

We
Spread
Lain
Reid

A NOVEL

New York Times bestselling author of
I'M THINKING OF ENDING THINGS and *FOE*

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WE SPREAD

Iain Reid



Scout Press

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

To Eliza

Part One

He was an artist. A prolific painter of merit and distinction. He impressed with his boldness and ingenuity. He liked to shock and bewilder. He refined this aesthetic of orderly, exaggerated confusion over many years. He gained admirers, patrons, imitators. “Parrots” is what he called the younger artists he felt were trying to replicate his flair. One reviewer wrote about feeling “emotionally mauled” by his work. All the time I knew him, he never wavered from his claim that his only obsession was producing more work and never burning out or fading away.

He received fan mail at our apartment—cards and letters would arrive from all over the country, even from Europe. Sometimes they would simply be addressed to the Artist, which made him roll his eyes in mock humility. He was discussed and interpreted by students. He would give guest lectures where those in attendance would ask him to clarify and expand on his work and to share any advice he could with aspiring artists. He was not famous the way a musician or actor is. But in a particular niche of surrealist devotees, he was revered and celebrated.

But none of them knew him the way I did. I knew him in the most intimate ways one person can know another. I knew him in a way no one else did, not his fans or friends or family. I knew him, I believe, as he knew himself.

Over our many years together I bore witness to the invisible anatomy that formed his identity. They thought he was immune to trends, to fitting in. He was not. He required a commonwealth of reaction and sought acceptance. He was loud in everything he did.

Some realizations about those closest to us arrive in a flash. Other insights take decades to form. My partner’s work conveyed something spiritual, but he was so human after all, mortal, a man who, like so many others, grew less interested, less curious, less attentive

over time. It was both endearing and disappointing. He was, I came to see, more than anything, a conformist.

We weren't miserable together. We fought like any couple, especially when we were young. But in later years we would quarrel over nonsense like what temperature to set the thermostat. Some evenings during our first years together, we would drink white wine and speak broken French to each other. Even if we didn't completely understand it, we loved the sound of the language.

As we grew older, we spent more time apart, even when we were both home in the apartment. He despised aging and didn't trust his crumbling body. The love I'd felt for him faded and detached. There was nothing to hold it in place. No more mystery. Nothing to learn. Wonder was replaced with awareness. By the end, it wasn't just familiarity. I had a total and complete understanding of him.

He used to say I was moody and too sympathetic for my own good. He said I avoided confrontation and that he'd spent years trying to make me less anxious, less meek and mild, and that I was always in some kind of inner revolt. He worried about trivialities just as much as I did. The difference was, unlike me, he could hide it.

Before he died, when he was very sick, he told me how frightened he was. He was terrified of becoming obsolete and forgotten. He'd never admitted being scared before that. Never. He said when you're so close to death, when it's right there, the depth of fear is enormous. He didn't want to die. He desperately wanted more time. He said he had so much more he wanted to do. He said he was scared for me, too, scared that I would have to go through the end of life alone.

He was right about that. I am near the end now, and I am alone. Very old and very much alone. I have been both for some time, surrounded by the listless stacks and heavy piles of a life already lived: vinyl records, empty flowerpots, clothing, dishes, photo albums, magazines about art, drawings, letters from friends, the library of paperback books lining my shelves. It's no wonder I'm stuck in the past, thinking about him, our days together,

how our relationship started, and how it ended. I feel enveloped by the past. I've lived here in the same apartment for more than fifty years. The man I moved here with, the man I spent more time with over my life than anyone else, would tell me in private moments, right here in the apartment, while lying in our bed, that my being too sensitive would be my demise.

"You were the sensitive one," I say now, to the empty room. "You were the fearful one."

I'm not left with anger or resentment or pity. It's an anticlimax—a mourning for my own naive belief.

I look around my living room.

There are piles of notebooks and sketch pads, drawings and photographs. The first piece of art I ever owned is buried in here somewhere. A gift from my father. It's a tiny framed print of the tree of life that's small enough to fit one hand. I never hung it because I didn't want anyone else to see it.

