A Fortunate Man

Sound check. Mahler Symphony No. 5.
Video check. 13 Trees, then black screen.
Preshow music. Slideshow Bob

Act One - Landscapes

Hayley: Hello everybody.

Jamie: Welcome to (name of venue)

Hayley: First of all, it’s such a privilege to be here today

Jamie: [insert date here]

Hayley: We are both very happy to be here and we are very grateful to you for attending because we know everyone is busy, and we want to thank the venue

Jamie: [insert venue here]

Hayley: and the University

Jamie: [insert local university here]

Jamie: Can you hear me at the back? Is this working? It's not working….Oh there’s a little button to press. OK, thanks, We’ve done this a few times and this has not happened before!

Hayley: It has happened before.

Jamie: We would like to thank the committee/

Hayley: /twice

Jamie: And the Centre for Research as that is where we first started to explore the book.

Hayley: A Fortunate Man And that is why we are here. I want to thank the late author …
Jamie: John Berger

Hayley: And the photographer…

Jamie: Jean Mohr

Hayley: … and all of the NHS doctors we have interviewed for our research –

Jamie: some of whom are here today.

Hayley: Some of whose names are redacted. Slide please.

Video 1

Jamie: I wonder if we could just adjust the title please. That’s better. Thank you.

Jamie: To help us understand this landscape, to give voice to the doctor who inspired the book

Hayley: Dr John Sassall.

Jamie: My colleague, Hayley here, will re-enact key moments and provide the footnotes.

Hayley: And my colleague, Jamie here, will provide the footnotes and re-enact key moments too.

Jamie: As I said thank you all for attending this lecture to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of this important publication. Slide please.

Video 2


Jamie: I hope you have all read the book before today.

Hayley: As we spend the next hour here we’ll find it a vital handrail. It is an invaluable part of our toolkit. If you haven’t read it yet then I urge you to do so afterwards.

Jamie: Available in all good bookshops.
Hayley: In 2005 it was described as ‘still the most important book about GPs ever written’ by the British Journal of General Practice.

Jamie: Those of us in the medical profession have turned to this book for answers since it was written. I know it’s accompanied us through our training and still has pride of place on my bookshelf. Indeed, I endeavour to re-read it at least once a year.

Hayley: The book has been reprinted on a regular basis. This is the most recent edition. [holds book]

Jamie: The aim of this talk is to take a journey into the book. To walk you through its pages. The Story of A Country Doctor.

Hayley: This is the subtitle of A Fortunate Man. (Hayley writes ACT ONE: LANDSCAPES on the board)

Jamie: It is a guided tour. What do we see on this tour? We see a doctor on call to his patients. Giving his life to look after theirs. But more of that later. This talk is in two parts, two acts - Landscapes and Portraits.

Hayley: Berger tells us that ‘to understand a landscape we have to situate ourselves in it’

Jamie: So, before we start to explore the life of a country doctor we have to understand the countryside he inhabits. Before we even open the book, I want us to leave this room. This lecture theatre. This time. This place. This moment here. And take ourselves back fifty years. To the Forest of Dean.

Hayley: A region in the western part of the county of Gloucestershire, England.

Video 5. Sound 1, Countryside v.1

Jamie: Slide please. We are in 1967. There is a low sunrise and the trees are silhouetted against the horizon. The occasional farmhouse meets the sky with smoke from the chimney from the day’s first fire. A procession of pylons score electric lines against the clouds. There are early birds drinking from puddles in the unploughed fields. Drawing muddy water through cracks in the ice. It is January. A thick frost covers the ground and cows stand with their backs to the winter sun after another night huddled together for warmth. Through this landscape a river runs, its waters rise and fall, and meander around this place.

Hayley: On page 28, Berger will tell us that the bend in the river reminds the doctor of his failure.

Jamie: But more of that later. We haven’t met him yet. We are still picturing the scene. Birds sing. The church bells ring. Another day begins. A boat floats on the river. Two men, one old, one young, fishing. Their lines cast upstream. Their images reflected in the water. There are ripples in the surface of the mirror. A fence runs across a
field to keep livestock, mapping the farmer’s territory, though we must remember the map is not the territory. An electrical pulse runs around the wire to stop the cattle or sheep from getting too close. Children dare each other to hold onto the fence as long as they can. They see how many pulses will win. Buzz. In the distance, two hills rise, dodged and burned by the photographer Jean Mohr in the darkroom.

**Jamie:** To play with perspective and depth of field. And in the centre of the image. A house. Where we are now. Where the doctor is. Where we wake up.

**Hayley:** To understand a landscape, we have to situate ourselves in it.

**Jamie:** Now imagine yourself waking up in this house, in this landscape, in this place. Berger writes: English country mornings are like mornings nowhere else in the world. The air is cold. The floor boards are cold. It is perhaps the coldness. Which sharpens the tang of the hot cup of tea. Outside steps on the gravel crunch a little more loudly than a month ago. Because of the slight frost. There is a smell of toast. And on the block of butter. Small grains of toast from the last impatient knife. Outside there is sunlight. Simultaneously soft and precise. Every leaf of each tree seems separate. Slide please.

