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Writing *Afterwards*

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PhD Thesis

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Foreword

Afterwards is my third published work of fiction, and came out in hardback from William Heinemann in February 2007. My intention had been to submit the manuscript as a PhD thesis, with an accompanying essay on the research process. However, since the publication of *Afterwards* has preceded my submission, and since the umbrella term for PhD studies such as mine is 'Creative Practice', I decided my dissertation would focus on the process by which *Afterwards* came into being: the writing and the editorial process which took it from draft through proof to publication and review. The first and longest section is an early draft of around 50,000 words. Then comes an essay detailing why this preliminary version of the story had to change, how editorial feedback shaped the new direction I took, and reflecting upon the critical reception of the novel. Finally, this essay has eight appendices comprising scenes in progress, exchanges with editors, reviews, and my own appraisal of drafts as they were produced. The hardback volume is attached to this submission, and the following pages provide the context for its production.

A First Attempt

Author's note: This early draft was submitted to my supervisor, Professor Willy Maley in June 2003. It is incomplete - there are gaps and some scenes towards the end are in note form - but shows the characters in development and demonstrates the initial direction I took with Afterwards.

PART ONE

Eve is doing the flowers so she'll be there.

Joseph knows it's a bad idea, but that he'll end up going just the same.

A family wedding, a cousin from his dad's side, and his mum insisted. Told him Arthur and little Ben were coming too, so it would look funny if he didn't. Please. She could borrow a suit for him and everything. Looked at him so hopeful, and then he couldn't disappoint her, not with the way he's been this past year and all the worry he's caused her.

They are late arriving, ushered into a pew at the back as the wedding is starting. Eve is there waiting, has been keeping the seats free for them. She mouths hello brother, smiling, takes his hand as Joseph sits down between her and his and mother. Arthur is on the end by the aisle with Ben on his lap, but the ceremony is long and the boy gets bored. Crawls across his Gran's knees, his Uncle Joseph's; sits on Eve's lap until he's had enough of his mum and then crawls back along the family to his father again. Joseph tries, but can't concentrate on the minister's voice, the readings.

Mind flicking from this to that: dusty sounds of coughing, feet shuffling, the smell of lilies, orange-brown pollen on his sister's fingers, wrapped round his own and resting on his knees, on the unfamiliar suit trousers that his mum had to tack up yesterday evening.

Joseph has stayed home five weeks now, the longest stretch in months. Sleeping on the sofa at Eve and Arthur's, visiting his mum every few days or so. Remind her that he's still there, not gone missing again, reassure her. She phoned Eve's every day for the first week or two, always about something else, but he knew she was checking. Looks so happy to have them all together today, sitting in a row like this: almost seems worth it.

Joseph looks round the church again, thinks he recognises a few people: uncles, maybe and a couple of aunts in hats. Only knows most of them from photos, and it's difficult to tell who's who with the wedding clothes and hairdos. At the front is his cousin with her hair dyed blonde and a veil pinned on top. Hasn't seen her since they were in primary school. In a few minutes the skinny bloke next to her will be her husband, and then the whole day will really get going. The standing around and the questions. Joseph had a couple of cans with Arthur this morning, after Eve had gone and they were dressing. Wearing off now and his guts are acid, head buzzing. Counting up the hours before they can go home again.

They are the first out and wait in the car park for the others to assemble. It is windy and bright and people squint as they leave the church, holding onto hats and hemlines. A few come over and say hello to Joseph's mum, and

she talks too fast introducing them.

- Teresa, you remember my Joey and Eve? And Art. Arthur. Eve's boyfriend?

- Of course I remember your children, Irene. You keeping well?

- Just fine thank-you. My Grandson, Ben. He's nearly two.

- Your boy Eve? Lovely flowers, you do many weddings?

Joseph sees his mum smiling and Eve trying, and he looks away so she won't have to catch his eye and get embarrassed. One of his uncles is making his way over, and he can't remember his name. Michael, Martin.

- Reenie. You're looking well, and Joey's on leave, are you?

- He's been out of the army over two years now, Trevor.

She puts a hand on his arm while she says it and Joseph nods at his mother's answer. Accepts the cigarette his uncle offers, glad of something to do for a minute or two, cupping his hands round the lighter.

- Well, it's good to see you all. Glad you could make it for our girl's day, she'll be happy you came.

- Father of the bride.

Eve whispers to Arthur when Trevor is out of earshot.

- My Dad's brother. The youngest.

About fifty of them outside on the tarmac now, and the photographer has them all walk down the road to the park, because the church is new red brick and ugly. Joseph's mum fusses with him on the way. Gets him to comb his hair and button his jacket because she says it hangs funny on his shoulders.

- You've lost weight again.

- Will you leave him be, Mum?

Eve steers Ben's pushchair so she's walking between her mother and brother.

- I shaved, though. Did you notice?

Joseph smiles, doesn't want them arguing: enough to be dealing with today. Eve says Trevor booked the community hall for the reception, just the other side of the park, and Joseph fills out the photo time thinking about what he will drink first.

Inside it gets easier for a while. People drinking and eating. Pork pies cut into quarters and pints served in plastic glasses. Free bar for half an hour and the queue is three deep. No-one bothers who you are in the crush and Joseph gets himself a pint and a chaser, which he downs first, waiting for the same to come for Arthur and a sweet white wine for his mother. Music playing now and a few people dancing, sharing fags, trying to pretend they're only talking while they shuffle to the muffled disco on the cracked lino.

Someone has closed the curtains to get the right atmosphere going, only there weren't enough to cover all the windows and Joseph can see that it's still light outside, the day still a long way from over. He sits with Arthur at a table strewn with paper plates and they take turns getting the drinks in. Eve is with Ben in the kids' corner with the balloons; his mother is talking to relatives and then standing, abandoned, until she finds the next one to walk over to.

Joseph remembers her answering for him, outside the church with Trevor. *What did she do that for?* Irritated now and he doesn't want to feel irritated with her. Sees how hard the day is: walking round her husband's family, making conversation. He's been dead twenty years and it's like she hardly knows any of them. Smiling, but she's not having a good time: forehead pushed into tight lines, fingers nervous around her wine-glass. Joseph can't watch, turns his attention to the beer and crumb mixture on the paper tablecloth in front of him.

Eve is with them when he looks up, swaying, Ben lying asleep over her shoulder.

- I wish Mum would sit down, she's got me all jumpy.

She laughs, but it doesn't sound right.

- She's okay, Evie. Just doing the rounds like you're supposed to.

Arthur takes Ben from her, lets him get comfortable: leaning up against his father's soft belly, small boy's fingers leaving cake and jelly traces on Arthur's best trousers. Eve is still standing, and Joseph tries to pull her into the chair next to him, stop her hovering like that, looking over at their mother.

- Just a couple hours more till bedtime.

Eve buys the next round and they sit together eating crisps, watching the crowd. People are drunk now, leaning into each other to be heard above the karaoke. Girls running about in gangs with balloons tied round their fingers; boys keeping busy swiping drinks off tables; men smoking and women dancing, properly now: jigging clusters of colourful blouses. The mother of the bride does *I Will Survive* and has everyone standing. Three generations together in the middle of the room, all clapping and joining in with the chorus.

Eve is singing too, and Arthur claps the sleeping Ben's hands together in time with the music. Joseph can't see his mum, but hopes she's joining in somewhere. Dark out now, inside too, loud and warm. He's at that comfortable drunk stage, maybe just over, faces and noises blending easily now, and everyone singing makes him think it's not so bad to be here. His sister smiling at him, nodding. His bladder full, glasses on the table nearly empty. His turn up at the bar, must be. Joseph stands and signals to Eve and Arthur that he's going over, walks the long way around the edge of the dance floor, looking for his mother, but can't make her out in the swaying and clapping.

The toilets smell of spliff and piss and two little boys in suits are over by the sinks. Laughing, punching the hand dryers to keep them blasting, running the taps, stuffing the plug holes with paper, first in the row already filling, overflowing. Long mirror on the far wall and Joseph can't quite register the bad skin too thin face that turns to him as he is leaving.

The bar staff are sweating and he can't catch an eye. His uncle Trevor comes over while Joseph is waiting, rests his cigar in the ashtray next to him, jacket buttons undone and stomach loose over his trousers.

- Can I get you one in Trevor?

- I should go easy, but thanks Joey.

His eyes are slow, smiling. Soft neck red above his collar.

- So your sister drives a hard bargain.

- Eve does?

- Don't get me wrong. Got a good business head there. And they were worth every penny, those flowers.

Joseph smiles, nodding. Head feeling loose, like he's tipping from comfortable to beyond. Thinks he should miss this round maybe, pace himself a bit like his uncle.

- What you doing now Joseph Junior? You working?

Joseph holds up a tenner to the barman who is still busy but nods at him.

- Painting and decorating mostly. Finished a job last week there.

Not exactly a lie, but not the truth either. Last painting job he had he walked out of a month ago, and the one before was much the same. He's been helping Eve out this past week, early mornings setting up her market stalls, but doesn't want to tell Trevor that. Too humiliating.

- That's good work. Shame about the army though.

Joseph orders three lagers instead of answering.

- My brother would have been proud of his son in the services. Would have wanted you to stick with it, I reckon.

- You think so?

It comes out quick and sounds aggressive. Joseph hears his own voice and it has him edgy, shifting his weight from one foot to another thinking he doesn't want to be getting wound up now. *Too much drinking.* Too risky. Careful to keep his eyes off his uncle, doesn't want the conversation turning.

- I know so. Never ran from anything.

Trevor is blinking, slow, still leaning into him, still friendly. Joseph thinks maybe his uncle is too drunk to have picked up the tone, and it could still be

alright, as long as he makes sure to keep things even now. No rising to the bait. *No smart answers.* Feels the hard edge of the bar against his ribs, the in and out, in and out, of his own breathing.

- I was twenty-three when he died. What age are you now?

- I was seven.

He can see Trevor working it out, counting back through the years, and Joseph doesn't want him doing that: better get this conversation finished. *Don't remember much about my Dad,* he wants to tell him. Which is true, he doesn't, but Joseph can't say it: can't trust the words not to come out angry, even though he's not angry about it. He watches the flow of movement across the bar, the exchange of pints and money. *If he wants to go on, just let him. Be over in a minute.* The drinks are a long time coming.

- He wasn't one for giving up on things, my brother. Your dad.