There are two bookshelves full of paperbacks. I'm losing my attention span; it's hard to read novels now, or books of any kind. I used to read a book or two a week. Literary fiction, historical novels, comedies. I devoured books on science and nature.

There is a box under the coffee table full of small, ceramic sculptures. I made them in my midtwenties. I have all these records, but I don't listen to music anymore.

At one time, it wasn't just stuff. It all meant so much to me. All of it. Marrow that has turned to fat.

My living room chair is the only place I sit. It's where I watch TV. It's where I nap. It's where I eat. I have a bowl of red soup in front of me on my tray, a single lamp lighting the room. I ate the first half of the can for supper last night. I sip the salty broth without pleasure. I don't sleep well at night. My body is tired. My knee aches.

I sit here in my chair from late afternoon until dark, when I realize it must be time for bed. I don't have much of an appetite. I never did, but it has diminished with age. I'm not turned off by food. I understand that it is essential. I mostly sip my soup for its warmth, which is lost by the last few spoonfuls. Consuming greedily, gorging the way some do, was never appealing to me. I couldn't do it. I eat slowly. Hot food always grows cold.

I used to enjoy cooking for myself and for others. I adored watching friends eat the food I'd made them. I'd take pleasure in cleaning the dirty napkins after a meal, relics of shared satisfaction. We'd have large, raucous dinner parties every few weeks. We'd open wine and discuss politics, art, religion, music, film. We'd dance, sing, play games, laugh.

We knew most of our friends from the art world, but we'd also include neighbors from our building, and people we knew from the neighborhood. I'd invite colleagues from work. My day job was a teller at the same bank for more than twenty-five years. The job mostly involved filing deposit slips. The last time I was there, ages ago, I didn't know a single face. I didn't recognize anyone.

I used to make a huge pot of rich bone broth the color of mahogany every Sunday. It became a winter tradition. The apartment would slowly fill up with its nourishing smell, which would stay on our clothes for days. I would roast whole chickens two at a time and make mushroom omelets with an arugula salad dressed with a lemon vinaigrette. My buttermilk biscuits were famous in the building. I'd always make enough to give half of them away.

But my favorite meal was the simplest. A single fried egg, over easy, with a piece of buttered toast to dip in the yolk. I learned to make it when I was around nine or ten. This lunch, with a hot cup of tea, was something that sustained me over and over again. Now the thing I eat most often is soup and dry soda crackers.

I scan the living room again. Everything's so old-fashioned. Even I can see that. Outdated. Worn out. This used to actually be a room for living. Now it's no more than a mangy depository. A shabby and confined storehouse for old newspapers, random trinkets, carpet stains, and me.

I bring a spoonful of soup to my nose and sniff before tasting. I can't smell anything. I fumble the empty spoon onto the floor by my feet. When I bend to pick it up, I feel my chest tighten and I start to cough. Just lightly at first, but it becomes a fit.

When the coughing finally stops, I can feel the tears on my cheeks.

Another long night of tossing and turning in the dark. Nights shouldn't feel as long as days. Nights are meant to go by in the blink of an eye. I'm supposed to wake up feeling rested and refreshed. But I never do.

I have no idea what time it is. My covers are up to my chin, but I still feel a chill. My bedroom, like the living room, is cramped and cluttered. I don't have the energy to get rid of anything. I shift my position, moving over to the other side of the mattress. Despite being tired, I can't fall asleep.

Just as I feel myself drifting off, I hear a voice, high-pitched, from the other side of the wall.

"Stop," I hear. "Listen."

I didn't realize I had any neighbors right next door, on the other side of the wall. I thought the tenant there had left weeks ago. She's loud and firm without yelling. She sounds serious. It's too muffled to make out what else she's saying. I hear a chair fall over, or a door close.

I roll onto my stomach, trying desperately to fall sleep, using my thin pillow to muffle the noise.