**Video 5, valley**

**Hayley:** Berger describes this scene to us on page 30 of ‘A Fortunate Man’.

**Jamie:** Just like the pages in this book, each one is separate, yet together they form a shape, a pattern, a story. They take us on this journey. To this place. At the beginning of the book Berger writes: Landscapes can be deceptive. Sometimes a landscape seems to be less a setting for a life of its inhabitants than a curtain behind which their struggles, achievements and accidents take place. For those who, with the inhabitants, are behind the curtain, landmarks are no longer only geographic but also biographical and personal. Slide please.

**Video 32, dochill**

**Hayley:** Berger’s words are typed over Jean Mohr’s image.

**Jamie:** The doctor walks up the hill to his surgery. It is apart from the house. A building the size of two garages. It consists of: A waiting room. Two consulting rooms. And a dispensary. It is on the side of a hill. Which overlooks the river. And the large wooded valley. From the other side of the valley. It is almost too small to be visible. On the door of the building. Is a notice:

**Hayley:** Dr John Sassall M.B. Ch. B. D. Obst. R. C. O. G.

**Jamie:** Slide please.

**Video 30, stethoscope**
Hayley: Berger tells us that he cured others to cure himself.

So now we meet the doctor. Dr John Sassall. Although that is not his real name. He is a pillar of society. He is known as ‘the doc’. He is the fulcrum of his community. He is the registrar of their births and the secretary of their deaths. He says again and again:

Hayley: ‘I know, I know, I know...’

Jamie: As if he doesn’t just observe their pain, he feels it, he shares it, he absorbs it, he absolves it. Slide please.

Video 37, 2nd phone

Hayley: He says, while giving an injection ‘I know. I know what it feels like. I can’t bear anything done near my eyes. That’s where I live, behind my eyes’.

Jamie: Part of him is always wanting to know more. At every surgery. At every visit. Every time the phone rings. And he has to go out in the middle of the night. Wearing his pyjamas underneath his coat. His son says he was never more alive than he was then.

Hayley: We interviewed the doctor’s son as part of our research for this talk.

Video 8 the hill

Jamie: Slide please. Here is a man who suffers frequently with a sense of anti-climax. He knows highs and lows, his mood peaks and troughs, like the landscape he serves. He wears many masks. The medical. The intellectual. The family man.

Hayley: This image sees the doctor walking towards a house on a hill.

Jamie: Berger and Mohr reversed the image. So, it looks like he is walking towards his future. Walking towards his fate. Walking out of the book. As Berger would say:

Hayley: ‘A moment’s reflection shows us. That any story drawn from life. Begins, for the storyteller, with its end’.

Jamie: This is the final photograph in the book.

Hayley: So, taking Berger’s lead, we should not start at the beginning. But at the end.

Jamie: This is the Afterword.
Hayley: Written in 1999.

Sound 2, Preset 2

Jamie: Audio please. When I wrote the preceding pages. I didn’t know that 15 years later Sassall was going to shoot himself.

Hayley: Little is known of the doctor’s suicide but Berger makes mention of it in an essay he writes at the time.

Jamie: His death has changed the story of his life. It has made it more mysterious.

Hayley: In the essay he is reflecting on the theme of death in the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Jamie: Not darker. I see as much light there as before.

Hayley: Published in 1982 in New Society, the essay is called ‘The secretary of death’.

Jamie: And standing before him. I do not search for what I might have foreseen and did not. Rather I now begin with his violent death.

Hayley: Dr Sassall took his own life by gunshot after his wife died.

Jamie: And from it, we look back with increased tenderness on what he set out to do. And what he offered to others. For as long as he could endure.

Hayley: What we now know is that he went into the bathroom and shot himself in the head.

Jamie: His son told us that he was the kind of man who would want the mess to be easily cleaned up.

Hayley: A careful reading of the book reveals its title to be a paradox. The man who spent his life helping others was unable to help himself.

Jamie: The doctor is somewhere between a doctor of the past, a doctor of the future. A doctor of yesterday, a doctor of tomorrow.

Hayley: He says at the end of the book. As we see him walk towards the final page:

Jamie: ‘Whenever I am reminded of death. And it happens every day. I think of my own death and it makes me try to work harder.’
Hayley: This is not so much an ideology as a prophecy.

Jamie: But that’s at the end and our story hasn’t really started yet. Our story starts with a tree. Falling down on a hill in the fog. Three woodsmen tend to a stricken friend. And a car races down a country road. This is the opening scene. Slide please.

Video 4, leaves, Sound Bergerbook v.3

Jamie brings on branch and places it centre stage. Hayley takes on the persona of the doctor.