Trevor isn't giving up and Joseph has to look away again. Around the room: remind himself what there is in here apart from his uncle. Fill his head with something, stop it translating Trevor's words into accusations. Coward. *Is that what he's saying?* Karaoke finished, some of the women have got a line dance going, slapping thighs and whooping. Kids running and falling over and crying. Everywhere people are shouting, making sure they're understood with their hands flying. Sharp gestures, smiling faces. Fag smoke hanging like a veil a metre above the shifting crowd of heads and shoulders and elbows. Joseph is still at the bar with Trevor, trying to keep

the sounds and sights and smells apart, head chasing around the room, but he's doing his best to pull himself in again.

- Wasn't he?

Trying to keep it neutral, but he can't say what his Dad was like, and it seems to him like his uncle knows it.

- You tell me, Trevor.

Trevor leans in further, Joseph hopes he didn't hear it. Knows this is going nowhere good. Can't stop his mouth. Stupid thing to say, best not say it again, best not say anything. He looks over to where Eve is sitting and sees her watching. Arthur next to her and he knows that both of them are ready to come over, step in if they have to. Two out of three pints on the bar now, not long to go. Joseph can feel Trevor's eyes on him, thinks he should find a way to end this on a good foot, but the music is louder again and he's had too much, so he leaves one of the beers on the bar for his uncle instead of speaking. Can't smile or anything. Can see Trevor shaking his head as he turns, and it's all he can do not to throw the pints in his hands all over the bar and his uncle. Doesn't want to start shouting. Eve is watching. He wishes she wasn't, but he's glad she is. *Keep walking.* And he does: arms unsteady, hands wet from the spilling, but he's getting there, through the dancing cousins and back to the table.

- You okay?

Eve stands up as he gets nearer, sits when he does.

- Fine.

Doesn't feel that way, like he can't get his breathing steady again.

- What was Trevor on about then?

..

In and out, lungfulls.

- Nothing.

Eve is still watching him.

- Wanted to know if I was working.

He pushes a pint across the table to her, the other one to Arthur who smiles at him.

- Don't worry about it, Joey. I get asked the same thing all the time.

- What did you say to him?

- Not much.

Joseph watches Arthur lifting Ben, waking him gently, doesn't look at his sister and her worried face, wishes Eve would be quiet now, just leave it.

- Tell him where to get off next time.

- No, don't do that.

Their mother is with them now, pulling her coat on. It's not late yet, but she's looking tired, disappointed. Joseph stands up, helps her into her sleeves.

- Sorry Mum.

He's not sure what for exactly. Wonders if she saw him up at the bar, if she's been talking to Trevor.

- Doesn't matter, Joey.

- Shall we take you home then?

She smiles and he's glad of it.

- You do that son.

Ben is crying when they get back to the house and Arthur takes him up for his bath. Eve comes into the front room with a cup of tea for Joseph.

- Was I a cow this evening?

- Couldn't tell you, Eve. Too busy drinking.

Both red-eyed, they smile at each other. Enough said for one day.

- What time is it? Do you want to go to bed?

- Don't know. Early. Yeah.

She gets the duvet and pillows out from behind the sofa for him and he tucks the sheet round the cushions. Joseph hears Eve and Arthur moving around upstairs for a while. Ben crying again, settling, Eve's voice talking him back to sleep and then it's quiet.

--

Been this way how long? Well over a year now. Joseph thinks it might be getting better sometimes, but it never does, not for long, and it's always the same when it happens. Like everything is getting away from him and there's no way he can stop it. Could be anything that sets him off, no way of knowing. Too much noise, too much talking, car driven too fast past him, wrong words said on a bad day and that will be it. Job chucked, or he's got the sack, or he's shouting at someone or, one time, fighting. Shoving and kicking, all mistimed punches and falling over, embarrassing when he thinks about it now but vicious too. Bloke he'd been working with, can't remember what started that but he was glad when it was over. Winded, on the floor and frightened. Pain after the adrenaline, and cuts he knows his sister saw

later, even though she said nothing.

Mostly it's no drama, nothing so obvious. Just can't be staying so he's gone again. Not turning up for work or answering the phone. Trying to go as many days as he can without talking, no contact with anyone. Hard, because he hasn't got his own place, and most of the time no money. Only way to sort himself out is to go missing.

--

Joseph lies on the sofa with his eyes shut first, then open. Thinks he sleeps for an hour or so, but after that he keeps getting up, walking into the kitchen. Doesn't know what he wants when he gets there: boils the kettle, listens to the roar of it in the quiet house, makes tea but doesn't drink it.

Thinking about Trevor leaning at the bar and how he got so angry. *Over nothing*. And then Eve, the look on her face watching him, all that worry. Everything feels tight thinking about it and he can't lie down now. On the sofa, up again, back in the kitchen. Standing at the back door, looking out through the window into the garden. Tiny patch of grass and narrow concrete path between this house and the next one: out onto the road. Five weeks he's managed. Maybe that's enough to be getting on with. Tries not to think what Eve will say to his mum, or how she'll take it. Has his face up against the door, breath misting the cold glass and then retreating.

Packing his things together, he stops when he hears someone upstairs stirring. A voice, Eve's or Arthur's, but they don't come down, so he zips up his bag and has it ready in the corner.

Five thirty and Eve stands blinking, hall light on outside the open doorway, her face half in shadow. Joseph is dressed now and she's found him. Still dark out, and she has her market clothes on, hair tied under a scarf, watching.

- You'll not be going away again, will you Joey?

Eve's face is squashed by sleep, but her eyes are dark and open. She's late, Joseph knows her routine: should be buying the day's flowers already, but she's waiting for him to answer.

- No. I won't. Had too much last night to be sleeping.

Eve blinks and smiles and kisses him before she leaves, but he's not sure she believes him. Joseph watches her walking out to the van while he takes apart his sofa bed. Her shoulders are pulled up and she looks thin and sad, and he is sorry. But it's getting light now and Ben will wake up soon, and Arthur. Duvet and sheet folded, keys left on the side, he's careful to shut the door quietly.

--

I was four years in the army.

And when he left he thought they'd all be behind him. Taken him months, years to realise it's not so easy to do that: put that bit of life away. Maybe no way at all, none that he can see now in any case.

Feels like he was something else before, but can't say now what was different. Meets people who knew him from school and after. Sees them looking at him, talking to him like he was someone else, and he would ask them, only he knows it sounds mad: what did I used to be like then? Could hold down a job if I wanted. Could talk to women. Could work on a hangover, could go days and no drinking, no smoking, never even thinking about it. Could run, eat in the morning. Sleep at night, use the phone without getting edgy. Did things then, didn't think about them. Got hungry. Not tired all the time. Could stay in the room if someone got angry. Just be somewhere and not thinking I might have to be gone again.

--

Everyone at home said how wide he got when he joined the army. Shoulders gone solid, his chest and thighs. Basic training, always shouting at you that you were lanky, slow, dirty. Never thought so much before about standing, washing, moving, never done so much running or eating. Had to buy new clothes and none of them fit him now, but it's not like the old body returning. More like a stranger's bones come to replace his: still tall, but his shoulders are bent forwards, and he is thin with narrow ribs, long arms and

legs, flat hands and fingers.

--

He's gone nearly a week before he phones his sister's. Picks a time when they'll be out so he can just leave a message. Doesn't say why he left, though he knows Eve would ask him. Not sure what he'd tell her anyway: this time it was their Dad set him off, only it wasn't. The way Trevor talked about him, maybe: leaning, drunk, not listening: Joseph can't say what it was now. Not their father anyway: *nothing there to get angry about*: not much to remember.

He had a beard, heavy glasses, so much on his face, you couldn't get past it. Joseph remembers him lifting the square black frames when he was tired; the damp skin underneath; light sheen on his closed lids; soft creases around his eyes. He was a fat man; you could always hear him breathing. Joseph liked the noise; it was comforting.

Different losing someone at twenty-three: sixteen extra years of memories adding up to something more than he has. No idea what his Dad would have said about the army or about leaving. How to explain to Trevor that it didn't really matter? Without offending him, no disrespect intended, because that was his brother.

He's not in any of our pictures. Died when I was seven, but it's like even

before that he was never really with us.

The mantelpiece photos, family albums. Always just the three of them, Eve and Mum and Joseph.

He has one he carries in his wallet he could have shown his uncle. The grass is yellow, dusty. They are all wearing summer clothes but still look too hot: high pink cheeks and squinting. Joseph's chest is bare and skinny, and you can see where the tan line stops at his neck, his upper arms: where his t-shirt would normally be.

It's the year after my Dad died.

They are outside the new house his mum got from the council. Eve is in her pushchair, with Joseph behind, holding on to the handles with his big brother's hands. He is standing on the low brick wall that marked out their patch of dry grass from the neighbours'. He is smiling; camera caught him talking, head tilting towards his Mum in the foreground, who looks so young. Same age as he is now, with two children and an uncertain expression. Arms folded, face somewhere between a smile and a show of defiance.

Nana would have taken that. His mother's mother. She took most of our pictures.

They moved in with her after his father died, in the autumn or winter, sometime before Christmas. Months where he and Eve shared the spare room and their mum slept on the sofa. Folded the blankets into a box in the corner before she left for work in the mornings. Two cleaning jobs, nursery and a pub, learned to cut hair later, after Eve started school.

He'd tell Trevor he never thought about his Dad being gone. Doesn't know what work he did, can't picture the house they lived in with him.

They had ice-creams the day they moved into the new place. Soft white ones with flaky chocolate stuck in. Summer was coming, and the ice cream van was doing its first round of the year. Nana had given them money to go out and chase it, and then they sat in the new house amongst the boxes, eating and listening to the tinsel chimes as the van drove off the estate again.

Does that say it all? Would that have been enough for Trevor? Not angry, not sad, nothing there to be regretting. Doesn't know what to call it.

Indifference, maybe?

He thinks he's missed something important. But how to cover it all? You couldn't. The rest of life, the most and best of life which was at home. The estate, on the edge of their town, between the industrial estate and the canal. Built at the same time the car plant was, for the workers and their wives and children. Rows of red brick semis, roads laid out in concentric

circles, endless pavements, kerbstones dipping for the countless driveways. Shops on one side of the estate with their concrete forecourt, primary school and allotments on the other, and after that the railway lines and the river. Their place was in the middle, where the gardens backed onto each other in a mess of wire and picket fences, sagging and ignored by the neighbourhood children, ball games played across and through them. What came before Joseph doesn't remember: for him it's as though everything started there.

