

The Medical School by Joshua Allan

Gissing, George, First Year, leaping into Second, encountering and conquering myriads of essays like little bumps in the road to graduation, was finally exhausted. The fullness of his accomplishments had brought about a peculiar feeling of defeat, and he could not tell if he were staring ahead at the blank space of summer or the off-white walls of his room. His wrist ached from writing. His legs had locked together on the bed, half-knotted with inactivity. He would have felt diseased had he felt anything.

There was simply nothing to do until Thomson arrived, and – George's eyes climbed the desk, fumbled about for the clock – Thomson was late.

Perhaps he had forgotten. Perhaps he had died in a fight, or was wounded beyond the possibility of movement and lay, a counter-image of George, in a brown gutter in Princess Street.

Perhaps he had finally stopped caring, as the other friends had done.

His eyes, strained, shrank back into their fleshy shells of semi-dark half-sleep.

A second passed and a shrill word reverberated, from outside, and through the off-white walls and the desk and the bed and his body. It was the landlady's voice. Sounds came from elsewhere, stirred into action: a spitting sound joining the increasingly dotted window; a slow staccato appending the clock's neptunian orbits; an old, male voice growling back at the woman, muffled behind wood. Somewhere in the crescendo was the creak of stairs, and then, louder, the knock of Thomson's fleshy knuckles on the door.

George forced himself to sit up. 'Cough mint.' His throat, slumber-numb, caught around the words. He said them again: 'Come in.'

The top half of Thomson's head hooked around the door, his spectacled eyes peeking sheepishly.

'Oh, do come in,' said George. He yawned. 'And shut that door.'

Thomson did as he was ordered. He produced a page of paper, wet and rustled, from his coat pocket. His feet stuttered noisily on the floor, and together with the patter of the rain and the ticks of the clock made the percussion of a chorus of bees. George felt the need to say 'at ease', but knew that Thomson never would be.

'Have a seat,' he said instead.

Thomson placed himself on the chair by the desk. He looked around the room, as if he had never been here, or as if it had ever changed.

'Is that it?' asked George.

'Oh. Yes.' Thomson held out the battered sheet. George would have snatched it with a

gesture of impatience had it been in any better condition, but the thing looked ready to fall apart. The ink reformed to liquid as he read it, dribbling down the page, but he could decipher the gist, summarised by those capitalised words which evade the caprices of water damage:

'END OF YEAR PRIZE FOR OWEN'S COLLEGE'

'CELEBRATE...RECENTLY OPENED MEDICAL
SCHOOL...COMPLEMENTARY PENDANT TO THE MOST SPLENDID FEAT
OF ARCHITECTU..'

There was also a deadline at the bottom where the drunk ink had merged and blotted out the date.

'Tell me, Thomson. Did you notice the deadline before you murdered this document?' said George, rolling up the paper.

Thomson flushed, but nodded. 'The tenth.'

'Of?'

'June. Oh.' They realised it together. Today was the ninth.

'Thomson,' said George, and while he spoke he pushed himself off the bed and pulled on an unwashed outfit, 'why is the deadline so soon? And why, of all times now, are you late?'

'There's commotion in the city,' was Thomson's answer. He too was making ready. He buttoned up his coat, though it had been open when he arrived.

'Commotion.'

'Yes, George.' For a man of mathematics – the kind who would one day secure a Nobel Prize, George often mused – Thomson had a taste for the abstract.

'What sort of commotion?'

'Well, it's the general election. I thought you knew, George.'

'Hmm.' No one had told George; he hadn't read it anywhere. But he hadn't left the room in – he counted: days, a week, weeks. Things were happening outside the Grove, surprisingly. And that was why he rarely left.

But today he had no choice. He unhooked his dust-coated jacket from the door and swept the desk in search of pen and paper, knocking aside inkwells, miniatures, Volume Three of Gibbons' Decline and Fall – all prizes from other competitions – and when he found the pen the ink had run dry. He decided it wouldn't matter.

'Do you know where this new building is, Thomson?'

'I reckon I can find it. I've been there once before, you know, when I had those broken fingers. The doctors there snapped them right back into place.'

'I'm not interested in who works or who lives there, Thomson. I merely want to see this building. See if it's worth writing about.' He glanced back at the clock. 'We're wasting time here.'

Any other day he would have waited for Thomson to leave before going himself. The mathematics student was a kind friend but with that came the inevitable drawback that he talked too much. But already time was running out, and it would do no good viewing the building at night, when the whole university would be black and cold and George would be a mere blink away from sleep. They left together, squeezing single file down the stairs.

The rain at George's window had seemed so slight, so distant and unthreatening beyond a blockade of glass, that he hadn't noticed it until moments before Thomson arrived. But outside, Manchester poured. They plunged into the streets and the rainwater was swelling to the height of their laces. They held their umbrellas like helmets, but insectoid swarms of rain, diverging from the direction of the gust, flanked from all angles, and a chaotic wind warped the canopies.