Jamie: (at mic) He’s been screaming ever since. He’s suffering something terrible Doctor.

Hayley: (at mic) I need everyone to step back.

Jamie: (at mic) We never believed you’d get here so quick.

Hayley: (At mic) Give the man some space.

Jamie: (at mic) He had a chance. When we shouted. But he went and turned the wrong way.

Hayley: (at mic) I want you to lift while I put a splint on his leg.

Jamie: (at mic) I shouted at him. He could have got clear if he’s looked sharp.

Hayley: (at mic) Just hold it steady.

Jamie: (at mic) We could injure him more this way – getting him out.

Hayley: (at mic) You know Sleepy Joe?

Jamie: (at mic) He’s lucky to be alive.

Hayley: (at mic) He was trapped under a tree for 12 hours before any help came…

Jamie: (at mic) He’s lost his leg, hasn’t he?

Hayley: (at mic) No – he won’t lose his leg…
Jamie: (at mic) Christ, let me alone!

Hayley: (onstage) I know… I know… I know…

(Hayley starts to bandage during the next speech)

Jamie: One of them shouts a warning, but it is too late. The leaves brush him down almost delicately. The small branches encage him. And then the tree and the whole hill crush him together. What is happening here? Medically speaking a trauma has occurred and a man’s leg has been impacted by the fallen tree. Berger tells us that the doctor kneels next to the man and injects morphine. His hands are at home on a body. New wounds are familiar to him. The doctor sets up plasma for a transfusion into the arm. As the morphine works, the man relaxes and his eyes close. The mist is getting whiter. The moisture condensing on the half-empty bottle of plasma. The doctor still working on the leg the man will soon lose. The woodman walks slowly back up to the forest. He tells the others what the doctor told him. As they work, they notice again the hollow where their friend was trapped. The fallen leaves still damp with his blood. And they question whether the doctor was right. The book is full of moments like this. We see a doctor at work but wonder if he is an accomplice to the accident, so sure does he seem. The book asks more questions than it answers about how or why the doctor might be fortunate.

Video 13, trees, Sound, Community_fortunate

Hayley: Slide please. After the war Dr Sassall married and chose a remote country practice in the Forest of Dean under the National Health Service, becoming the junior partner of an old doctor who was much liked but hated the sight of blood and believed that the secret of medicine was faith. This gave the young man plenty of opportunity to save lives.

Jamie: He was always overworked and proud of it. Most of the time he was out on calls in St Briavels - often having to make his way over fields, or walk, carrying his bag of instruments and drugs, along remote forest paths. In the winter he had to dig his way through the snow. In his bag he carried a blow-lamp for thawing out pipes.

Hayley: I do not attempt in this essay to discuss the role of Sassall’s wife or children. My concern is his professional life.

Jamie: Although Berger doesn't focus on Dr Sassall’s personal life and his wife, it is important that we recognise the significant role she played in this story. Betty, in addition to running the house, worked in the dispensary, staffed the reception, typed up notes he dictated, and kept his diary. She managed his mental health when he was struggling. In fact, his family have told us that without her support they suspect he might have taken his life earlier than he did.

Video 17, typewriter
Hayley: Slide please. *A Fortunate Man* is a moving meditation on humanity, society and the value of healing. When I was working as a newly qualified doctor it became my habit to give copies as gifts. For years it was out of print, the habit became expensive…

Jamie: Dr Gavin Francis, writer and practising GP.

Hayley: We interviewed him and he put us in touch with Sassall’s son.

Jamie: Dr Gavin Francis wrote the foreword to the latest edition of the book. [*Holds up book*]

Hayley: Published in 2015.

Video 14, Jean and John flip

Jamie: Slide please. My colleague and I will now re-enact an exchange that took place between the photographer.

Hayley: Jean Mohr

Jamie: And the writer.

Hayley: John Berger

Jamie: When they first discussed working on the project.

Hayley: *A Fortunate Man*

**Sound, 6 typewriter**

Hayley and Jamie walk downstage to enact a conversation, each holding a mug.

Hayley: From the outset, our relationship was perfectly balanced.

Jamie: As a condition of publication, we retained the right to the book’s layout.

Hayley: The position of the text on the page.

Jamie: The position of the pictures within the book.

Hayley: The combination of text, page turn, and picture.

Jamie: The relationship between a paragraph and a photograph.
Hayley: One of the first questions I asked him regarded the rudimentary Jamieer of earnings, specifically copyright. He said:

Jamie: We’ll go fifty-fifty, does that sound all right?

Hayley: Yes John. *(They chink mugs)* And, of course, it did

Jamie: That is how we started.

Hayley: And that is how we continued as collaborators.

Jamie: In 1966, I saw a story he worked on, following a doctor for a time in Belgium.

Hayley: He enjoyed it, but said that:

Jamie: The two of us could do it better.

