

also by Will Eaves

FICTION

*The Oversight*

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POETRY

*Sound Houses*

WILL EAVES

# The Absent Therapist

**B**editions

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There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world,  
and none of them is without signification.

– 1 Corinthians 14:10

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## I The Absent Therapist

I had a last look round for the key and then took it to Fortress, who were closed, of course. After that I decided to have a go with my penknife and jemmied it open in about ten seconds. And, as I suspected, it contained my birth certificate but not the photos I'd been kidding myself I hadn't lost. On the other hand, I did find my Whippet Club Centenary badge (1899–1999) and the programme from Hemel Hempstead, where Whisper won the Burger Bar stakes at 8.47 p.m. Whisper's full name was Whispering Softly and, oh, she was a headstrong animal, never came when you called, which I didn't all that much. You couldn't go round shouting WHISPER! WHISPER!, could you? The comments said, 'EP Ran on Well', EP for 'Early Pace'. She was up against Marlow Dusty, Jimmy the Hoover, Little Minnie, Louisiana Venture, and Rye. She'd had just that one race before, a four-dog trial with the early pace, and Dad was so pleased when she won. Whisper was more his dog than mine. I only bred a single litter, but I got Bacardi Breeze out of it and she was a runner-up in the East Anglia Whippet Coursing Club Trials in 2002. That earned her a rosette and a two-line write-up in *Dog World*, which also went in the box. Bacardi Breeze wasn't her real name and I've been worrying over and over about what it was. Dad would remember, that's for sure.

It might have been Misty. Maybe it was. Misty bolted from the house one morning and came back an hour later with a bow-tie round her neck. Where she got it from we never knew. She kept that tie on for months.

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He wrote back without giving his number. He said he had to be discreet as he was well known in the Perth area, but if I could place an ad in the *Mail* for a green lounge suite with my number attached he would ring it, the idea being that no one in their right minds would want a green lounge suite so the only person answering would be him. It did seem a little complicated, even to my innocent mind, but then I thought, perhaps he's famous? Perhaps it's Jason Donovan! And I began to get excited. So I placed the ad and of course it turned out that several boho couples who were refurbishing apartments on Crown Promenade felt that a green lounge suite would be just the ticket, and I had to disappoint them all. 'I'm sorry. It's just gone.' Some of them were suspicious. How come I'd sold it so quickly? How many other people in Perth wanted a green lounge suite? Then Peter rang and said 'You've been on the phone a while' and I said, 'What is it you do, anyway?' He said, 'I'll tell you when we meet', and we arranged, finally, to meet at the station café. He would be wearing a suit and tie and reading the *Mail*. How would he recognise me? I, too, would be in a suit. 'What colour?' he asked, and I said 'green', thinking he'd appreciate the joke, and he put the phone down.

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Owen has the kind of lack of self-awareness that makes you think it must be a dare, him seeing what he can get away with before someone says, 'Are you, or have you recently gone, totally mad?' I like him, but he needs his whole mental world completely realigned. He was telling the office the other day – well, speaking on the phone, but shouting, shouting, *shouting* with the door open so we could all hear – how French people mistake him for a native because of his amazing accent. Trying to make it sound as if he was being modest, you know. 'Oh, I'm not all that fluent. I mean, I get *by* in conversation perfectly well. But the accent fools people because it's really very authentic-sounding, so I'm told. People think I must be French, you see.' And I thought, really? Who are these people, Owen? The relatives of Helen Keller?

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I did know the Prince quite well, yes. Well, no, not *that* well. He went out with my friend Rebecca for a while and I think she found it a struggle. She used to come to my room with a bag over her head to avoid the paparazzi. But I was in plays and he was interested in the theatre, and our paths crossed. I remember bumping into him in Sainsbury's, during the Easter vacation. I was up trying to write a dissertation on Webster, and suddenly there we were, he and I, and his bodyguard – Jim – looking grim in front of the digestives. I said to Prince Edward, 'What are you still doing here?', and he said he'd stayed on to write his dissertation as well. 'I can't really do it at home, you know,' he said. 'You know how it is.' And

I didn't know what to say to that. I mean, I thought of my house, in Harlow, with the small sitting room and my parents and grandmother and my three brothers and my sister, and the box room I still slept in, and the telly on, and no books, and I couldn't say anything. I thought, what? Can't you decide which home to write in? I had an audition two years later, for *Aspects of Love*, when he was 'setting up' his company, and Heaven knows what kind of struggle that must have been, and I said 'hi' from the stage, and he blanked me. *You know how it is.*

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Catherine was involved in a car accident last week. Hyde Park Corner, five lanes of traffic. She wasn't in the accident itself. She was a few cars back, but she got out and ran to help, and sat there in the road, holding this lady with massive head injuries, calling for an ambulance. The woman bled to death in her arms. The ambulance and the police arrived and a man said to her, 'Is there someone at home, love?' Nobody offered her a lift or ordered a taxi. And she said she'd be fine – avoiding the question, she said – and she went back to her flat. Her mac and her clothes, her shoes and her hands completely covered with the woman's blood. She was in shock when she rang me and thank God I wasn't at the ruddy PTA. Thank God I was at home when Cathy rang.