Walking to school the long way after his paper round, football and cigarettes at the recreation ground. Sunday dinners at his Nana's house. Auntie Jean, who wasn't really his auntie but lived next door, kids grown up and gone. She looked out for him and Eve after school when their mum was working, took the fence down between their houses three weeks after they moved in. His mum and Jean sat smoking together on the back step in the evenings and Joseph liked to listen, not to what they were saying so much as the sound of their talking. Lying on the rug by the fire in the living room, cool air from the open door coming across the floor towards him, half an ear on his mother laughing, half watching the telly.

--

I was in the army four years, and the last one I was in Ireland.

Six month tour, and he's not really told anyone about it since, what it was like, what happened. And that feels strange sometimes: so little said but so

much thinking.

Joseph bought himself out after he came back to the mainland. All his savings. *Hard to spend money over there*: no going out, strict limits on the amount you could be drinking. Felt worth it when he found out how much he had in the bank, and what he could do with it.

Had to borrow the rest from Eve and took any work going for the first year or so to pay her back. Thought he was clear after that, and more time on his hands, but it was all just starting. Things coming back and that feeling: he's got no way of controlling them.

--

Contractor got killed. New RUC station being built. He was the plumber, going to fit the toilets. Had a van load of cisterns, and they blew him up on his way there. IRA, INLA, *some set of initials*. Republican ones anyway, and it was probably not meant to go off until he was parked by the building. *Best laid plans and all that*.

They got there about ten minutes after it happened. Had to wait for bomb disposal, seal off the area. Tyre shreds all over, car doors, sleeves and what was left inside them. Took a while to work out there were two of them in the van. Turned out it was his son who was with the plumber. Didn't usually work together, but he'd been on the dole for a while and his Dad was probably paying him something, or a favour for a favour. Joseph remembers

laughing. About the body parts. Too many of them. And about someone having to make a phone call to ask if the plumber had a mate. That and the toilets all over the road. The plastic balls that float up, make the water stop running: they were everywhere you looked: bright blue and yellow at the side of the road, in the hedgerows.

Ballcocks. Someone said that's what they're called and then they were off again, pissing themselves over ballcocks and body parts.

One of the other soldiers was puking. Kneeling on the verge chucking his breakfast into the grass and laughing.

--

B Company were stationed in South Armagh. 98 men to cover the 50 square miles around DSH: Drumshitehole is what the outgoing soldiers called it. A main square and six roads off it. Four running south and west, the few miles to the border, the other two due north into bandit country.

Down three streets, round four corners and you were back where you started. Small place and it was quiet for weeks on end. Nothing like the mad, bad days of the 1970s, but they shouldn't be fooled, his corporal said. Ops room full of photos, known operatives, suspects. Sometimes felt like everyone in town was up there on the walls: no-one you didn't need to be watching. *We're living in the IRA's back garden.* His corporal again. A

crossroads between the province and the republic.

--

Difficult job. Could never decide if he hated it or loved it. Always be somebody talking about leaving, but moaning came with the territory, just like boredom and adrenaline and no chance of privacy. That was the biggest shock of basic training: the anxiety and exhaustion, the fighting and laughing and crying that went on all around him. Five of them in one room with blue lino tiles, washing, tidying, polishing, cleaning, ironing every evening. Talking talking talking. Someone always saying, always asking something, all the time. Joseph remembers walking corridors, trying hard to find a place where nobody else was.

Six in a room in South Armagh. Not like any barracks he'd known before, more like a bunker. All barbed wire and reinforced concrete. Thinking back it was like the place had no windows: nothing that would leave them open to incoming mortars. Everything still done together, washing, eating, working, cleaning, TV, pool table, bar. Knew each other's smells and sounds better than their own. Joseph sat on the toilet and could hear the others ripping the piss out of him, his slow bowels, but at least it was a small room just for him, just for a short while.

Years in the army by then, and thought he was used to it, but when he got a weekend home he spent in his room. Friday night to Sunday morning. Got

up after his mum had gone to bed and went downstairs to watch telly, back in his bedroom again before she came down for her breakfast. She was worried, of course. Disappointed, too. Wanted to hear about how it was going, take him out for a pint and a pub meal, show him off to the neighbours if the chance came. But she didn't complain. She's good like that: Sunday and she said she would drive him to the station when he finished packing, but he insisted on walking, alone, and so she let him.

Can't decide how he should feel about it all, now that it's over, and most of the time the memories don't seem to fit together. Not properly. No order to them or logic. No telling when they'll come or won't, they just happen.

If Joseph tries to go through those years, makes a conscious effort, he just gets other things coming at him, out of other places. Thoughts he hopes might lead him somewhere, but the trouble is he can't tell the useful from the useless until he's let them run on too long and they have him distracted.

One of the sangers, where they did their guard duty. Big cage of a place, metal fortress on a normal street full of houses. Black steel and barbed wire and inside it was freezing in winter, suffocating in the summer weather. Nothing to do in there, just waiting and watching and nothing ever happened.

Man with the next door house had a garden. Big lawn with trees in it, flower beds round the edges. Pensioner, Joseph thought, because he was always out there, never working. Grey hair combed sideways and his trousers ironed into creases. That grass was the thing that Joseph remembers. Black sangar and the watchtower behind it, spikey poles in the sky of the transmitters and receivers. And then this garden, just next to all that, this lawn like a big patch of velvet. Snooker table green and perfect. Old man with a paunch and grey moustache raking it clear of moss, aerating it with a fork. Beautiful and soft. Rain keeping it lush.

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The Troubles had been going on for years already. Over twenty, plus the hundreds before that the army told them about and he'd already forgotten most of before he got on the ferry. Remembers that he was one of 18,000 British soldiers in the province. Extra battalion deployed: *due to the increase in sectarian violence. Semtex, Armalite, Red Hand Commando. Nationalist, Loyalist, Paramilitary.* Words he knew from the TV, the papers, and now he was part of it.

Only knew about the IRA before, now he had a whole new bowl of alphabet soup to swallow: *UFF, UDA, UVF, UUP.* One of them was a political party, but he could never remember. Riots in the cities, the summer he was there, and the police attacked by Loyalists, which he didn't understand because he thought the RUC were Protestants too, though you weren't supposed to say that.

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Belfast was what you saw on the telly: all burnt out cars, mad murals, kerb stones painted red white and blue or green white and gold, and between them a run of barbed wire called a peace line. Joseph didn't know that Ireland would be beautiful.

Days when it didn't rain out in the country: fields and woods and rivers, dry stone walls, the wet ground and the sunshine on his skin. Held the backs of his hands up under his nose to get the best of it, breathing the sun-warm smell of them in. Only brown and green and blue, but the shades were better than any he'd seen at home. Loved it then, being out there on OPs. No-one ever had to beat or bully him into getting moving, tabbing miles on end which he'd hated in training. More soldiers killed out here than anywhere else in the Province, got taken everywhere by helicopter because the roads were too dangerous. But these were times when Joseph forgot that, or it didn't seem to matter. Sleeping out and seeing the hills in the morning, hearing the sound of a stream before you got to it. Still days and sky, cold air, birds flying. Feeling afterwards like his head had been cleared and his lungs been filled. Lying in his bunk and searching out the bruise on the inside of his arm where his rifle butt kept knocking; that tired ache in his legs, the quietness of sleep coming.

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He was there for six months. *Summer to winter*. That spring, a soldier from the outgoing company had been blown up at the border.

Sniper in Armagh got his fourth just a few days after Joseph got there. Not someone he knew, in another company, but for days after he could feel it at the back of his neck, between his shoulders. Reminded anyway, every time he put his flak jacket on and his helmet. Not war but terror. Protection felt like an invitation, uniform target with a porcelain breastplate.

A woman gave sweets to soldiers last Christmas. Two pound tin loaded with explosives.

Tail End Charlie. Last man on patrol always walking backwards.

Soldiers pissing against cars, trees, walls, marking out the province like dogs, Joseph thought. He did it too.

Foot patrol, they found a body in the morning. Cold and just getting light and there it was between the waste ground and garages. Punishment beating, legs all twisted under. Lying among the dog shit and tufts of grass. Sometime the whole place felt like that, all quiet and cruelty.

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When it started, the remembering, Joseph started moving. Found nowhere he could be for long, wasn't anywhere he could settle. Spent a few days

here, a few more there: friends places, then friends of friends, sometimes hostels. In a place for veterans for over a week once. Was good for the first days, easy, familiar: the sharing and the three meals a day and everyone speaking the same way again. But the man in the next bed had screaming nightmares, and the dayroom was full Gulf war blokes and all of them angry. Bitter talk about compensation and pensions, scared Joseph thinking he'd get the same way as them.

People he knew from before the army, a lot of them were married now and couldn't be doing with him. Malky, who grew up down the road from him, he was still in the same life as before: drinking, smoking, living off dole scams and killing boredom. Being with him was easy in that way: days went by and he lost count of them, slept on the couch and Malky never asked questions. Always a bit of something floating about to be taking. Ate up the days well enough but not good for the paranoia levels. And there were always new people. Ones he didn't know, and Malky didn't seem to give a toss who was in his flat, long as they brought something with them.

After a while, once he'd used up his money and his possibilities, Joseph would bounce back and forth between Eve's house and his mother's. South London streets he didn't know or the old estate that was too familiar. Leave a couple of days in between, that turned into weeks where he'd go wandering. Sleeping rough, he used to try and get out of London. Hitch down to the coast, Brighton was usually easy enough, and then out to the South Downs or on to the beaches.

Knew how to live out, that's part of what they taught him. Cold, salt and wet in a bin-liner bivouac. Broke into a beach hut one night, and ended up staying. Second summer after he left, and it was quiet there and for a while that made it not so hard to be remembering. Learnt to let them come, the snatches, and then at least there was calm after they were gone, beach was mostly deserted, nothing else to disturb him. Late summer, cool evenings, windy days passing, sleeping, smoking. Wooden walls and shingle, kerosene smell of the stove when he got it up and running. Walking back along the cliffs from the village with food and tobacco. Hitching up to London every two weeks, signing on. But he lost track of the days and then they stopped his money. Went home and took a bag of food from his mum's place while she was out working. Got more on tick from the shop in the village by the beach, but after three weeks the owner shut the door when he saw him coming. Stove ran out, weather turning colder and it was after that everything started hurting. Skin cracked, round his mouth, under his nails. Great sore patches, red raw under his clothes. Woke and he could taste the sea but the summer was lost to him. Still dark, pitch, and freezing. Tried but couldn't stand, crawling. Scared then. Crying.