I'm going through my morning routine in the bathroom the same way I do every morning, brushing my teeth, washing my face. I splash a handful of warm water onto my cheeks. I used to have smooth skin; strangers would tell me I looked young for my age. My white hair is thinning and flat. I stopped coloring it a few years ago. I've always been short, lean, but I've lost weight. I know without stepping on a scale. I'm scrawny now, withered. I'm parched and shrunken like dried fruit. I've never moved gracefully, but my arthritic knee has made me slower and even more inelegant. It aches.

Once dressed, I time myself using the clock hanging on the wall, and it takes nine minutes for me to get ready, bundling up in my jacket, boots, gloves, scarf, hat. Nine full minutes. I imagine it's as time-consuming as it would be preparing a toddler. Almost ten minutes just to leave my apartment in winter. All this to get a few groceries.

I descend in the elevator, exit my building, and walk along the slushy sidewalk, wheeling a small cart behind me. I walk slowly, carefully, past an office building's large ground-floor window. I would pass this building on my way to the bank each day. I pause when I see my full reflection in the glass. My hunch has worsened. When did I stop taking care of myself?

Perhaps this physical decline was inevitable. It's what he dreaded most: seeing a depleted shape looking back in the mirror, the feeling that he'd lost his chance to create. Could he have done anything to stop it? Could I? To reverse it? The finish line always, eventually, arrives. It has to.

That's life. It's the tragedy of life: the end comes for us all. People on the sidewalk pass me by, stepping around me, without eye contact or acknowledgment.

Back home, back on the third floor, I sit inside door 3B to remove my boots. I don't have the pep to remove my coat or unpack the cart of groceries. My body might be giving up on me, but my mind has been less depleted by age. I can still think. I know what day of the week it is, the season. I can converse with strangers while standing in line at the store if need be. I'm grateful for the compromise. That's what has always worried me most. Cognitive decline. Fading memories. Lost days. An uncertain present.

I walk over to the bookshelf, looking for a specific book. When I find it, I remove it from the shelf and take it over to my chair. *Surrealism* by Herbert Read. I flip to a page marked with a napkin. I read aloud a sentence at random.

“The Surrealist movement was a revolution directed at every sphere of life, encompassing politics and poetry as well as art, its purpose the liberation of resources of the subconscious mind....”

Art and surrealism encompassed my life, too. More than anything else. I loved this book when I bought it.

I was so excited to get home and read it. The ideas in it felt so alive to me, connected to what I aspired to be. It felt personally linked to me by the emotion it aroused within me. I remember I'd been working on a self-portrait when I bought it. I don't know what ever happened to that painting. I'm sure it's still here somewhere among a pile of others.

I can remember with such specificity the feelings I had then, a private, internal frenzy of potential. Where is that now? Frames of mind aren't built to last. They aren't dependable. Even the sturdiest eventually dissolve and disappear.

I set the book down on the side table and finally remove my hat and unzip my heavy coat. I lean over and write three names on the flattened, unused napkin from my lunch.

Arshile Gorky, Meret Oppenheim, Leonora Carrington.

There was a time when seeing the names of these artists thrilled me. It didn't even have to be their work, just seeing their names. I read the names over a few times and then set the napkin down atop a short pile of other handwritten notes.

There are several of these piles all around the apartment. Sometimes I find my notes in the creases of the chair or in the pockets of my sweaters. The notes started as mundane memos to myself, about recipes, or grocery lists. But they've become more urgent over the months. My memory is strong. I'm writing these notes preemptively. I'm writing them because I know I'm very old and soon I'll forget. I'll forget all these things that excite me, thrill me. All the things I adore. I'll forget the feelings I felt. Then it will be too late to try to remember.

I remove two notes that I find in the pocket of my cardigan hanging over the back of my chair.

There's more bread in the freezer.

You always loved to dance.