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Mystery shoppers call around four. They're supposed to be undetectable. You're supposed to think they're legitimate enquiries, but they're always obviously fake, which shows how much management know about what we do, what it's like to field calls all day, if they think their efforts are remotely plausible. That said, most of the real people who *do* ring us are certifiable, and not as dentists, so perhaps it makes no odds. I hadn't had a mystery shopper for some weeks and then the woman with asthma who's just been promoted rings me and says, 'Good morning, I'd like to be a specialist.' And I say, 'But you work in HR.' To which she replies: 'Can you tell me how I'd go about becoming a specialist?' So I ask her whether or not she has any relevant specialist qualifications and she says no. She's beginning to pant. 'Can I still, *hup*, be a specialist?' In my monthly review my manager said that 'clearly not' was a good and helpful answer. The only thing I might have considered adding was, 'Is there anything else I can help you with today?'

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And Lionel was brought up by a tyrannous Uncle, who ended up in a locked ward, so in many ways thank goodness for the Second World War which saved Lionel from his, shall we say, less than promising domestic circumstances. Then after the war he became a GP and taught himself to plumb in his spare time. He fitted the appliances here. Did you smell any gas in the night? I got a whiff when I was passing through to the toilet. It's a kerosene gas fridge and it's burning yellow now. I've been

trying to clean the ceramic lighter, which is – can you see? – a very delicate little mechanism, very delicate indeed. It might be chipped, I think. But it's part of the experience. This is a *hut*, after all, not a holiday home. The tap-dancing mice are an integral part of it, too. They belong here. If you can just help me push the fridge back, use your hip, *that's* it, there we go. So there's no gap between it and the wall. Then nothing can fall down. Rodents, small children. The floor? What about it? Ah no, there we must agree to differ. The state of the floor is not in fact as alarming as it might seem. What appear to be myriad droppings could well be insect cocoons, larval casings or desiccated moths, so let's not be *too* liberal *too* quickly with the *Talon*. A little poison goes a long way, as my widowed aunt used to say. It's certainly not as bad as Lionel's brother's experience in Winscale, whither he was dispatched in the 1970s to serve as a research radiologist. He had to scrub his children daily when he came home from work and they installed a Geiger counter along with the colour television and fridge-freezer, the latter quite a luxury for Cumbria in 1974.

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I don't see the point of boxer shorts. No support. And the gap for your sticky wicket, why bother? Too fiddly. You end up groping about for the opening while your fellow man casts suspicious sideways glances. And as my beloved put it, why poke your head out of the window when you can jump over the wall?

They didn't like him because he was self-sufficient, which is not to say he was rich because he wasn't. He was just the wrong sort of homosexual. That is to say, close, and mysteriously confident about men and sex, not extrovert, needy, and therefore harmless. I heard the usual stuff, 'it's a selfish life, it's not nice for the children, I have to explain about the strangers going in and out', etc. Did they envy him his solitude and freedom? Do Catholics shit in the woods? He told me a wonderful story once about some man who came round for sex and said, 'Give me a blow job, then.' And Terry said, 'That's not very romantic,' and the man sighed and said, 'All right. Give me a blow job *in the rain*.'

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On a less high-minded note, could I put out a call for any unwanted balls of double knitting wool Friends may have? I use them to knit hats for the Sailors' Association which distributes them at Christmas time in their hampers. To all the branches of the Merchant Navy. It doesn't matter if you have odd colours, or not much of one colour and plenty of another: I can do stripes. I used to do jumpers with quite complex patterns but I'm not up to that anymore, so it's hats mostly, because they're really quite simple, and very warm of course. One young man wrote to me to say he'd worn *four* of my hats, one on top of the other, in a storm off Jutland when it was goodness knows how many, some horrific number, of degrees below zero. He'd got some shampoo in the same hamper, which he said was less useful, for reasons the enclosed photograph made clear.