Reversing the charges from a phone box when the dawn came. Eve shouting and Arthur saying what was the place called, what was the number, the dialling code, stay there and he'd come out and get him.

--

I was in the army four years, that last one in Ireland. It was on that tour, near the end of it, when it happened.

--

His sister got pregnant while he was over there and started writing him letters. How many weeks (12), how big the baby was (size of a plum), how she wanted to know if it was a boy or a girl but Arthur didn't. *I'm not a Christmas cracker.*

Been with Art how long? Joseph was fifteen when it started, which would make her thirteen, so over ten years by then. Arthur was in Joseph's year at school, but he didn't know him. Eve used to come out sometimes with Joseph that summer, down at the rec or at the river, one or the other. It would be him, Paul Mitchell, Paul Squires who he knew from snooker and Sweeney, and it was alright to bring Eve along because he knew they fancied her, especially Paul Mitchell, even if he never did anything about it. They were smoking down at the swings the first time Joseph remembers Arthur coming round for Eve. She was lying on the grass and Paul had just got it together to sit down next to her. They'd all chipped in earlier and Sweeney had been to the offy. Sun was setting behind the pub and the chippy, street lights coming on. Sweet-sick taste of whatever it was they were passing round, back of his throat gone thick with it, burning feeling of too many fags smoked on his tongue. And there was Arthur coming over from the bus stop.

- What does he want?
- Tell him to piss off when he gets here.
- No don't.

Eve was getting up, brushing the grass off her skirt. Told Joseph to tell their Mum she'd be back by eleven, and then she was off and waving at Arthur. She didn't look round, but he did. As if to make sure they were looking, seeing him with her.

- What's your sister playing at?

Paul Mitchell couldn't believe it. Paul Squires was laughing. Eve was off with Arthur. Who never said anything to anyone. What's that about? When did that happen?

- And he's got a twisty lip. Don't forget that bit.

Sweeney thought it was hilarious, said they had to sew it up after Arthur was born.

- You should get yourself one, Mitch.

He pulled his top lip to one side, in an exaggerated version of Arthur's and then Paul Mitchell punched him.

Joseph wasn't angry, just remembers being pissed. Years later Arthur told Joseph it was Eve who had asked him. He thought she was having him on, wasn't even sure he liked her at first, but she never gave in.

His sister was like that when she made her mind up, unstoppable.

Eve came to his passing out parade and then refused the drink he bought her in the bar after. She had dressed up, skirt and blouse, but couldn't bring herself to do more than that, standing with her face closed while everyone in the room was laughing, chatting. Art said she gave their mum a row later, in the car on the way home, because she cried when she saw him in uniform. Eve shouted at her on the motorway for a good twenty minutes: she should be crying real tears about it, save the sentimental bubbling for weddings. Joseph remembers laughing at his Mum and her hankie, wonders whether she thinks her daughter was right now.

--

Summer in Drumshitehole and the local kids swam in the river. Sat on the banks in wet shorts, skinny boys shivering. Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen year olds. Drinking lager out of plastic bottles, smoking, shouting, hardest ones jumping off the old stone bridge into the water. Cuts on their legs from the rocks at the bottom, but no limping, no pain showing while the girls were there on the opposite shore watching. All the patrols talked about it, how the

girls had to go swimming soon, but days passed and still they kept their clothes on. Boys only in and out the water, stomachs pulled in from the cold and skin on their ribs shining blue-white in the unexpected sunshine.

Out on OP, they kept watch on the girls through binoculars, always one of them ready for when they got their kit off. The boys nicked tractor inner tubes from one of the farmers and this was what did it. Joseph was on watch when it happened, but he kept quiet when the girls finally got off the banks. Still not showing much skin except leg, pale wet limbs splayed and floating around on their black inflated rings. Mouths wide and Joseph thought he could just hear them from up on the hill where he was lying. Screaming and laughing, turning and moving with the current, boys swimming out and splashing them, T-shirts and knickers clinging damp then so Joseph could see more, if he kept the binoculars still enough. Insects dancing in the long grass in front of him, sweat on his belly from the sun, from lying there for hours and bored and uncomfortable. Breath held, pressed down onto the hillside, kept watching as long as he could, until the girls floated under the bridge he passed the binoculars on.

- You dirty fuck, why didn't you say nothing?

They heard later that a few of the younger boys took ring each and drifted off downstream, beyond the bridge and away from the town. Made it as far as the sea, down at Dundalk, in the Republic, and when it got dark they hitched home again.

The farmer was furious about his inner tubes, dumped at the beach, and his wife wanted him to go down to the police station and report them stolen. But there was no chance of that, because two of the boys were sons of someone important.

- That's the way things work here. No justice. IRA makes it's own laws. No-one follows the ones we're here to be upholding.

Serious RUC officer, tight lipped and livid. Joseph knew he should, but he couldn't get worked up with him: about the principle maybe, but not about the boys and their inner tubes. They saw the five of them again a few days later, all up on ladders, painting the guttering on one of the farmer's outbuildings, and the corporal said they were witnessing the local version of justice in action.

The border was only marked every so often, so you had to keep your eyes open: for a line painted on a fence post, a mark on a tree. Easy to cross and not know you'd done it and they ended up spending most of one patrol in the Republic. Got bawled out by the company commander for that one: what were you doing, playing Special Forces? Could see the blood vessels under his eyes working, thinking about them upsetting relations with the Irish Government, making the company a laughing stock in front of the locals. It didn't turn into a diplomatic incident, but they did get a few cool smiles over the next few days.

- All Ireland, isn't it? Same woods, same fields, same rivers.

The comment from the old man who always stood smoking outside the post office. Townsend said he was right, but not to his face, of course. Only to Joseph later on when they were mopping out the toilets: part of their punishment for the border crossing. And while Townsend was going on about drawing stupid lines in the earth and sky, Joseph thought how he'd sooner be painting a barn than scrubbing urinals, and if he'd grown up here, maybe he'd be in a different army altogether.

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Two days in Bangor on R and R, twenty of them. Driven there in a coach: civilian vehicle, civilian clothes. Three small boys at the side of the road, couldn't have been more than six years old: hard little faces, spitting, giving them the finger as they were passing. Everyone knew who they were, no getting away from it.

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It was autumn.

Over half way through his time there. Reports of increased border activity, and they were doing more vehicle check-points. But it seemed something like this came in most weeks, and then nothing happened.

It was Armagh. It was dusk and we'd been out two hours, fields and roads.

Joseph thought there would be nothing doing that day, either: no buzz, no expectation, just out in the November wet and dark and feeling hungry.

Tired. Joseph remembers runs of 16 hours on 8 hours off and waking up all the time. Always too hot in his bunk, they kept the heating on all the time in the block. *Fuck knows why.* Waking at all hours, dry eyes and parched, hangover without the drinking.

Learnt to sleep when you could. Was a relief when you were sent to lie down, but you could snatch it anywhere after a while. Anytime you were waiting. If your patrol was on standby, even on quick reaction, sitting there in all your kit at 30 seconds notice, just close your eyes and you'd be dreaming. Mad things, twenty different stories and all in the space of seconds. People talking, noises outside your head making their way in, awake and asleep mixing together. A phone ringing somewhere in the other room and in your dream you'd be patrolling, walking down the road and into a house to answer it. Irish family in the front room watching telly, all getting up and heading for the door when they see you and your rifle. Only it's not them, it's your patrol called out and moving, and so you're up and running too, outside sometimes before you were really awake again.

Townsend.

He was doing that check point with Joseph. Was in the same brick, patrolling with him most days for the whole time they were there.

Townsend was Welsh, kept a photo taped up on the wall by his pillow: the hill behind his Dad's house in the Rhonda. Said he climbed it every time he got home on leave, and he liked to have it there to remind him of what was important in life, but you could never tell with him if he was serious.

A wind up merchant. Always watching you while he was talking, and always some part of him smiling: mouth, eyes, something in his manner, so whatever he said you'd have to be careful about joining in, just in case he turned it against you. Told Joseph his cousins used to set fires in the holiday homes of the English, and that they were right to do it, he'd have done it too only his Dad said he wasn't old enough.

- *What you doing here then?*

- Fuck knows. You?

Sang *Give Ireland Back to the Irish* in the NAAFI bar and was put on CO's

orders. Drink in one hand, standing on a chair, loud but still in tune, hard to tell if he was pissed or just acting. Insisted he was only proving a point, settling a long-running bar room dispute: McCartney could be as political as Lennon when the mood took him. Townsend was smiling again when he said it, and the major didn't take kindly. Two weeks on drill, an hour every morning being bawled at in the transport yard by one of the sergeants, who told him to stay out of trouble afterwards because he hated drill, too fucking boring.

--

- *What you doing here then?*

- Fuck knows. You?

Townsend was seventeen when he signed up.

- That's my excuse.

Too young to think it through. Joseph was nineteen and wonders if that counts for him too. Three months shy of his twentieth birthday when he went down to the recruitment office. Others were there with their mates, one with his Dad: not old enough yet to sign his own papers.

Infantry Command Respect. Even back then he'd laughed about the videos you got and the leaflets. Couldn't take it too seriously, actors running about

looking hard in cammo, loud music and speedboats. Never expected that from the army, never that stupid, so what was it exactly?

Some said they joined because it was that or the dole queue. But Joseph was working: painting and decorating. Had loads of jobs on, and the boss gave them speed and lager to keep them moving into the evenings. He remembers the clenched gut feeling in the van in the mornings: long days and nights working away inside of him. The money was good, but he wanted something to change, the routine was getting to him, getting boring. The jobs and the pub and then the carry out after. Mostly with the same blokes he was working with, easier than finding others to go with after a while. But then you always had the same nothing conversations and ended up staying later than you meant because they'd laugh at you for going home and you'd have to face them again in the morning. And then there'd be joints passed round and the landlord would make it a lock in.

Others said the army was the only ones would take them because of their criminal record. Joseph had one too: kept some knocked off goods for a friend, and a cut of the profits. Couple of thousand pounds in T-shirts and trainers, under the bed at his mum's house, which is where the police found them. His mum cried about it but he only got community service: nothing to link him to the original crime and he never told his bosses about it. They never checked, or if they did they never said and it was never a problem.