'We really need much better umbrellas,' shouted Thomson over the gale as they made their way down the empty street.

'Not for a while. I'm saving up.'

'For what?'

'A place to live.'

'The Grove not suiting you?'

'Not at all. The racket, the people generally. And you've seen how small and how stuffy my room is.'

Thomson pondered it for a moment, letting the rain soak his spectacles. 'So that's why you need this prize.'

'Well, I also have a reputation to...'

His last word was lost as they rounded the corner onto Oxford Street and into the black-coated, parasol-wielding river of noise. Any attempt to speak was made futile by the combined blast of every other conversation, and of the mechanical braying of unseen vehicles. The smell of dung merged sharply with the rain, and the road itself was invisible beneath everybody's black clogs, plodding forwards, up towards the city centre like the separate limbs of a multi-brachial monster. On the other side, behind the crowd, hovered the single spire of Owen's College.

George and Thomson walked inversely to the marching mass, using the spire as a waypoint. They moved at the edge of the pavement where again they could talk and

hear; but instead, transfixed by the spectacle, they simply looked on. George had never seen this many people in one place in his life. His anthropobic heart throbbed anxiously, quickening with the pace of his walking, slowing at the relief that if this crowd looked like a beast then at least it didn't resemble the human people who irritated him so extremely. At intervals a white hand could be seen amidst the black body, holding on a long pole a signpost; but the words were an inky mess. Whatever this beast was protesting, it hadn't accounted for rain.

They were still not at the rear of the crowd when they turned down Coupland Street. Here it was quieter. A group of girls were playing hopscotch under the shelter of a veranda. At the end of the street a prominent, freshly-built structure seemed to be giving a silent speech to a line of rapt admirers by the wall of the opposite building, all taking notes.

'Well,' said Thomson. 'There it is.'

'Hmm.'

'Will I be seeing you later, George? The boys are playing cards this evening. To celebrate the end of the year.'

'I would love to, Thomson,' lied George. 'But I shan't make any promises. This could take quite a while.' George had been staring at the building all the while. He now turned, and shook Thomson's hand, and as he looked back to the building, and higher, to the spot in the vast black sky where the sun was melting through, he heard Thomson's farewell footsteps. Yes, it was much quieter here, thought George.

As George approached, he was able to count the writers, twelve in all, and all were gazing ahead aimlessly, out of paper orideas.

He had never been here. The place was for medical students, or qualified doctors. He had heard Thomson's and others' accounts but they didn't amount to much, being in too much pain to take anything in. The doctors were all friendly men, apparently, fresh from distant medicine faculties. Yet George had a scepticism of doctors, and of scientists of any sort. The men outside the building were of an altogether different calibre. He could tell from their clothes, and from the styles in which they sat (cross-legged, side-tilted), and from the fact that they were there at all, writing about a house when ships needed building or illnesses curing, that these were humanitarian men. One of them lifted a head as he approached, and George recognised his perennial enemy, Burton.

'Mr Gissing.' Burton rose, lazily, as if from sleep. He walked over to George, wielding his book and pen closely like a shield and sword, as if addressing a brigand.

George said nothing. The other writers seemed to be waking from their collective reverie, blinking at the newcomer.

'I thought perhaps you'd had enough of winning prizes,' said Burton. 'Besides. This isn't a poem, or one of those blighted short stories for people with nothing better to read. This is academic.' He beamed, as if he was already holding the trophy.

Burton was an architect. His father had had a hand in the planning of the Medical School, and Burton likely knew its ins and outs, the brick, the mortar, the entire blueprint. The loose pages in his book revealed a mess of notes, with more black than white.

'I'm on page twenty-two,' he continued, 'but really I'm only just getting started. There really is so much to write about: the design, the history of the firm, the benefactors. I'm scared I might run out of paper.' He shuffled the loose notes, put them back in order. 'What's that, Gissing? You didn't bring any paper at all?'

George had hardly been paying attention. All the while Burton was speaking, George had been wondering what to write, peering at the brickwork, and through a window where a red apple basked. A doctor emerged from the obscure beyond and grumpily closed the curtain. It was a shame he had to see it on such a gloomy day. In summer the building would gleam. Perhaps he could write about that.

When George turned back, Burton had returned to his seat and seemed to have already forgotten him. The spell of lethargy seemed to have passed, and all the writers were writing again. There was no chair for George, and all the nearby benches they had been sacked from were seatless. None of the writers looked ready to go soon.

What could keep them here for so long? Studies were over, true – they had nothing to do. But the art of describing a building, fruitless, effectless as it is, could not possibly take a full day. A full day! What was keeping them? What could anyone, for instance, say about bricks? In this case they were yellow or they were cream, and that was that. The gothic spire, slipping skywards through an architectural rainbow – church-like at the top, sloping to a red-brick funnel and further down into grey – was all that could be said, and the design itself said nothing about the building, its denizens, its past or its prospects. The rest was a uniformity of brick – and that was good – but what was to be said?