Hayley: Yes John. *(They chink mugs)* That became the idea for A Fortunate Man

Jamie: We spent a month observing the daily rounds and moral challenges of a doctor in the Forest of Dean.

Hayley: At the end he liked my prints but thought some were too aesthetic.

Jamie: I was wary of photos that were too beautiful.

Hayley: He liked those that looked almost accidental.

Jamie: We had both tried to write the book on our own.

Hayley: That’s not what we wanted at all.

Jamie: So, we reworked it so that the words and pictures were like a conversation

Hayley: Building on rather than mirroring one another. Finishing each…

Jamie: Other’s sentences. I wanted to find a counterpoint to the story.
Hayley: One picture could speak pages of words.

Jamie: He is one of the truly great photographers. Utterly invisible.

Hayley: He’s very strong.

Jamie: Blending into the background like a lamp-stand

Hayley: He’s very certain of himself.

Jamie: The perfect man to sit in on medical consultations

Hayley: And very positive.

Jamie: This was how we worked.

Hayley: Never disagreeing for long.

Jamie: Always discussing ideas as equals.

Hayley: Always finishing the job even firmer friends than when we started.

Jamie: That spirit of collaboration is rare between a photographer and a writer. (*Wine mugs are chunked*)

Hayley: This conversation was taken from a 2015 Guardian interview with Jean Mohr.

Video 27, hospital curtains

Jamie: My colleague and I will now present some interviews we did with contemporary GPs. To retain their authenticity and preserve their anonymity we will be reading them verbatim.

Hayley: All ethical clearances for this project were sought and approved. Slide please.

Video 29, medical records. Sound, Mahler Symphony No. 5

Hayley and Jamie now put on headphones and press play on i-pods at the same time. Music starts to play and drowns out their words. After two minutes they take off headphones and resume the scene between Berger and Mohr.

Video 19, film.
Jamie: Slide please. In the dark room we listened to music – Jean and I shared a love of Mahler, Schubert and Berg

Hayley: And when the music stopped, we talked about how it felt to be 70.

Jamie: We have extended the narrative dialogues between text and images

Hayley: We share a sense of measure

Jamie: To create pages which flow

Hayley: A book has to advance on two legs

Jamie: One being the images

Hayley: The other being the text

Jamie: Both have to adapt to the pace of the other.

Hayley: Both have to avoid repeating each other.

Jamie: The same being said twice.

Hayley: Once with words

Jamie: Once with images

Hayley: We have to walk together in step with the story.

Jamie: Perhaps this is true – at another level – for all long-standing friendships.

Video 15, camera

Hayley: Slide please. This conversation was taken from Understanding a Photograph by John Berger.

Jamie: Audio please.

Video, waiting room. Sound, 8, The best thing

Act Two: Portraits
Jamie and Hayley recreate photographs from the book.

Jamie: Can you make us a cup of tea?

Video, 23, husband

Hayley: Slide please. On page 29, Dr Sassall consoles a man who has lost his wife.

Jamie: It would have been worse for her if she’d lived. It would have been worse.

Hayley: He might have said death is a condition of life. But whatever he said at that moment, the old man would have continued to sit in front of the fire and rock in his chair. Whatever he said, he said it with care. The care of a man who has seen it before. The care of a man who had lost patients he couldn’t save but looked after families that were left behind. The care of a man who knew when to say the right thing.

Jamie: I know… I know… I know…

Video, mug shot. Sound, ticking timer

Hayley: Slide please. We know Berger and Mohr lived with the doctor for six weeks.

Jamie: We know doctors do not take lunch breaks

Hayley: We know they aim to see every patient within 10 minutes.

Jamie: We know patients do not always go in to see their doctor with the condition that they want to talk about so 10 minutes is spent guessing the real reason for their visit

Hayley: We know it takes the same time to process a film as it does to give a pint of blood.

Jamie: We know the conversation is still the cure in a lot of cases and some patients just want someone to listen to them.

Hayley: As John Berger said, ‘If I am a storyteller, it is because I listen…’

Jamie: As Jean Mohr said ‘If the picture is not good enough, go closer’.

Hayley: We know a photograph of unwashed cups in a kitchen sink tells us more about the NHS than anything we could write.

Jamie: We know doctors do not really want to talk about politics today but we cannot avoid this being political.
Hayley: We know that to understand a landscape we have to situate ourselves in it.

Jamie: We know that doctors love what they do.

Hayley: We know when asked to name the best thing about their job many of them tell us it is the people, the patients, the place.

Jamie: We know they want to make a difference to people’s lives.

Video slow-neonatal. Sound, 02, preset

Hayley: We know Doctor Sassall only says 365 words in the book. (Alarm rings). Slide please. On page 31, Dr. Sassall meets a young woman he delivered as a baby, 16 years ago and now he suspects she too is pregnant. She is crying as she comes into the surgery.

Jamie: [addressed to empty chair] What’s wrong?