He could have got a new job, a new crowd, or moved away even. His sister

did about that time: up to London with Arthur, and he could have done the same. *Something anyway.* Not like he had no other options open to him. Eve was doing a course: Joseph had chucked college a couple of years before, but that was just him being lazy and it wasn't like he couldn't start that again.

When Joseph thinks about it there were blokes on the estate who'd been in the army, and a couple he played snooker with too, but he never talked to them about it. He'd finished a job, first day off in ages, got the address of the recruitment office out of the yellow pages. He was still seeing Julie then, and can remember talking to her after he'd been down there. Afternoon and they were sitting out the back of the pub on the benches, and he told her about a soldier he'd seen on the news during the Falklands. Must have been about 12 then, not much older and the soldier was just one short image in the report, interviewed while he was digging in for the night, but he was the bit that Joseph remembered. It was getting dark and raining, wind battering it straight into his face while the soldier was talking. The reporter was hunched over the microphone and he looked freezing, and the soldier's lips and fingers were blue, and you knew he'd be staying out there after the cameras were gone, but the way he was talking made it seem like nothing. *Not playing the hard man, just like he didn't have the same limits.* The difference between him and the shivering journalist, the people in their front rooms watching.

It sounded good to Joseph while he was telling her, and he remembers Julie nodding, but even then he was surprised to hear it coming out of his mouth,

didn't really know where it came from.

And none of it adds up to him now: not enough of a reason. All he can find are these bits and pieces, none of which he finds convincing. Bored of the life he had then, but why the army and not some other thing? Joseph doesn't trust this about himself, this not knowing, just like he doesn't trust that he hated being a soldier. Remembers lots of times when he wanted to leave, but he wouldn't have stuck it out for four years if it was that bad, would he? He thinks that it's just the same as not remembering why he joined up in the first place: his memory can't admit it. Making excuses all the time: *it was all a big mistake. Not my fault. I never wanted to do it.*

It was a relief, he does remember that much: when he got his dates for basic training. It was like everything got easier. Still working, but it didn't bother him any more, the long, same days and all the same people. And it was like that again when they were told they'd been posted to Ireland: it was good, knowing he was going, that feeling when he woke up that something real was going to happen.

Some said they could see no other option, but most of the blokes he knew in the army were happy to be there, and Joseph thinks he should count himself among them. The training was the hardest thing he'd ever done and he is still proud that he got through it. *I wanted to.* Maybe he just wanted to be a soldier. Does he have to know why? *I do.* He has to find a reason.

Because if he doesn't then it was all just arbitrary. A meaningless, stupid set

of events, a coincidence. And it can't be that, can't just be that and have him feel this bad, can it?

--

They used to talk about guns. Part of their training, part of general conversation too. Especially if you got talking with Jamie who was just eighteen and looked like a skinny girl, all hairless cheeks and blonde lashes. Had been in the cadets for years along with his twin sister. She was posted in Cyprus now, but company rumour had it she was just up the road and they had a week on week off system going, always swapping places. Stood to reason when they were doing twenty-hour days and Jamie never got tired. Never got tired of gun-talk either. Jealous of the officers, not so much of their 9mm Brownings, but because they got to carry them all the time, even in civilian clothes. Had a story about a lieutenant who dropped his once, in a Belfast hotel, standing at a urinal, and the CO gave him a bollocking when he got back to Bessbrook for making himself conspicuous. *And here's the punchline.* Not because of the gun, Jamie said, but because of his clothes: could always spot an off-duty junior officer by his diver's watch and chinos.

Weapon recognition, Jamie could remember all of it and more. How far a high velocity bullet can travel; 7.62; from an L96A1, the kind the snipers use. Through a brick wall at 100 yards: in and out of a body, easy. Best kind of wound you could hope for, if it didn't touch bone as it passed, of course, or go through a major organ. A Barratt 90 could take most of your head with it.

Not the worst way to go: never even hear the crack of it firing so at least you wouldn't know it. Told Joseph that slower bullets can bounce around inside you: come in at your groin, up off your pelvis and lodge themselves in your liver. And he could bore you rigid talking about how the IRA had all the best sources: arms coming in on fishing boats from the USA and Colonel Gadaffi. Given the choice, would you have an Armalite or SA80? *The IRA buy quality and we get the junk, the army issue.* That last bit wasn't just Jamie's opinion.

--

Benson. Who used his time in the sangars for wanking. Told Joseph all about his porn collection at home in boxes, in the attic at his mum's place. Always left a magazine hidden somewhere. If your duty was after his you could spend half of it looking, take it back to the barracks with you for later. Benson liked talking about it, called himself an addict. *Junkie for skin.* Blamed the army for it, they got him started. Said that filth was all part of his training for the province: told Joseph they showed him videos of riots and bombing with hard core cut in. Cunts and petrol bombs. Parades and fucking and burnt out cars. Joseph didn't believe him, *you sick bastard,* laughed at him. Thought the training video was just wishful thinking. Something Benson dreamed up to entertain himself in the too long hours on guard duty.

--

Got to all of them at some point. Stress and boredom; worst combination; leads to poor concentration, zero motivation. Add the rain and cold and days like that he'd be counting, counting, from the minute they started, clocking off time. Feeling everything slipping, minutes going by too slow and all gone slack inside. Uniform walking empty. No will, no muscle to put into the task at hand. Just wanting to get this patrol over and back into the barracks again. Still functioning, but no further: brain and body shunted over to minimum.

Remembers once letting his battery go dead on his radio, walking out across the stubble and on through a hedge, although he'd heard the command to wait shouted behind him.

- What was that about?

He was spoken to after, by the second lieutenant, who was leading the multiple that day and younger than him by at least three years. One formal ticking off after they got back to the camp, and then a man-to-man attempt later on in the evening, while he was having a cigarette out behind the cookhouse.

- I just don't feel I'm getting one hundred percent from you. And it's disappointing, you know, because I have read your file and know you to be a very capable soldier.

The rain had stopped, but Joseph could still hear it singing in the guttering: one ear on that, the other on the army psychology: praising and scolding, *disappointing*. Just like being at school again.

--

Why did he leave then? Didn't make his application until they were back in England. When did he make that choice, was it before or after? Seems important to know now, but this is another thing that makes him suspicious. Another way to shift the blame a little: *see, I didn't even want to be there*.

Wasn't cut out for it. He spent at least his first three years wanting to be a better soldier.

But even if he wanted to leave before, does that make it any better? Whether he wanted to or not, the fact is he did it.

--

I was in the army when it happened.

When Joseph thinks about telling somebody about this: his sister, mother, doctor, man from the helpline on the end of the phone, doesn't matter who it is, it's often the words that stop him.

We were doing a vehicle check point. He was a suspect. A terrorist and I shot him.

Sometimes he thinks that's the only way to put it: matter of fact, with just the barest bit of context. But it never seems to work properly, no matter how he tries it. He thinks about the words and then he can't use them. Saying shot is just like he's avoiding something, because he killed him. But change shot for killed and it sounds cold-blooded. *I was scared shitless, nothing cold-blooded about it.*

So much else happened that day, the days and weeks and months all around it. Can he just tell bits of it like that? Where should he start, where should he finish?

And so it goes on in his head instead, this incessant conversation. Has been for two years, give or take. Some days less, other weeks worse. He's tried, but he can't let a word out, can't get them out: not the right ones anyway, and not in the right order.

--

How he feels now. *Always changing.* How he felt then. *Difficult to say now.*

Then there's the facts.

Dead man is a fact.

But he doesn't even know what he thinks about that. *Different on different days.* And what was it he thought back then when it happened?

--

The morning after and already his memory was slow to respond. Soon as he woke he felt it: that there was something about yesterday. But there were long seconds in bed before he could say what was wrong: what it was and where, and what it had to do with him.

--

There were reports to do, days when he had to do interviews. RUC and army, and then debriefing, the doctor, the welfare officer. He vomited before the first one, with the Commanding Officer. It was the same afternoon, about an hour after they got back to the barracks. Didn't tell anyone, though he thought they would smell it in the toilets.

His back felt clammy and his hands and he was marched in to go over and over what happened. Six people in the room including the CO, the Major. Others were Military Police, no-one he knew anyway. Wanted to hear it from him again and again. Checking and checking with the same and then different questions.

- You didn't hear the Astra coming?

No.

- High hedge, sir. They must have known those lanes to be driving like that. Come down at us fast as anything.

- Do you know how fast the Astra was travelling?

No.

- Fifty? When it got to us, sir?

- Yes, when it got to the checkpoint.

- No, sir. I don't, sir, but they weren't thinking of stopping.

Sounded stupid, everything he said made him sound like he was slow or something.

- There were two cars. The one we had stopped and then the Astra

- Yes. The civilian car, the Escort, had stalled in the road you say.

- Yes sir. We'd finished checking her and then she stalled when she was driving away.

- Draw it. Bird's eye view.

Pencil and paper pushed across the desk, he made his lines. Drew a box for the Escort with an arrow showing the direction it was going, but once that

was in, he saw he'd drawn the road too wide: looked like the Astra could have passed without a problem. He re-drew the line of the verge, and then asked if they had a rubber, explaining.

- I've not drawn it right. It's that line, sir. See, edge of the road, not the other.

He scribbled along it, and they gave him more paper so he could draw it again and asked more questions. About where everyone was standing, and he marked them onto his plan with crosses. He can remember Benson, Jamie, Townsend, and Jarvis his Corporal. The man he shot. And he must have put a cross for himself somewhere too, because if he hadn't they would have asked him. Can't see it now, can only remember their questions about the warnings. If any were shouted, how many and when, and all the time Joseph was sitting there, he kept an eye on the wastepaper basket by the desk in case he had to puke again.

--

At first, in the first weeks afterwards, while he was still in the army, this particular day didn't stand out the way it does now. *The only man I ever shot. Killed.* But it was part of something then, one of a series which he didn't classify from bad to worse. There was no order to it.

--

Joseph writes lists. To get things down on paper. Thinks that once they are there, he can maybe try to organise them later.

Dead man That's always the first thing, even though it was one of the last things to happen. Always has to write it down, get it out of the way and then on with the rest of it. Split into different headings.

What he could hear

Car engine. Escort ticking over, but like it's going to give out any second. Mis-timing. Not enough revs to keep it going.

Kids. In the back seat. Blaring. Not crying, and then making that sound like little dogs make.

Rain. On the road, in puddles. On the car bonnets, hammering. Been on and off all morning and his shoulders, knees and thighs cold and soaking.

Breathing. His own, coming fast, caught under his helmet.