A muted thump from next door wakes me. Then, a cough. A voice. A woman's. Displeased but assertive. She must live next door. The apartment beside me. I thought it was empty. I thought the last tenants moved out. My mouth is dry, and I'm thirsty. It's still dark now, and I wonder how much longer until morning.

Most nights my sleep feels feeble and flimsy but full of troubled dreams. I have a reoccurring dream of being in the park near my apartment. I don't go there much anymore, but I used to walk there almost every morning before work. I loved seeing the huge, old trees, how the first light from the rising sun made the grass look like a moving painting. I would sit on a bench and feel the breeze on my face. But I had to get there at the right time or I'd miss it. It would never last long. That's what made it special.

In the dream, I'm trying to get there, to the park, to the bench, but people keep stopping me on the way. It's frustrating and frantic. It's getting lighter and brighter, and I know I'm not going to make it. I wake up, fall asleep, wake up, fall asleep in an endless cycle until my room is filled with daylight. The dreams come and go. I never look at my clock until I'm up and out of bed.

Once, he told me I should try painting a landscape, as an exercise. He said portraits are so specific and small. He said I should expand my areas of interest, challenge myself, acknowledge a grander scale. So I painted some of the trees from the park to appease him.

He saw the first piece when I was halfway through it. He studied it, taking his glasses down from the top of his head, and said: "I don't see trees, Penny. Not at all. This is not an insult. I'm just encouraging you to try painting more sincerely. To paint what you actually see."

I never did finish that painting.

I roll over and flip on the soft bedside lamp. I run my hand along my forearm. There's a bruise there, and the spot is sensitive to the touch. I don't think I had this bruise when I went to bed, so how did I get it?

"We can't stop it now," the voice says from the other side of the wall.

"I know that," a deeper voice replies.

I stop rubbing my arm. I'm listening. I've been hearing these voices from next door more and more, usually at night. They're only sounds, disembodied tones, but they are real. Voices aren't sounds like the cars and buses and sirens from outside. These ones have a distinctive impact on me. The sounds of humans.

I hear footsteps and a door slam shut. What time is it? I lie in the dark, eyes wide open, awake.

"How do you feel?"

I can't make out the exact response. I've missed it.

"No! You can't say anything. Especially not to her."

Another muffled reply.

"You're not listening!"

Then, silence. I lean over, switch on the lamp, and scrawl a note to myself.

Ask Mike about the voices next door.

I get up.

My slippers make it harder to walk. They're heavy and stick on the carpet. But without them, my little feet are too cold. During the days, I sit more than I walk anyway. I sit and watch the TV. I sit and I eat. I sit and look at my changed hands, the dark spots and protruding veins, how bony and curved my fingers have become. They look more like knotted twigs than usable human fingers, more like bark than skin.

I wish I had done more. There's not enough time for me now. I had years and years' worth of time. It went so fast. It went too fast.

I shuffle to the washroom and then crawl back into bed. I've never removed the empty litter box from under the window, even though there's no need for it now. When did the cat die? Gorky loved to cuddle, especially in the morning. It seems a long time ago now.

Every now and then, I still hear her, Gorky, softly mewling from one of the rooms. It takes me a moment to realize it's only an illusion, an auditory figment born from loneliness and memory.

Above the litter box two oil paintings hang on the bedroom wall. Massive landscapes. Two of his earliest ones that, for sentimental reasons, he said he could never sell. They're so big, heavy, like all his work. Does scale on its own show aspiration? Does dimension relate to achievement? I don't like these paintings of his. I avoid them. I never told him the truth of what I thought. He was fond of them. I would take them down if I could reach them and was strong enough. They're too heavy for me to move. They always were.

There are other canvases, too, smaller paintings of mine, leaning backward against the wall in the corner of the room. We never hung any of my portraits. I didn't want to. I didn't feel the need to display them that way, and I never felt like they were finished. I always wanted the chance to keep working on them, tinkering, revising, revisiting. I was only confident in the excitement I felt and in my dedication to the work itself. Not in the end result. I didn't believe I could produce anything to affect or inspire others.

