

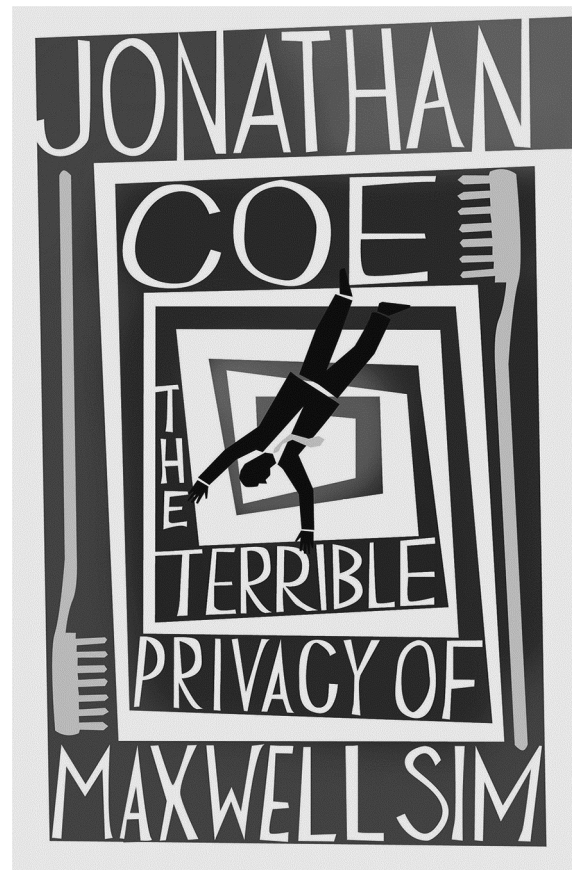
*The following text is the first chapter of the novel The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim, by Jonathan Coe.*

### Chapter I

When I saw the Chinese woman and her daughter playing cards together at their restaurant table, the water and the lights of Sydney harbour shimmering behind them, it set me thinking about Stuart, and the reason he had to give up driving his car.

I was going to say 'my friend Stuart', but I suppose he's not a friend any more. I seem to have lost a number of friends in the last few years. I don't mean that I've fallen out with them, in any dramatic way. We've just decided not to stay in touch. And that's what it's been: a decision, a conscious decision, because it's not difficult to stay in touch with people nowadays, there are so many different ways of doing it. But as you get older, I think that some friendships start to feel increasingly redundant. You just find yourself asking, 'What's the point?' And then you stop.

Anyway, about Stuart and his driving. He had to stop because of the panic attacks. He was a good driver, a careful and conscientious driver, and he had never been involved in an accident. But occasionally, when he got behind the wheel of a car, he would experience these panic attacks, and after a while they started to get worse, and they started to happen more often. I can remember when he first started telling me about all this: it was lunchtime and we were in the canteen of the department store in Ealing, where we worked together for a year or two. I don't think I can have listened very carefully, though, because Caroline was sitting at the same table, and things between us were just starting to get interesting, so the last thing I wanted to hear about was Stuart and his neuroses about driving. That must be why I never really thought about it again until years later, at the restaurant on Sydney harbour, when it all came back. His problem, as far as I can remember, was this. Whereas most people, as they watched the coming and going of cars on a busy road, would see a normal, properly functioning traffic system, Stuart could only perceive it as an endless



succession of narrowly averted accidents. He saw cars hurtling towards each other at considerable speeds, and missing each other by inches — time and time again, every few seconds, repeated constantly throughout the day. 'All those cars,' he said to me, 'only *just* managing not to crash into each other. How can people stand it?' In the end it became too much for him to contemplate, and he had to stop driving.

Why had this conversation just come back to me, tonight of all nights? It was 14 February 2009. The second Saturday in February. Valentine's Day, in case you hadn't noticed. The water and the lights of Sydney harbour were shimmering behind me, and I was dining alone since my father had, for various weird reasons of his own, refused to come out with me, even though this was my last evening in Australia, and the only reason for me visiting Australia in the first place had been to see him and try to rebuild my relationship with him. Right now, in fact, I was probably feeling more alone than I had ever felt in my life, and what really brought it home to me was the sight of the Chinese woman and her daughter playing cards together at their restaurant table. They looked so happy in each other's company. There was such a connection between them. They weren't talking very much, and when they did talk, it was about their card game, as far as I could tell, but that didn't matter. It was all in their eyes, their smiles, the way they kept laughing, the way they kept leaning in to each other. By comparison, none of the diners at the other tables seemed to be having any fun.