Shouting. Blokes voices. Loud, the ones that were close. Sometimes he thinks his must have been one of them, because afterwards his throat was sore, but he doesn't remember what he might have been yelling.

What he could feel

Wet. Rain got into his boots. *How did it get there?* Maybe it was sweat.

Sick. Helmet too heavy to be holding his head up. Loose guts below, tight feeling in his neck like a cord pulled round his gullet and knotted.

What he could see

Car headlights. Up the verge and in the trees, grey-green branches against dark sky. Like night coming except it was afternoon. All happened at lunch time. Those car headlights aren't moving, but there were others, coming towards them, still driving. He thinks that must have been earlier, but doesn't let himself write that here.

Torches. Those as well. Middle of the day but dark enough to use them. Jumping circles. Three or four, he can't remember, can't see now who was carrying them. Lights moving like they were running maybe. And then under the cars. Looking for something.

Exhaust pipe. Fumes coming out of it, red in the tail lights. And white, car must have been jammed in reverse. Not moving, though, just engine running. *See above.*

Back windscreen. Steamed up. Small faces behind it, smudging. Small heads moving. *Goes with the small dogs sound on the other list.* But Joseph stops himself there, making connections.

--

He finds things he's written and doesn't recognise. Tears them up or burns them. Things come out differently each time he tries and so he stops trusting the pieces after a while. And then his ability to slot them together.

Maybe you shape things to suit. I think I do. Or you turn things against you. Might do that too.

He panicked just after it happened. Stood up from the road (and he doesn't know how he got to be lying down, that's a bit just gone, hasn't come up anywhere) and thinking he'd shot someone's Dad. Kids in the back of the car, woman in the front, and he's thinking: *What car did the man get out of?* Escort? He never saw. Kids crying, making that small dog noise and maybe that's why. Looking at the man in the road with his jeans on. That woman in the front seat, she's his wife.

--

He had a gun. Read that in the report, or did somebody tell him? Loaded and had been recently fired. Sometimes he sees it when he remembers and sometimes he doesn't.

How far away was he? Five metres. Fifty. Fifteen. Joseph has detail in his head: man's jacket was denim, his beard was a real one not just unshaven, he had short hair, a crew cut and his face was turned sideways. It's not

always this way, though because sometimes Joseph sees all of him, the cars behind, the road and the verges. And who the man was looking at:

Townsend.

Must have been before he shot him, because after that the man was down.

How long before? Can't say now.

Didn't see him get out of the car, though he does have a picture of the passenger door open. Which car? White one or the red?

He was looking at Townsend.

--

When he died. *Think he died when I shot him, not after.* He just made this grunt and then his legs were gone. Dropped loose, down on top of himself with this weird little noise of air coming out. And that was it. Except for the shouting. But he was dead. And then after a while it was like everyone decided the whole thing was over.

--

The corporal who headed up their patrols. He would have been about thirty then, in the army since he was eighteen and he was alright, Joseph liked him. Ran poker games, always keeping a book on something. Offered odds

on anything, just about. League and horses, the usual, but also things they thought up themselves, whatever you came up with to pass the hours. Who'd end the week on CO's orders. If Benson could go a whole foot patrol and not talk about shagging. Never won much but sometimes it was that kept you going.

Different rank, but you could talk to him. Pete Jarvis. *Never called him that though.*

--

Things he could smell is another list. Wet road, wet clothes, hot tires and exhaust pipes. But fresh air, too.

Never dreamt about that day yet. Never had a nightmare, but he he wakes up with one of those smells around him sometimes, and can't get rid of it. In the sheets, so he gets up but then it follows him, on his face, in his hair. It's the rain on the ground and the exhaust fumes sometimes, but mostly that fresh air. Cold smell, like the windows left open in winter.

--

Jarvis was there when it happened, and again, a few weeks afterwards in

the pipe range. Joseph had been carrying his rifle every day since on patrols, cleaning it, doing everything as normal, only he hadn't fired it again. The range was there for target practice. Supposed to use it every couple of weeks. He remembers that he and Jarvis were zeroing their weapons, but when it came to Joseph shooting, he couldn't.

Joseph has tried to work it out since, but still doesn't know. What it was exactly. Something about the noise the rifle makes when he lifted it, smell of the oil, feel of it up against his face, maybe. Something he did was the same, some movement his body remembered.

Back out in the rain and the cold. Dark and the bloke lying on the road. Shouting and the kids and the cars. Like it was happening now, not like it was weeks ago.

Seconds. Not long, but it was hard to get himself straight again after.

Sweating, so much it got into his eyes. Shaking, so Jarvis had to take his rifle. Not like shivering: bigger, stronger, more like a fit and it was frightening. Starting somewhere back in his guts, around his kidneys. Backs of his legs like water, something pulling hard and tight under his shoulders and he thinks he's slipping, going over.

Jarvis saw it all. Joseph wonders what it looked like, what he looked like, never asked him. Made him sit down against the wall with his head between his knees. Tried to get up after a few minutes but Jarvis wouldn't let him.

- Puke pale, you are, Mason.

Not going anywhere until his blood was running properly again.

- No-one to see you here anyway.

Stayed with him, not saying anything. Don't know how long it was. Five, ten, twenty minutes. Never happened again.

--

Joseph makes his way east, hitching along the Essex roads and all their red brick and pebble-dash, endless junctions. Jarvis was posted here after their tour ended, and Joseph knows he lives out now. On an estate in the town, with his wife, three children. She hated being an army wife, he remembers. Doesn't much like Joseph turning up there either. Understandable, he thinks, standing in the hallway, listening to them arguing. Door to the front room closed, but he can hear what she's shouting. Can't blame her. *When you turn up and you can't remember their kids' names and you're stinking.*

Jarvis clears it with her. Gets Joseph a couple of cans to drink, makes bacon sandwiches. They sit in the kitchen while his wife takes the kids round to the neighbours'. They eat and Joseph remembers how Jarvis liked it in Ireland. It was his second tour and his wife and kids were living over there with him. First daughter at school, getting the best education. Reading writing arithmetic. Better than back in England, Jarvis said. Good soldier and the army was good to him. Be sure to make sergeant at some stage. Gave odds on that too, but not good ones. Too certain. Talks to Joseph while the bacon is grilling. Says he does basic training now so he's not away so much, family not shifted around. And his wife is happier. House doesn't look a bit like the ones you get from the army. He said she wanted it that way: sick of the standard sheets and the cutlery.

- What's going on with you then?

Joseph hasn't thought of a way to start.

- *Don't know. Can't really get it together at the moment.*

- Looks like it. Last time you shaved must have been a week ago. You were one of my lot I'd back squad you.

He's smiling.

- Different out there, is it?

Joseph nods, shrugs.

- You wanting back in?

He shakes his head.

- So what's going on then? How comes I've got the pleasure of your company this evening?

Nearly an hour gone by already. Jarvis is tapping a finger lightly on the table, maybe not aware of it, but Joseph is, of the time passing and nothing said yet.

- Think I'm having problems with my memory.

- Oh yeah?

Joseph can't think of how to go on, only Jarvis is doing that tapping again.

- Do you ever get that feeling? That you done something? But you can't

remember.

- What kind of something? Drinking?

- No. Something wrong.

- You in trouble?

- No. I'm talking about before. When we were over there.

The corporal looks at Joseph a long couple of seconds before answering.

- You going to get all Brits Out on me?

- No. No. Not that.

It's not going well. Joseph doesn't know if he should try to explain himself.

Might take forever and still not get there. Jarvis sits up straighter.

- Come on then. I'm not a mind reader.

- Don't know. Don't know if it matters where. Do you think it makes a difference? Maybe if we were out in the Gulf or something. Might be the same wherever, I don't know. Maybe it's different if you're in a real war, real fighting. Do you think so?

He doesn't think he's making sense, but Jarvis is still listening.

- You talking about killing?

- Yes.

- You talking about when you did that bloke?

- Yes.

- He was a terrorist.

- Yes.

- He was a member of the Irish Republican Army. Army. They train just like us. They call it a war.

- I know.

Joseph doesn't know what to say then. Maybe that he wasn't wearing a uniform, the bloke, the terrorist, but that sounds pathetic. Like some trick his own head plays on him. The man looks like anyone you'd see on the street. And you wouldn't think to be shooting.

- We stopped people loads. Got them arrested and charged.

- Sometimes that's the best way of getting things done, sometimes it isn't.

- I just can't remember it straight. I just keep thinking if I did it right.

Procedure. I don't even know he was armed sometimes when I'm thinking about it.

Joseph laughs a bit when he says that, but it comes out strange.

- He had a gun.

Calm statement. No argument. Jarvis was there. Joseph thinks he has to remember that, next time the gun isn't. Jarvis is leaning back in his chair now, fingers spread out on his thighs, looking at him, and Joseph feels like he's putting his head on show. All the mad thoughts in it, all tangled and strange and it makes him want to cry, seeing what a state it's in.

- I never went to the Falklands or the Gulf. I've been in Germany and Ireland.

Jarvis has gone back to where he started. Joseph realises he must have been staring at him, must have felt like he was demanding an answer. He remembers what their Quartermaster Sergeant used to say about people who ask questions. Family, friends, people who corner you in pubs and want to know how you deal with it. You might have to kill someone. Don't you ever think about that? *Civilian eyes*. They look at you with them and think they will be the ones to crack the façade. Break through to the human being on the inside. Joseph used to laugh when he said it. Knew that look. The way they'll ask you roundabout questions when what they really want to know is if you've done it. Even the pacifists. Fascinated. Sergeant said if you keep quiet they'll always presume you have. Think the army is all running round and shooting, wouldn't cross their minds that you might be a

cook or mechanic or something. Don't want to know about that anyway, just what it's like, what it's really like to do it.

Joseph thinks he looks like a civilian now, wonders when the change came.

- If I could go back, you know. To just before it happened, and I could make it come out different.

Jarvis nods, a tight movement.

- What about if I shot him in the leg or the arm, you know?

- Right. Like you had all the time in the world.

He looks angry now and Joseph doesn't know if he should carry on. He tries again.

- But if I did that, I could have stopped him anyway. No need for him to die, was there?

- I don't know.

Joseph doesn't want to cry, but he thinks he might. He doesn't speak for a while and Jarvis lets him sit there. Doesn't say anything, pulls out cigarettes

slowly, gets up quietly, lights one on the gas ring, lays the pack open on the table for Joseph, ashtray between them and the greasy plates cleared away.

