speculations in it. “And in December, I’m going skiing at Aspen, assuming Dexter can get away from his wife. And travel from Glasgow down to Southport could be a nightmare if there’s another freeze-up.”

“That is so selfish, Onora.”

Having at last managed to say it, he goes on, “She brought us up, for God’s sake.” He allows his eyes to fill with tears as he pictures the already-corpse-like form wired up with monitors and tubes. (Would there be a death rattle or did that not happen in modern medically-supervised death?) It was all that was left of the tired, warm-aproned woman who, after their parents died in a plane crash, moved into the family home to care for them. *I’ll never be your first mother but I’ll try to be your second*—this assurance, unnoticed at the time in a world stripped of a presence too profound to be called love, was remembered later to have enfolded all the safety and sustenance of a separate love.

“And very grateful I am,” Onora says, putting it on record, not expressing an emotion. “That doesn’t alter facts. I suppose you’ll be going to Adam’s again for Christmas.” This last is in brackets, merely establishing something for the files rather than manifesting concern for Edward, who feels he has lived his whole life as a widower, his marriage an irrelevant interlude. He has no idea whether Onora envies him Adam.

“Selfish.” He derives comfort from repeating.

“Selfish? Isn’t what people do selfish? Aren’t we hard-wired for it? Selfish genes.” Unfortunately, she’s not shrill and defensive, and therefore guilty. It’s merely some intelligent pondering from wee sister more than ready to put right clumsy, unsuccessful elder brother, who has merely the upper flat in the former family home, divided by wise Auntie May once they were old enough to live independently and she removed to Southport to be near her daughter. Onora has, as well as the lower flat, a cottage in Perthshire which he has not seen but is reportedly un-cottage-like enough to have an attendant cottage where the housekeeper and gardener live.

He says, “Oh, I’m too much of an old leftie not to see that all that evolution stuff about selfish genes and the struggle for existence isn’t just a bit too convenient as a justification of big business profiting at others’ expense, ruthless competition—”

“Aren’t your People’s Park activities selfish? They bring you into the thick of things for once, committees, public meetings. Give you status, now you’re retired.”

“If some of us don’t exert ourselves for the public good MacKendrick Park will be destroyed by people who care about nothing but making money.” He attempts a look that pins the phrase on her, wishing he dared ask her whether her company is involved in the commercial development planned for the park.

“You look better than you’ve done for years. Face it, you wouldn’t be doing it at all if you didn’t get something out of it. You could go to Southport instead and support Heather through what’s going to happen.”

“Can’t. Committee meeting tomorrow night, no, the night after. They want to stop Nightwatch.”

“Why?” Her voice shows no concern: it’s just that knowing the *why* of everything is part of her strategy for success.

“Because too few people are unselfish enough to spend a night under canvas to save the park.”

“If you succeed in what you call saving it, the council will have less money to spend on schools and roads and child protection. Also, a lot of jobs will not materialise.”

“Oh, jobs.” He’s scornful.

Her small mouth gives a downcurved smile that you could believe revealed sharp teeth, though her lips are pressed shut.

Addressing an invisible third party, he says, “It’s always jobs they go on about when they’ve completely lost sight of other values. Man does not live by bread alone.”

“It’s quite a nice park that people like you like to walk in sometimes.” Those, she implies, are the sum total of the *other values*.

By shaking his head from side to side and silently exiting, Edward signals wordless despair at selfishness so all-pervasive that you can no longer spell out what’s important to the people who are the biggest threat to it.

He finds Onora’s words have fouled his grief for Auntie May, for, trudging upstairs to his flat, he’s wondering whether, as an unmarried mother when that wasn’t a lifestyle option, Auntie May saw the burden of her sister’s children as a price worth paying in order to get herself and Heather a nice home in a posh suburb of Glasgow.

Suddenly trees swaying in night wind, rustling in darkness, call to him, promising to restore purity to his grief and assuage it. He’s only in his shirt sleeves and cardigan, but comfort wouldn’t be right tonight.

As he passes the obelisk commemorating a nineteenth-century Clydeside shipowner’s *munificent gift to the public*, Edward says out loud, “A gift, a gift,” spreading over the dark acres a soothing balm in a nasty world. The possibility of altruism seems confirmed by the fact that MacKendrick’s will was in his own handwriting and employed his own eccentric linguistic mix; confirmed, too, by the fact that his homespun phrases are now being made to generate legal ambiguities that may halt the council’s plans. MacK-

endrick left the park to “the good folk of Cartside all together” and wished “each to be as free to enjoy the blessings of nature therein as one possessing the full pride of ownership”—could these words be teased to mean that the park couldn’t be sold or leased to developers except by unanimous vote of everyone in Cartside?