“How can you be an artist if you never let people see any of your pictures?” he asked me. “You need the viewer as much as they need you. Otherwise, it’s not art you’re making.”

I did have that far-off ambition hidden away somewhere, I suppose, that there was a chance I might produce something that another person might respond to. But I never told him that. I never told anyone. Even alone now, it makes me ashamed to think I’d hoped it might happen.

The week after he died, I took out my box of my ceramic sculptures. I removed one and set it on my bedside. It’s still there. It was the first sculpture I ever made. Its amateurishness had always embarrassed me. The clay figurine is a person with their head tilted to one side.

I pick it up, exam it, rubbing my thumb over it. I never would have admitted to anyone, but I’d felt such thrill making it.

I’m starting to lose the intimacy of my memories. Most of my memories have stopped feeling like my own. I don’t believe them wholeheartedly the way I used to, and they don’t carry the same heft they once did.

It’s sad. It’s sad how I live. Isn’t clarity supposed to come with age and experience? If I had more time, I could make changes. I could learn more. I could work more, paint more. I could be better than I am. That’s what I regret most. Knowing I could have been a better, more accomplished painter, but now it’s too late. It all comes down to not having enough time. I wish I could go back.

I turn the lamp off. Unable to fall asleep, I start quietly humming to myself, a lullaby.

I feel like I've barely slept. My lips are cracked. I touch them with my finger as I walk into the living room. I've left the TV on from the night before. It's muted. I sit and turn up the volume. It's loud. I squint at the screen. It's a nature show about insects and other small creatures.

"Little, old honeybees. We take them for granted, but they're actually smart enough to engage in mathematics," the announcer says in a deep, soothing voice.

I watch as a tiny bee extracts pollen from a red flower. I stand up, walk back to my bedroom, and rummage around in my closet until I find what I'm looking for: an old set of oil paints. I can still hear the TV from in here.

"Bees understand math and can even solve simple puzzles based on elementary arithmetic...."

I never understood math. It's just not the way my brain works. It's a whole world I could never inhabit.

The case is dented and dusty. I hold the set in my hand for a moment, wondering how long I've had it. I sit down and open one of the canisters. The paint has dried and is unusable. I haven't painted in years. I lean over and pick up one my paintings in the corner, leaning against the wall.

It's an unfinished portrait, one of the last I worked on. I don't recognize the subject. Who is this person? Someone I must have been close with. A childhood friend? I don't feel any connection to this piece anymore. Nothing.

How can that be?

Another day come and gone. Another night to endure in my bed. A soft, almost imperceptible knock on my wall. Just one. It's a delicate knock, but it startles me. How many days has it been since I've been hearing these sounds? Two? Three? A week?

In the darkness, the knock somehow seems directed at me, as if one of the people next door, I think the man, is trying to tell me something, warn me of something. I lean over and knock back, very lightly. I hear nothing. I do it again, louder, with more force. I wait, hoping to hear a response, when a dry spot in my throat causes me to cough. It tickles, and despite my urge to remain silent, it only gets worse.

I put on my slippers and barely reach the kitchen when I'm in the throes of a full coughing fit. I'm holding on to the counter, keeled over. When the hacking finally subsides, I spit into the sink. A thread of saliva dangles from my bottom lip.

There's a single potato sitting by the sink. I've had it there for weeks, maybe months. I took it out to bake. It's sprouting now. There's life locked in that simple, dormant potato. That little sprout will keep growing, and start moving toward the window and the light, the longer it grows.

Just this morning, as I made my tea, I listened to an interview on the radio with a professor, a plant biologist. It made me think of my father. He had such a fascination with nature and biology. As a child, he would tell me tidbits about trees and plants, how amazing they are, how durable and sturdy. I stood beside the radio and turned it up, thinking about Dad.

She talked about an experiment with two plants growing together and how it was possible for the cells of the individual plants to end up gathering meaningful amounts of DNA from the other. It was fascinating. I listened, transfixed. She went on to explain how