He felt a chill run through his muscles, and bunched his arms. Perhaps the building would do the talking. Metaphorically, of course. He watched it, like this, for a while, and in a way it seemed to glare back at him, and hold him in a frame of contempt while he looked on with confusion. Then, as if sparked to life, one of its lower oblong eyes twitched open as a curtain was pulled and a young doctor stared out. He was not looking at George. Rather he tilted his head up, telescopically, sky-gazing and frowning. George looked too. The sky was getting blacker. A real storm. Or a plague of industrial fume. Either way those clouds must have held an ocean in their thick grip.

The doctor closed the window, disappeared, reemerged from the front door. He lit a cigarette, and gazed on coolly at the row of writers. Within a minute he had flicked his cigarette into the grass and reentered. He had not noticed George.

Again, George felt with conviction that there was nothing to write about this building. He looked on, until he could not; and redirected his gaze to the writers. Burton was still moving his pen furiously. He recognised some of the others. They were from various disciplines. Sunter, an historian, wrote sporadically and every now and then

lifted his eyes with listless reminiscence. Foster, the slimy, hairless archaeologist was there, flicking his spectacles on and off his forehead with every peek he took at the building. And there at the edge was Grahams, the artist. He was not writing, but painting, and very badly. In his lap-held paper universe the sky was much too colourful.

It was strange for the university to provide such flexible rules. Anything diverging even slightly from an essay, or a story when called for, was instantly and utterly dismissed. But maybe Burton had been right. George had been 'winning' too much. There was no shame in stepping down, and letting a work of art, no matter how dreadful, take the podium.

Still, and while he was here, there must be a story in the bricks. He went up to it and touched the rain-wet eczema of the walls. He could still smell fresh yellow paint. But there was nothing in this. He put his ear against the cold wet brickwork. Voices seemed to come through it, as though the bricks were light as paper. But really the doctors had just begun talking, and their words moved out of the half-closed window.

'...scalpel...'

'...blood...'

'...newspapers and...'

'Move, Gissing.' Burton was staring straight at him, trying to stare through him to the brickwork. George stepped back, and saw the object he had been obstructing. A narrow plaque embedded in cement, camouflaged in a cream colour as though the paint had drooled on top of it. But it was empty. There were no words on it.

George walked back, with easy slowness, to the cover of a nearby forecourt. Somehow, the black sky was blackening further. The other writers were looking up too. Grahams, the artist, was making to leave, though his painting was unfinished or simply terrible. Even in his case, a rain like this would cause destruction.

The others watched him as he left, for something to do. He stumbled at the top of Coupland Street. The hopskotching girls had gone.

Very little time passed, in which nothing happened, before the others began to follow him, one at a time. Sunter, who bowed as he walked even when there was no threat of rain, was grinning, and had perhaps finished. The others did not look so cheerful.

Eventually, and it was very black now, only George and Burton remained. George took one of the empty seats beside him.

'Have you done anything today, George?' Burton did not look up from his scrawling.

George did not answer. He knew that Burton was still bitter from the time they had competed for the poetry prize, when Burton had written something halfway towards an epic and George had submitted a triplet, edited the night before into a couplet. He

had left with an annotated Dickens while Burton left with a red face.

The archaeologist looked up. He seemed to accept that George was not going to talk. 'I've nearly come to the end,' he said. 'And it's a very good essay, if I do say so myself. I'd let you read it, get some inspiration. But of course you'd just copy.'

'I knew I shouldn't have left the room today,' muttered George.

'What was that, Gissing?'

'Nothing. But that you're the reason I keep indoors.'

'Is that so?' In the corner of George's eye Burton raised his pen.

'But it's not just you. It's the loudness and the filth of the city, and I hope they do something about it.'

Burton had closed his book too.

'What's more – or what's less, I should say – there's so little to do in this city. One needs a market, a stadium, a real high street. And what does the university need?

More of this,' and he waved a hand at the building. 'More buildings and more things to do. More doctors, and more writers to write about the doctors, and the structures they work in, devised by the architects. And the engineers who build them, and the economists who find a way to keep it all going – with the help of their mathematician friends. That's what I think.'

He looked to his side. Burton had gone, had finished. He was halfway up Coupland Street. George was finally alone.

But in a moment his solitude was shattered. The door of the Medical School reopened, regurgitating a group of doctors. They were silent. Among them was the one who had smoked and stared, and the one who had drawn the curtain before him. They were tired with work, and their white clinical gowns were red with blood. Their feet made no noise along the ground apart from a slight pitter-patter, which, as the rain began to show itself in white streaks, became subsumed in the larger sound. The sun had not yet sunk, but beyond the clouds the stars were dissolving slowly over the edge of the roof, which he could barely see. Everything was a single colour: dark.

A drink would be waiting for George at home. He gathered his thoughts, standing up. He would write the article, deliver it in the morning, and return.