Much of the park is woodland. There ought to be huge mysterious breathing banks of sylvan darkness gilded (or silvered?) by moonlight, but somehow it’s not like that. The paths aren’t where they should be, branches scrape his face, he stumbles amidst undergrowth, MacKendrick Park lurches out of control. Editing out the fact that council gardeners trim branches, root up rhododendrons and reinforce paths, he concentrates on the idea of wildness. He halts in an open, grassy area to invite the wind in the high branches and the earthy powers of growth and renewal to send him an infusion of rapture, which must bring deep natural healing to minds corrupted by modern life.

Habit prompts a precautionary look-around for ridiculing witnesses, then he lies down in the grass to egg on the secret rapture.

No rapture. Nevertheless, as he struggles back to his feet, he tells himself indignantly, “That they should want to sweep away *this* for *white-knuckle rides* and *tree-top exploring* and a *skateboard forest* and *ecoburgers* and a *natural health spa* and *the world’s biggest grassed-over underground cinema* and *adventure retailing ...*” He’s uttering phrases from the development plan in his mind and occasionally out loud, as in a ritual to call up the life-force against the privatisers.

“And all,” he concludes aloud, “so someone can make money!”

A good captain never loses the chance to keep his troops up to the mark. He’ll pay a visit of inspection to the Nightwatch tent. He’s uncertain whether anyone is scheduled to sleep out tonight, but, squelching in darkness through mud, tripping over what he will later identify as an animal, peers through foliage for the glow of a lamp under canvas. Still, his attempts to locate the tent can’t fail to be assisted by the proud connection of cause and effect between his own mind and the very existence of Nightwatch, it having been Edward’s proposal, unanimously endorsed by the People’s Park Campaign, that people should sleep out every night in MacKendrick Park, both to generate publicity, especially if celebrities could be got to do it, and as an early-warning system in case the developers attempted a dawn raid to chop down trees and set the excavators churning away.

Yes, a light glows. The Nightwatch tent is pitched near the border of a specially-planted natural wildflower meadow where, he noticed a few days before, devil's-bit scabious lingers into autumn. "Just seeing how you're doing," he calls, not announcing his name; they'll recognise their leader. Two torch-beams dazzle him and, as he turns away, illuminate a First World War cemetery beneath the trees: receding ranks of white tubes protecting seedlings.

He says, "Why do you do this? Camping out, cold and uncomfortable."

"I've found a new reason the scheme has to unravel. In MacKendrick's time a much bigger area than now was called Cartside. Only the smaller part of it was in our council's area, so the park shouldn't be under our council's control at all." That's Stewart Mutrie, so the other is presumably Something Khan, with whom Mutrie lives, sharing Mutrie's mother's bungalow with her. Mutrie fancies himself as a lawyer because he did law at Glasgow Uni but for some mysterious reason never qualified. He calls himself a project manager for charities, but Edward has met him working as a care assistant in a care home.

"We'll get our legal team onto that," says Edward.

Like a dutiful pupil taking his turn to answer teacher rather than the teacher of biology he in fact is, Khan, spectacles gleaming, says without a trace of foreign accent, "Native red squirrels could be reintroduced here, because there's no population of greys nearby to replenish it once they're removed. These new plantings"—he waves the torchbeam among them, while Edward notes his concern for native species—"include a lot of spruce, pine and birch. They give greys less of a competitive advantage over reds in surviving and breeding."

Edward speaks reprovingly: "Competition's not what we want in this park!"

Neither of their replies has answered Edward's question, but to press it further feels indelicate.

"I tripped over a fox," he says encouragingly. "Sleep tight." He wonders if they or any other Nightwatch people have sex there in the disappointing wood, and this reminds him that because of the lack of toilet facilities the council is threatening action against Nightwatch.

It's only as he approaches the house that the thought of Auntie May returns, in the form of an image of Onora, who would never run, running out of her flat with the news that she's died. So while MacKendrick Park didn't afford him any discernible rapture, it did for while obliterate his anxiety.

“That’s how nature works, not with mystical experiences, but silently, silently, the wondrous gift is given,” he thinks.

Though Onora does not run out of her flat to him tonight, she does so two nights later as he shuts the main door behind him. There seem to be tears, too. He has time to note that Auntie May’s death causes him no access of feeling of any sort.