- You did what you were trained to do. It was him or Townsend. You hadn't done it, you'd be sitting here now telling me you wish you had. Thinking about Townsend and all the Welsh hills he can't be climbing.

He passes his cigarette over so Joseph can light his on the end.

- It's not about wrong or right, is it? Just doing what has to be done.

Joseph knows he's been looking at the corporal like a civilian now.

Recognises the way he can't accept the answers given, that the words make sense but don't mean enough somehow. *That's why they always look at you for longer.* Why he's looking at him now. Maybe that's the answer he'd have given himself before. *Not about right or wrong.*

- Told you it was a bad idea to be leaving. Does your head it to be outside.

Different set of rules, different world he was in then. *Is that what it is?*

- You think about things like this?

- Course I do.

- And?

- You think too much.

Three hours they have been sitting there, longer, and now Jarvis tells him he can't be staying. Sorry. Looks like he is, too. Says Joseph is to get in the shower, get shaved and then he'll drive him down to the bus station.

- Kids'll be needing their beds. I'll get you a towel. Disposables are up there in the cabinet.

Waiting for the coach he buys him tea, pie and chips, but Joseph can't eat.

- Doesn't feel like it, I can see that, but you're lucky. I've got a mate up on civil charges. Didn't even kill, got his one so he can't walk now. Family wants him convicted, wants compensation. That's stress for you.

Joseph wonders if he knows him. Doesn't ask, doesn't think it would be right somehow.

- No-one's saying you did wrong. Are they? Just you. You're the only one.

Joseph can't look at him, pushes the chips around on his plate.

- You can't change it. Useless thinking. Got to put it away. Get on with it.

All the ifs he goes through. *Don't make a blind bit of difference.* He can only think, *can't do nothing about it.*

Jarvis walks with him to the bus, but they don't say any more about it. Waits on the forecourt, watching while the coach pulls out. Only person standing there on the concrete.

Motorway comes and Joseph watches the lines in the road. *It was legitimate.* So why can't he get over it?

--

[This is to be included somewhere in part one, part of Joseph's story. As discussed in my statement, I am going to extend the time between the incident and Joseph's breakdown (8-10 years), and the following section is in part intended to show how the incident affects him long before he is conscious of it. What most of the trauma patients I've interviewed said is that it was close friends/family who got them to see their behaviour as a problem.]

Three years it lasted with Julie, more or less. That last year he'd moved into her place over the winter months. Clothes, toothbrush, CDs, and then his friends started phoning him there. They never really talked about it, but Joseph started paying half the rent in March and that was that. He loved her. His mum was pleased. He doesn't really know now if Julie was.

That summer she told him she didn't like it. That he was so quiet sometimes. She said it bothered her that he went days, weeks it felt like, without talking. Breakfasts together, dinners eaten, whole evenings spent on the sofa and no how are you love, what's been happening, did you see, no nothing.

- Like you're not there. Or I may as well not be.

They were out the back of the pub on the benches and it was a bright evening, sunset behind the industrial estate, yellow in the trees. Pints on the table and a bag of crisps split open between them. Julie cried and it caught him off guard: they'd never rowed before, but he wasn't sure they were rowing now, or what was happening. Her make-up ran and Joseph went inside for loo roll, chest tight and head gone blank, didn't know what to be thinking. Said he was sorry when he came out and he put his arms around her. Didn't know what he was sorry for, really. Shocked him. Never thought she was unhappy. Didn't know he was like that.

He met her about six months after he left the army. She started coming to the snooker club, the sister of a girlfriend of someone he'd been to school with. They slept together a few times and it was nice, and then he started looking forward to her being there, mostly it was Thursday nights. She was seeing someone else, Malky told him, and then a week or two later she wasn't any more. Julie never said anything to him about it, it just worked out that way: no discussion, no embarrassing asking, just time passing and then they were a couple.

He was living at his Mum's then, still paying Eve back what she'd lent him. Friday nights his Mum went out and Julie came to see him. Stayed over whole weekends after a while: Joseph would go out and play a few games of snooker, and Julie would stay in and watch Saturday telly with his mother. Packet of biscuits open, their feet pulled up into the easy chairs, he heard them chatting as he went out the door down the road.

Joseph came home with bottles of lager on carry out and after his Mum had gone to bed Julie would take her clothes off and they'd get going on the sofa, in the kitchen, up against the tiles in the back bathroom. Her feet wedged against the washer-dryer and her eyes closing, lashes flickering: small tits, pink-red nipples, soft belly, hard arms and legs all pushing and pulling. Her mouth was the best thing, thin lips, wet teeth, cool tongue. They'd share a fag, a bottle and then that mouth would be smiling again, pressing and nipping him on.

She worked for the gas board, in an office on the industrial estate. Rented a flat two stops nearer town, only a ten minute walk. If he went there after work she'd make him take his painting clothes off at the door, run him a bath and she sometimes got into it with him before she cooked them some dinner. Just lie between his legs in the hot water and talk to him. About things she read in the paper, what her boss said, who her sister went out with yesterday. Her hair got wet and spread across his chest and he loved it, listening to her, but not listening while the water cooled off and she was talking. Thought they were happy years. Didn't know it was beginning, even then.

- I never know what to do when you're like that, Joe. What am I supposed to do?

The sun had gone down and they were still outside, first pints finished, more bought, the spilled tops of them spreading out across the table. He loved her and put his fingers in the wet and drew lines while she called him moody, said it was impossible sometimes to know what he was thinking, and it drove her mad, asking, trying and still getting nothing. He said he didn't know what she meant and she said:

- See, see? That's exactly it. I'm asking you, I'm asking you now and you're not telling nothing.

They argued a lot that summer. Still sleeping together, it was still good, but then she stopped wanting that in the autumn.

- Just a substitute. Fucking for talking. No good having one without the other.

And he hated it when she said things like that because it wasn't the way he felt about it, about her. Nowhere near. Not something he did to fill in the gaps, it was just what he wanted to do to her, with her. What he thought about when he thought about her, which felt like most of the time. Days at work he'd want to be crying, remembering how she used to unzip her skirt and be looking at him, smiling.

She asked him to leave and he didn't, so then she told him. He got a room at a mate's place to tide him over and he'd still see her sometimes at the pub, in the snooker club. Once or twice she slept with him again, but they always ended up crying. And then she started seeing someone else: Malky told him. Joseph saw them together a few weeks later and embarrassed her, shouting. In the middle of her street on a Saturday morning and all the neighbours standing at their windows, watching.

He's spent so long going over it all. What was he supposed to tell her? What did she want to know? Sure she wouldn't want to hear it, not really. Not just the problem of where to start, how to explain it: no way of telling what she would do or feel or think after he said it, after she knew it. Not likely to be the end of it, was it? Wouldn't solve anything, just the beginning of a whole new set of problems.

Joseph tried once. Went round to her flat about two years later. He'd been gone a few months, could see from her face she'd heard about it from someone: that he was losing it these days and living back at his Mum's place. Julie was alone and he said he wanted to talk to her, saw the way she rolled her eyes and thought he'd do it now, give her a shock, something to think about. He sat down in her kitchen that was his once too, and then he told her about the road block and checking the cars through. About who else was there that day, the other men in the multiple. They were coming out, the words, and she was listening, and he really thought he might say it, and even thinking that made him start crying. And then she was crying too, standing there across the room from him with her fingers wiping at her eyes, even though he'd told her nothing yet, hadn't even got halfway through it.

It was too much then. Gone from being nothing to too much in a matter of seconds.

But he kept on talking. He'd started now, it was too late, and so Joseph finished his story. But that's all it was, because the way he told her, it was Townsend who fired the gun, and he was just one of the men who saw him do it.

- What you crying for?

- Because you are.

But he wasn't any more, he just felt tired and angry, and she didn't want him to go but he did because he thought she might take her clothes off or say she was sorry or something and he didn't want any of that to be happening.

Never wanted to lie to her, he'd gone there to shock her, frighten her maybe.
Tell her and then ask her, what the fuck do we do now then, now the talking
is over? But he couldn't have it, couldn't have her knowing.

He'd killed a man and then after that he'd been happy.

PART TWO

Traffic on the expressway moves fast, disperses, and Alice arrives at the house sooner than she expected. Earlier than arranged with her Grandfather and he is not at home. She rings the bell a second time, just to be sure, and then digs in her pocket for her set of house-keys and lets herself in.

Three letters lie on the side table in the porch, one for her Grandmother, all unopened. The house is cool, dim, although the morning outside is bright spring. The tiled hall is swept, the carpet runner clean, but surprisingly threadbare. Alice stops, it has been there all her life and she's never noticed it before. That the red-green pattern has worn brown in places, marking the path of feet over years and decades. Not quite a week since she was last here, five days since the funeral, when the house was full of quiet guests holding plates of uneaten sandwiches, and her Grandfather paced between them, shaking hands and thanking, as if he wanted them all gone as soon as possible.

Alice doesn't like to go further inside, steps out again through the porch, past the roses along the short gravel path to the gate that grates on its hinges. She looks both ways up and down the street, but there is no sign of him, just pillar-box and lamppost, kerbstone and bay window. Parked cars and bedding plants, a bus stop, a For Sale sign. He didn't say he had anything

planned, but then why should he tell her his business? More empty hours to fill in the day, more chores to do now he is alone, a widower.

She goes inside and puts the kettle on. In the kitchen, she notices it too: everything clean and in its place, but somehow sparse and worn. Colours faded, numbers rubbed off the cooker dials over the years. The cupboards are mostly empty, a few tins and jars, and though they are all spotless, they still smell of crumbs.

The kettle roars. She pulls out cups, teapot, spoons from the drawer. Doesn't hear the key in the door.

- Hello hello. You're early. Or is it me? Late I mean?

Her Grandfather is standing in the kitchen doorway, in his blue blazer and tie. Pressed and trimmed and groomed. That familiar smell, like he's freshly shaven, that he carries with him through the day.

- Hello. No, traffic was better than I thought.

- You came by car?

- I borrowed Martha's. One of my flatmates. Easier than getting the train.

- Yes. We suburbanites are not well served these days.

Alice smiles. The usual pragmatics, the usual opening gambits.

- I put the kettle on.

- Yes, you're a good girl.

He steps up to the counter where Alice is standing, and she sees he is holding her Grandmother's shopping bags. Carton of milk, tealeaves, newspaper, visible through the string weave. He lifts them onto the worktop, starts unpacking with Alice watching. Shopping seems such an unlikely activity for him. She knows he has been doing it for a while at least, since Gran got ill, but she is still not used to the idea.

