

Harald was in the room where Duncan slept. And the girl. There was a pot of face - cream among the cigarette packs on the left bedside table. He turned away respectfully from the appearance of the room, took shirts and underpants and socks from a wall - cupboard while ignoring anything else, none of his business, stacked there.

Don't bring anything I was reading. The books weighing a rickety bamboo table to the right of the bed; but he went over, he picked them up, read the titles familiar or unfamiliar to him, with an awareness of being watched by the empty room itself. The table had a lower shelf from which architectural journals and newspapers were sprawled to the floor. To him they had the look of having been dropped there, that day, when the occupant of the bed lay listening to battering on his door. He knelt on one knee and straightened them into place but the shelf sagged and they spilled again, and mixed up with them was a notebook of the cheap kind schoolchildren use. He balanced it on top of the pile → what for? So that Duncan

would be able to put his hand on it when he came back to sleep in that bed? As if the delusion existed that he was about to do so.

He took up the notebook and opened it. He felt settle on the nape of his neck the meanness of what he was doing as he turned the pages, the betrayal of what the father had taught the son, you respect people's privacy, you don't read other people's letters, you don't read any personal matter that isn't meant for your eyes. It was all ordinary, harmless → date when the car was last serviced, calculations of money amounts for some purpose or other, an address scored across, note of the back number of some architectural digest, not a diary but a jotter for preoccupations come to mind at odd hours. Then scrawled on the last page to have been used there was a passage copied from somewhere → Harald's love of reading had been passed on when the boy was still a child. Harald recognized with the first few words, Dostoevsky, yes, Rogozhin speaking of Nastasya Filippovna. 'She would have drowned herself long ago if she had not had me; that's the truth. She doesn't do that because, perhaps, I am more dreadful than the water.'

Nadine Gordimer, *The House Gun*, Bloomsbury, 1998 (410 mots)

When I had walked into the sea with my father I had felt quite safe, but, undressing at Robin's health club, I could hear the peculiar muted din of water being violently disturbed and I began to shiver. Standing on the edge of the pool I could see a little steam hovering over the chemical chlorinated blue, and below me a pattern of tiles wavering and shifting; my leg, when I inserted it, immediately looked blanched and dead. A man wearing goggles and a nose clip was ploughing furiously up and down, and I was fearful of the commotion he was setting up, of the mess and foam he was creating.

The noise echoed under the glass roof, a mournful and reverberant noise that filled me with horror. I waited until he was out of the way before launching myself and managed to swim a length without much trouble. But he was faster than I was or wanted to be, and I could hear him behind me. Every so often he passed me, rocking me in his wake; once my nostrils filled with the waves made by his arms and I retreated to the side, coughing in a hysteria of fear. 'Go on,' shouted Robin. 'Don't give up.' Two girls, of enviable slimness, watched me curiously, before losing interest and neatly upending themselves in the water. They came up, hair streaming, and turned on their backs and floated. Water to them was familiar, an element in which they could play; their streaming hair made fronds below the surface. They decided to race each other, backstroke, and at one point, caught between their flailing arms and the man in the goggles, I thought I must sink. I couldn't, of course; I was too good a swimmer, but my mind seemed to give way. I felt I must surrender, break down. I wanted no more of it. I waited for a gap and swam to the side; when I got out my legs were shaking.

Even when I was dressing I could hear the dull shouting, magnified under the glass roof, and the fact that these were sounds of enjoyment made no difference to me.

Anita Brookner, *A Friend From England*, 1987 (363 mots)