“Edward, she’s *recovering!*”

He manages to back away into a small table, from which a vase crashes to the floor tiled in black and white. “Steady. You made me do that.”

She says, “Heather’s just off the phone. The drugs they injected worked. She’s talking. She even said she fancied toasted cheese! They’ve had her on her feet. She’ll be home in a few days. What are those?” She points at a handful of small round blooms on long stalks amid the shards and puddles: her never-ending fact-finding mission.

“Devil’s-bit scabious from the wildflower meadow. A reminder of what we are fighting for.” His *we* firmly places her outside the ranks of the nobly unselfish. “That was one of Auntie May’s vases.”

“They’re so starved-looking, decrepit. *Scabby’s* the word. And they’re *a reminder of what we’re fighting for?*” She gives an unbelieving laugh, then seems puzzled, almost distressed. “At Heather’s news I felt pure joy.”

Edward, stooping to pick up pieces of the smashed vase, can quote, too. He taunts, “But *the next little thing will carry her off ...*”

“I knew that but *I didn’t care*. Of course, you’re right, it just puts off the evil day. It’ll be *very* awkward if she dies in the next two months. *When* she dies in the next two months. How was your committee meeting?” Just keeping tabs, without concern, and without any sign, either, that it’s a subject-change to allow her to collect herself. She’s already collected.

“We’re going to have to wind up Nightwatch. The council is getting all elfinsafety about toilets. Plus too few people volunteering. Selfishness again.” Too late, he remembers he might be betraying useful information to someone with links to the developers.

Onora is pacing the hall, gathering the decisive argument against something her board is oh-so-foolishly tempted by. She’s wearing the same blouse as two nights ago, clatty cow.

“It’s astonishing that I felt so pleased, so *overwhelmingly* pleased, at Heather’s news, because there’s absolutely no reason to be pleased, either for her or for myself. Everything I said still applies. So I was mistaken. We can’t be selfish, not entirely, if I can be so pleased about something that will

make difficulties for me for no advantage at all.”

Edward, holding shards and flowers like holy objects, notes that she does not regard him with sufficient respect to say this by way of refuting *his* charge that she’s selfish. She’s disputing wholly with herself. Self, self, self.

He says, “Well, now ... Feeling pleased at the survival of relations sort of binds you to people, makes other people like you, support you. That has to increase your chances of survival, doesn’t it?” Not that he can picture Onora needing support.

He pauses before placing the follow-up for full appreciation by this childless career-woman. “Survival, plus your chances of reproducing.”

He adds, “I mean, that’s what everything’s about, really, isn’t it?”

“Survival and reproducing?” She’s laughing again. “So that’s why you and your chums are agitating about MacKendrick Park. You’re surviving and reproducing!” This causes Edward’s thoughts to return to people having sex in the Nightwatch tent, or perhaps lying in the grass outside it, though there wouldn’t be much reproducing by Mutrie and Khan.

“I can’t afford to be ambushed by feelings like this,” she’s saying, as though Edward were urging surrender to them. “I really can’t. They could cripple me. A total distraction. I need to be on top form for Shanghai and Moscow. And Aspen, too. There’s only one thing to do.”

“Selfish.” Edward nods, comfortable now in the judgement he first uttered to her two nights ago and attempting the stare she employs to impress on him her superiority in all things. He manages to see no reason to revise this judgement even after she spends several days visiting at Southport, during which, should Auntie May be up to the journey, she offers the cottage in Perthshire for convalescence, including the services of the housekeeper and gardener.

“Well, of course you feel better in yourself when you do what’s right,” he tells her, somehow feeling he’s scored one off the school chaplain, who used to say this. “But it won’t help her recovery when she knows what you ... they want to do to MacKendrick Park. She loved MacKendrick Park. She played cowboys with me there.”

Nor does he revise his judgement when, before departing for Shanghai, Moscow and Aspen, she engages in what is obviously more propitiation of that strange, disconcerting joy and other rogue emotions that may lie inconveniently in wait for her. She spends two nights under canvas in Mac-Kendrick Park. She knocks on Cartside doors until she’s tripled the number of sleep-out volunteers and saved Nightwatch. As a final piece of insurance, she persuades

four people with houses adjoining the park to allow Nightwatch personnel to use their lavatories, thus scotching the threat arising from the council's rumoured concern about human faeces littering the park. His persistence in judging her selfish seems justified by the fact that those householders opening their lavatories to the sleepers-out have an interest in preventing the noise and crowds and parking problems and feral youths that will plague them if the commercial development of the park goes ahead.