Hayley: (at mic) I just feel sort of miserable.

Jamie: What’s getting you down?

Hayley: (at mic) No answer

Jamie: Sore throat?

Hayley (at mic) Not now.

Jamie: Water works all right?

Hayley (at mic) She nods.

Jamie: Have you got a temperature?

Hayley (at mic) She shakes her head.

Jamie: Periods regular?

Hayley (at mic) Yeah.
Jamie: When was your last one?

Hayley (at mic) Last week.

Jamie: Do you remember that rash? Has it ever come back?

Hayley (at mic) No.

Jamie: You just feel weepy?

Hayley (at mic) She leans forward.

Jamie: Did mum and dad put you up to come to me?

Hayley (at mic) No, I came by myself.

Jamie: Even having your hair dyed didn’t make you feel better?

Hayley (at mic) She laughs. It did for a while.

Jamie: Do you like working in the laundry?

Hayley (at mic) It’s a job.

Jamie: What about the other girls there?

Hayley (at mic) I don’t know.

Jamie: Have you thought of doing anything else?

Hayley (at mic) What can I do?

Jamie: What would you like to do?

Hayley (at mic) Secretarial work.
Jamie: Who would you like to be secretary to?

Hayley (at mic) She laughs. She shakes her head.

Jamie: When you’re a bit better I’ll keep you off work for a few days if you like and you can go to the Labour Exchange and find out how you can get trained. There are all kinds of training schemes.

Hayley (at mic) Are there?

Jamie: How did you do at school?

Hayley (at mic) I wasn’t any good.

Jamie: Did you take O Levels?

Hayley (at mic) No, I left.

Jamie: But you weren’t stupid were you?

Hayley (at mic) No.

Jamie: Well it’s no good being sorry for yourself.

Hayley (at mic) It’s terrible that laundry. I hate it.

Jamie: If I give you a week off will you use it?

Hayley (at mic) She nods.

Jamie: You can come again on Wednesday and I’ll phone the Labour Exchange. And we’ll talk about what they say.

Hayley (at mic) I’m sorry. She cries.

Jamie: Don’t be sorry. The fact that you’re crying means you’ve got an imagination. If you didn’t have imagination you wouldn’t feel so bad. Now go to bed and stay there tomorrow.
Hayley: As she walks away from the surgery he watches her cry. The dry-stone walls on either side of the lane are now cemented together. Audio please.

**Sound, 10, Schubert. Video, 33 doctor-reversed**

*[Jamie speaking page numbers into Dictaphone. Schubert’s Serenade plays.]*

Jamie: Pages 1-2

Hayley: There is a car hurtling down a country lane in landscape

Jamie: Pages 3-4

Hayley: There is a man holding open a door, between coming and going

Jamie: Pages 12-13

Hayley: There is a boat with its line cast near the place where he fished

Jamie: Pages 14-15

Hayley: There is a village veiled in darkness the sky beginning to bruise

Jamie: Page 16

Hayley: A fog is devouring a telegraph pole. A tree where a man lost his leg.

Jamie: Page 20

Hayley: The forest dodged and burned to look like clouds in the sky

Jamie: Page 22

Hayley: The river ruffled by a passing boat

Jamie: Page 23

Hayley: A herd of cows graze near the bend in the river that reminds him of his failure
Hayley: A car still hurtling down a country lane in portrait this time

Hayley: A house surrounded by drystone wall it juts out like rotten teeth or tombstones

Hayley: A house silhouetted at dusk by a biblical sky. Shepherd’s warning.

Hayley: Trees on the riverbank reflected in the water. No sense of perspective.

Hayley: The surgery. Three rooms. When patients wait to see the doctor their knees touch.

Hayley: The dispensary. Surrounded by scripts. A patient waits. He is a blur.

Hayley: 11 chairs in the waiting room. Surgery hours on the door. He is a blur.

Hayley: Sleeves rolled up. Tie tucked in. Braces clipped on. He is a blur.

Hayley: He inserts the needle. That’s where he lives. Behind his eyes.
Hayley: He smokes a pipe

Jamie: Page 59

Hayley: He smokes a cigarette

Jamie: Page 61

Hayley: He stops smoking

Jamie: Page 63


Jamie: Page 65

Hayley: He feels the throat for lumps

Jamie: Page 66

Hayley: He takes a baby’s temperature

Jamie: Page 67

Hayley: He treats a lady’s leg.

Jamie: Pages 69-71

Hayley: He reassures. He talks. He listens. He stands. She stands.

Jamie: I know… I know… I know…

Hayley: Page 72

Jamie: I feel a woman’s stomach. Pregnant with hope. Her eyes alive.
Hayley: Page 80


Hayley: Page 82

Jamie: My car off the beaten track. A Citroen DS. My headlights on full.

Hayley: Page 85

Jamie: The door half open half closed

Hayley: Page 86

Jamie: I insert the needle. I say that’s where I live. Behind my eyes.

Hayley: Page 87

Jamie: I stretch. Patients are allowed to smoke at the following times.

Hayley: Page 89

Jamie: A man in a woolly hat – unnamed and unshaven but smiling.

Hayley: Page 90

Jamie: A woman in an apron at twenty past two, somewhere between dinner and tea.

Hayley: Page 96

Jamie: A man with a bucket, flat cap and tanned skin.

Hayley: Page 104

Jamie: A parish meeting.

Hayley: Page 105
Jamie: A schoolroom filled with parishioners.

Hayley: Page 106

Jamie: When I speak, people listen.

Hayley: Page 107

Jamie: When I raise my hand, people follow.

Hayley: Page 118

Jamie: A woman dries her eyes with a handkerchief.

Hayley: Page 125

Jamie: A man strokes his dog and cries by the fire.

Hayley: Page 136

Jamie: Table tennis in the village hall.

Hayley: Page 137

Jamie: My daughter dancing.

Hayley: Page 140

Jamie: A couple embracing.

Hayley: Page 148

Jamie: Dictating memos in my office. Page 149.

Hayley: A woman waits to die
Hayley: A woman wakes

Hayley: A nurse checks her watch

Hayley: A patient’s back

Hayley: A park bench

Hayley: A twisted spine

Hayley: A bloody shin. An egg cup filled with alcohol. A scalpel waiting to go in.

Hayley: His medicine bag

Hayley: House visit

Sound, abstract-drips. Video, 22 cottage.

Hayley: And again in close up. His back to camera. He walks away from the lens. Somewhere between coming and going. Beginning and ending. Living and dying. In later editions this image is followed by The Afterword. Slide please. On page 34, Dr. Sassall meets a woman who lives in a house beyond repair. Half the window above the sink is broken. There is a piece of cardboard across it. The sun pours in through the cracks.

Jamie: [Each line addressed to the empty chair] You won’t be able to stay here in the Winter.

Hayley: (at mic) Jack says he’s going to patch it up when he gets the time.

Jamie: It needs more than patching up!

Hayley: (at mic) Doctor, can a woman of my age have heart trouble?

Jamie: Did you ever have rheumatic fever when you were a child?

Hayley: (at mic) I don’t think so, but I get so out of breath. And if I bend down to pick something up I can barely stand up again.

Jamie: We’ll examine you properly when you come up to the surgery. But I can promise you now you don’t have a serious heart disease.

Hayley: (at mic) Oh, I’m so relieved.

Jamie: You can’t go on like this. You know that don’t you?

Hayley: (at mic) There’s lots more unfortunate than me. She laughs,

Jamie: We’ve got to get you out of here.

Hayley: (at mic) If I won the Pools I’d buy a big house.

Jamie: Where were you living before you came here?

Hayley: (at mic) In Cornwall. By the sea. Look.

Jamie: Is that your husband?
**Hayley:** (in chair) No, that’s not Jack. Can you tell me if I’m too old. He says I’m too old.

**Jamie:** I think you're tired and you feel like you can’t cope.

**Hayley:** (in chair – to Jamie) Sometimes I think I can’t go on. I just want to lie down and stop.

**Hayley:** (in chair – to audience) She shows the doctor a photograph of her former husband and wishes she was young again. Talks of her first love. Talks of being held by someone who loved her. Talks about how she will never forget it. Talks about how it was heaven. The doctor nods.

**Jamie:** I know, I know, I know…

**Hayley:** The radio plays.

Video, 26, butter knife. Sound, Shoeburt v.1

**Act Three: X-Ray**

**Hayley:** Dear John,

What do we know about you since you have gone.

We know you played golf with your son-in-law every week off a handicap of 21.

We know you used to swear when your tee shot went wrong.

We know you used to practice by hitting golf balls into the valley

We know you used to drink gin at midday.

When the sun was halfway over the yard arm.

We know you used to play backgammon with your wife.

We know you went to China to learn to be a barefoot doctor.

We know that you acupuncture yourself to stop smoking.

We know you spoke about the book with regret rather than fondness.

We know a story in the News of the World really upset you according to your son.

We know you moved around after your wife passed away

And then for whatever reason you felt you couldn’t carry on.

We know Betty polished the cutlery every Sunday, and when she died it lost its lustre.

We know you grew a beard

We know your obituary in the British Medical Journal talks about your time at sea

Both literally and metaphorically.

You struggled with your mental health and wellbeing

Now we would call it bipolar disorder and it affected your ways of seeing.
Difficult to find ways of being after Betty died. 
The job you loved. The woman you loved. The place you loved. 
Where they wouldn’t let you be laid to rest. 
All lost and with it perhaps a sense of purpose. 
A sense of duty. A sense of you. 
I understand why but I’m not sure I’ll ever understand you. 
I see pictures of you
Beyond the life of the book
Your house covered in snow
Your new car – A Citroen DS
Your son looks on with pride
You and your wife – your arm outstretched
A half-embrace, a half holding on for dear life
You sit looking out at the Forest of Dean, pipe in your mouth
Your beard is white now
Your smile is wide
Your skin tanned from working in your garden
Your hands, that once stitched skin, now covered in soil
Your eyes on the horizon.

Mike, 11, mirror. Sound, electric v.2

Jamie: Slide please. The following text is taken from What Jamieers in medicine: Lessons from a life in Primary Care, by David Loxtercamp.

Hayley: John Sassall was considered to be no ordinary doctor.

Jamie: But the responsibilities took their toll.

Hayley: You could not but be aware of John’s depression, since from the first days I was there he talked freely about it.

Jamie: Brian Oldale, my colleague, 1966.

Hayley: Indeed, one of my first memories is of John and his then secretary discussing the joys of ECT for my benefit. They described it as

Jamie: Having an enormous weight removed from the brain…
Hayley: I wondered what I had let myself in for.

Jamie: At the time, there were few medical options available for the treatment of major depression, electroconvulsive therapy was seen as dramatic but effective last resort.

Hayley: Our day started with a morning office. Then we went out in the practice Land Rover and did house calls. Then a further office in the evening. Any urgent phone calls were answered and a house call was made as required. He was working long days and not sleeping at night.

Jamie: After the publication of *A Fortunate Man* I contemplated a career in the Red Cross.

Hayley: However, the doctor would agree to his family’s demands and remain in the village until his death. As he aged, his depression became deeper and more formidable. In 1978. He was devastated by the crippling stroke of his daughter. The same daughter who was pictured dancing in *A Fortunate Man*. His wife’s heart condition, for which he assumed responsibility, deteriorated. Finally, in 1981, in the middle of a loud and heated argument overheard by his neighbours, Betty collapsed and died.

Jamie: Within the year I was forced into retirement.

Hayley: His bipolar disorder, which Betty constrained, veered out of control. He experimented with antidepressant medication and electro-convulsion therapy.

Jamie: I treated my patients rudely, carelessly and without sufficient attention.

Hayley: He aroused the concerns of his colleagues with his erratic prescribing.

Jamie: Excessive drinking

Hayley: Overdose and withdrawal from antidepressants

Jamie: Gave me seizures

Hayley: Made him unfit to drive.

Jamie: I retired. I was retired. I was asked to retire.
Hayley: Berger recalled: ‘When he came to see us in France, he was sometimes in a strange state. If I tried to question him he would either not answer me or become furious. He said:

Jamie: ‘You can’t practise your amateur psychiatry on me John. I know a lot more about it than you do. You, you write your fucking poems’.

Hayley: He came about a month before he died. And we walked together. And I was worried about him. He went back and about a week later telephoned me to say:

Jamie: ‘I’m getting married. Will you come to the wedding?’

Hayley: He had spoken vaguely about a new woman friend but not very much. So I said, ‘sure I’ll come to the wedding’ which was going to be in three or four weeks time.

Jamie: ‘It’s wonderful. I have a relationship such as I have never had in my life!’

Hayley: The next thing that happened was his lover phoned me to say that she had discovered him in the bathroom in the morning with his head blown off. Our telephone conversation lasted for hours. His suicide came as a total surprise to her. She knew she had made him happy. Why does a man kill himself when he is happy?

Jamie: There was no suicide note

Hayley: Perhaps Sassall, who was touched by pain and the desire to relieve it in others, perhaps he knew that he could not live with happiness for long. I do not think his last act was morose or vengeful.

Jamie: ‘Happy’.

Hayley: He said to himself.

Jamie: ‘This is the moment to go’.

Hayley: The suicide turned village sentiment against him.

Jamie: The memorial service was fascinating. The whole village was there, but everybody was cross. They went, but they were angry with me for doing what I did in the way that I did. It was a mixture of guilt.

Hayley: We didn’t help him when we needed to.
Jamie: And anger.

Hayley: Why did he do it that way?

Jamie: It was very tangible.

Hayley: He was someone who leaves a mark on your life.

Jamie: Couldn’t live on my own after Betty died. Wanted to learn how to heal body and mind. How to mend myself. I stood in the forest, barefoot in the leaves, at a crossroads. And when she died I couldn’t find a way home.

Hayley: It would have been worse for him if he had lived. It would have been worse. I couldn’t help him. I couldn’t console him. I wasn’t there anymore. I couldn’t give him the lifeline he needed. He couldn’t hold onto me. In sickness. In health. For love. For dear life.

Sound, 02 Preset 2

Jamie: ‘What reconciles me to my own death more than anything else is the image of a place, a place where your bones and mine are buried, thrown, uncovered, together’

Hayley: But we couldn’t be buried together because he took his own life. The village where he worked didn’t want to bury him in the graveyard. It was against the church they said. Even though he had mowed that grass, planted those flowers, tended to this earth.

Jamie: Our bones alive in this place. Touching in the quiet way our bodies once touched. They are strewn there pell-mell. One of your ribs leans against my skull. A metacarpal of my left hand lies inside your pelvis, against my broken ribs.

Hayley: And I wasn’t there that day. When he walked into the bathroom with the pistol. Shut the door. And sent a murder of ravens into the sky. He kept his firearms in the cloakroom. Next to his golf clubs. Next to the children’s toys. Next to his medicine bag.

Jamie: The hundred bones of our feet are scattered like gravel. It is strange that this image of our proximity, concerning phosphate of calcium, should bestow a sense of peace. Yet it does. With you I can imagine a place where to be phosphate of calcium is enough…

Hayley: And I couldn’t stop him from pulling the trigger like I’d stopped him before. Three times. Three chances. He wouldn’t listen. He couldn’t hear me. Only his own voices.
Jamie: This is where we meet. In the dust. In the earth. In the ash. In the last words and the final photograph. In the hole left behind in the ceiling. The visible brings the world to us. But at the same time, it reminds us ceaselessly that this is a world in which we risk being lost.

Video, familyslideshow. Sound, looped guitar old friend

Hayley: The quotes are not visible here anymore. There are no more footnotes. They have been folded into our words. The fact has become our fiction. The documentary now a memory. With snapshots collected from family albums. Conversations over coffee with old men crying. Talking about identifying his body. Talking about when they interviewed his replacement. Talking about how John Berger came to say he was sorry after I died. Talking about how he wrestled with including me in this story. How I wasn’t a footnote. Talking about how actually I was the one who kept it all together. The doctor. The surgery. The pharmacy. Talking about how they drunk wine long into the night. Berger drinking red wine from a coffee mug. Talking about how when he listened there was an intensity in the silence. How when he looked at you his eyes read you hungrily. As if he could see the writing you would become.

Video, 42 final animation

Jamie: Thank you for joining us on a journey into the book.

A story is always a rescue operation
He bled to death in the bathroom.
The pistol fell out of his hand.
He watched John Mills do it in a film.
He said to his family,

Hayley: That’s the way to do it.
Go somewhere you can clean up the mess.

Jamie: He wore many masks.
A different face for a different audience.
His patients. His peers. His family.
If he were still alive today.
He wouldn’t put up with people telling him what they thought they had
Because they googled it.
He wouldn’t like the paperwork. The processes. The protocols.
He preferred meeting patients to meeting targets.
He was a one-man band.
He would try and fix everything.
Medically he could put you back together.
Socially he could tear you apart.
He died not knowing how this book would come to be on doctors’ bookshelves. He died thinking he was a doctor of the past. Whereas in fact he was a doctor for today. A doctor for here and now. He says at the end of the book. As we see him walk towards the final page

**Hayley:** Whenever I am reminded of death. And it happens every day. I think of my own death. And it makes me try to work harder.

**Jamie:** Slide show please. Video, SLIDESHOW2. Sound, Untitled song track1 cleaned

**Hayley:** There is a tree on a hill And its branches grow high and wide Like the arteries of a heart Pumping blood Around this community And blood is spilt Around this tree As a man is trapped Beneath a branch Fallen in the wood And his leg is broken And the doctor’s car comes Hurtling down a country lane Honking all the way As the man’s blood is spurting To save the day As the man’s leg stops hurting To take him away The day this man lost his leg

**Jamie:** There is a man taking notes There is a man taking photos There is a man taking the blood pressure
Of a woman at a kitchen table
There is toast and butter
There is a doctor.

**Hayley:** There is a patient
There is a photographer
There is a writer
There is a curtain
And it is closed
There is a landscape
There is a book
And it is open

**Jamie:** The doctor is somewhere between
A doctor of the past
And a doctor of the future
A doctor of yesterday
And a doctor of tomorrow
A clerk of births
A secretary of deaths.

**Hayley:** He knows how things work
Between a doctor and a patient
A paragraph and a photograph
He knows how to tell a story

**Jamie:** And if he is a storyteller
It is because he listens. Intently.
To patients. To landscapes. To communities
He tells stories to reassure you.
He is the writer of your fate
The author of your future

**Hayley:** Only he knows how many pages
You have left to turn
How many words there are left
Before the book is closed
And put back on the shelf

**Jamie:** Our story ends with a gunshot

**Hayley:** A tree falling

**Jamie:** A knock at the door

**Hayley:** A phone call

**Jamie:** A book

**Hayley:** A bullet

**Jamie:** A post-mortem

**Hayley:** An afterword.

**Jamie:** And when the doctor
Heads off to the horizon
Walking up the hill
Towards his house
To signify his struggle

**Hayley:** They will reverse the image
To make it look like he is walking out of the book.

*Slow fade to black.*

*Sound, outro.*

**The End**

First Performed: Summerhall, August 2018