- I'll take over from here. You make yourself comfortable.

Alice wonders if he noticed her watching, and if it annoyed him. He busies himself, makes no eye contact, and Alice goes into the living room as ordered, but she can't sit down for some reason, stays standing near the mantel.

The familiar photos in a row, just below eye level. Her school pictures, gappy teeth and bunches, her Grandparents' wedding photos in London. Their engagement portrait, her Grandfather in uniform, taken in a studio somewhere in colonial Nairobi. The most recent one is their ruby

anniversary. Before Gran got ill and was still plump, her hair still curly. Done every other Monday in the salon next to the post office. Only three years, but it seems a different time, a different woman. Alice wonders how long it will take for the image in the photo to take over again. On the edge of the mantelpiece is the picture of her mother. Taken before she was born, and although she only knew her afterwards of course, this is how she sees her, young and lip-sticked, even in her own memories.

The rose bushes outside the window stand tall in the sun. A bus passes, filling the window red for a moment, then quiet, no other movement or sound.

- It's brewed, so I'll pour if you're ready.

They take their teacups out into the garden and, after standing at the edge of the lawn for a few minutes, sit down on the plastic chairs on the patio. Her Grandfather brings a box of cakes out from the kitchen, places it on the table between them, unopened. Alice thinks how her Grandmother would have arranged them on a plate, and wonders briefly about doing the same, but decides against it. Her Grandfather never eats sweet things anyway. She thinks he must have bought these for her while he was at the shops and so she opens the box, but the iced fingers have been sweating in the sun and she doesn't feel like eating them, drinks another sip of tea instead. She follows her Grandfather's eyeline across the trim borders of the garden, can't see what he is looking at, something in the middle distance.

- Did we have a reason for you coming?

Alice blinks.

- No Granddad, I just wanted to see how you are. Keep you company for a bit.

- Yes. Only this morning I couldn't remember. Thought there might have been something to sign, but then I was sure we had done all that.

The sun is strong on the back of her neck and her hair has grown hot. Alice sits up.

- I should get going anyway. I start at two, couple of things to get done before my shift.

Which is a lie, not about working, but she only has to get the car back to the flat, and even if the traffic is bad now, that will still leave over an hour to kill, but she doesn't want to stay any longer. Her Grandfather nods, but his eyes are still elsewhere, and when she stands he looks surprised, pushes himself up out of his chair.

- Well. You're off. But you'll come again, won't you, Alice dear? It's always

lovely to see you and hear your news.

--

Martha is home for lunch. Alice pushes the keys across the kitchen table to her, and then sits down herself.

- How was he then?

- Okay. Difficult to tell with him.

- You grew up with your Grandparents, didn't you?

Alice likes Martha, she's a good flatmate, but she asks a lot of questions.

- Yes.

This is not enough: Alice can feel the other woman's curiosity. Reminds herself of the lent car, shared meals, Martha's countless other generousities.

- My mother died when I was four.

- I remember. I think you told me before.

Alice doesn't remember that. Thinks Martha must have found out from

someone else, one of the others. *Doesn't matter.* Hardly a state secret.

- We lived with them anyway. I was born out of wedlock, you see. My mum got pregnant and went home to live with her parents. The not-so swinging sixties in suburban London. What time is it?

She smiles at Martha and tilts her head to read the watch face on her flatmate's arm.

- I'd better get moving.

Alice gets up to make herself some sandwiches for work.

- I could give you a lift up to the hospital.

- No, you're alright thanks. I'll be quicker on my bike.

- They sound pretty tolerant, your Grandparents.

- I don't know. We've never talked about it. I think my Gran probably had to work at getting my Grandfather round. My mum was their only child. He doted on her really, but I suppose he must have been disappointed.

- You've never asked him?

Alice looks up from the bread: Martha has stopped eating and is watching

her, and something in her expression makes Alice uncomfortable. Under scrutiny, along with her odd, closed family. She can see Martha thinking, forming another question, but she's had enough now, has the feeling she's said more than enough already.

- I filled up the tank, anyway. Thanks for that.

- No problem.

--

Three new patients. Leonard Coulter, Janice Nesbitt, Jan who was here last year, and Joseph Mason. Four others have been discharged: Alice reads over the names on the whiteboard in the ward office. She is early, waiting for her Charge Nurse: Jamie said he wanted her to check in with him before her first shift back and she flicks through her own patients' files while she is waiting, checking on the covering nurses' updates. A week she has been off. Compassionate leave and then a couple of days' holiday she had coming. There were two cards waiting for her in her pigeonhole, lilies and remembrance; some of the staff put their heads round the door as they pass, tell her they were sorry to hear her news and Alice smiles and thanks them. Jamie finds her reading through one of her own patient's notes.

- No-one's arranged a CPN appointment for Graham.

- How did I know you were going to say that?

He sits down heavily, blinks at her, end of double-shift eyes.

- He's due to go home, though. Graham needs to know who his community nurse will be. His appointment should have been made days ago.

- You telling me how my ward should be run?

Jamie has his serious, teasing face on. He takes a gulp of her coffee.

- You may mock, Mr Porter, but I bet you Graham's getting anxious. Siona was covering, she should have done it.

- She'll maybe have had her reasons. What do you reckon?

He smiles, but Alice knows he's telling her to be careful. Siona is a Charge Nurse too, more experienced, more senior: Jamie's not one to pull rank, but she is, and Alice feels the familiar impatience with ward business rising. Politics and routines. Back at work again. Graham's file is still open on Alice's lap and she starts checking it over a second time.

- I haven't found anything in here about it.

Jamie pulls another patient's file off the desk and puts it on top of Graham's.

- Dystonic reaction, remember? Mason. Brought him here about a fortnight ago, emergency.

Alice does remember someone on medication from his doctor, a bad reaction.

- The bloke who came in with his brother-in-law?

Jamie nods, yawning.

- Admitted Thursday, through his GP. He requested, apparently. Sister came with him, mother too. Nice people.

The day before Gran died, perhaps. Alice can remember what happened, but not quite when.

- He's nice, doing well for his first week in. Maybe you could go and say hello later. He'll probably remember you.

Alice nods, thinks Jamie is finding special tasks to keep her occupied, take

her mind off things.

- I'll do that, but I'm alright you know.

- I know you are.

- It was a long time coming. We knew she wouldn't be with us long.

One of her Grandfather's phrases, and Alice wonders why she's used it, how it came out like that, didn't feel like her talking, didn't feel like she needed phrases like that for talking to Jamie.

- I know you did.

They blink at each other a moment and then Alice drops his gaze.

- Listen, there's nothing in Graham's file, so I think the CPN team should be called today. One of them has to come out and see Graham this week.

- Fine by me. Just make sure you check it with Siona when she comes on.

Jamie makes a face and Alice smiles, glad he's not sparing her that task, can't bear any cotton wool today.

- You're too kind.

--

Joseph Mason is in with Graham and Marty, the dorm at the end of the corridor. Alice makes time a bit later in her rounds to have a chat to him, finds him sitting on his bed, back up against the wall. Skinny man, all eyes and cheekbones, she recognises him. The afternoon sun is among the leaves outside the window, and he seems to be watching them.

- Joseph? I'm Alice.

He takes a few seconds before he smiles, but it is genuine. And there is the gap in his teeth she remembers noticing while he tried to speak to her but couldn't because his muscles kept contracting. Poor guy.

- You were brought in to us about a week ago, yes? I spoke to you, got you sorted out with the injections.

He blinks, nodding.

- Jamie says we have you on different medication now.

- You do.

His answer is just a little late.

- Making me slow.

It doesn't sound like a complaint.

- How are you going with it?

- Okay. Better I think. The heat, too maybe. Doing this to me.

He lifts his hands, drops them onto the bedcovers next to him, arms loose.

Watching, faintly amused, as if they don't belong to him.

- That will be the sedative. The one we give you in the evening. Are you sleeping alright on that?

- Sleeping a lot.

- Well, I'm sure you know it takes a while before things start working properly. We'll see how it goes the next few days, ok?

He looks at her, still blinking. She thinks maybe he doesn't know why she's come to talk to him. Something in his face that makes her uncertain, in any case.

- Are you my primary nurse, then?
- No. That's Jamie. You'll have done a care plan with him.
- Yes, Jamie.
- I just came in to say hello. I've been away, and Jamie thought you might remember me from the other day.
- Right.
- You can always talk to me if Jamie's not here, or I can pass things on to him.

He nods. Alice thinks she should probably leave him be.

--

Joseph knows the shape of the hospital routine by now. Meals and drugs and showers; the once-weekly assessment with the psychiatrist; the patients' meetings where the others debate what TV channel should be on and when, and who has been stealing the tea bags. Only one designated smoking area, but fag burns on everything: carpets, lino, cisterns in the toilets. Was difficult to tell the staff and patients apart at first because they all wear civilian clothes, but he learnt what to check for when he didn't recognise faces: id badges for staff, slippers for patients. Knows who works here now, pretty much, but there's always new patients. Gets to feel like every day someone's discharged and another comes to replace them.

There are large windows at one end of the ward, but their city dirt smear barely lets the sunlight in. His world is the cool blue-white of strip-lights, the too-warm feeling of underfloor heating, oily smell of the lino, the buzz and hum. Summer, and outside everything is damp and green. City full of leaves pressing up against the greasy window panes. Heatwave, and at one end of the corridor, by the nurses' station, stands a single fan, lopsided head gently shifting the warm air around.

Joseph tries to have feelings these early hospital days, but can't. He breathes deep, but there is a soft wall between him and his fear, and tears can't seem to penetrate. The first week he eats and sits and walks and life is like a perpetual sleep. Sometimes with the lights off and then with the lights on again.

Out of breath at the corridor's end, he has the lungs of an old man. Heavy hands and feet and tongue. He finds he can listen to music now, though, in the day room. Can watch the news and sport and soap operas and weather forecasts. Or rather he can't be bothered to get up and walk away from the stereo, from the set. Pictures only sometimes making sense to him, sounds just part of the general hospital drone.

--

Summer weekend, hot Sunday. The flat is empty, windows open, neighbour

somewhere nearby with a radio on. Alice walks from bedroom to kitchen to bathroom to living room and thinks she could go to the lido or get a tube north and walk by the river, or get a paper and see if there's an exhibition on maybe. Morning just about gone already and she hasn't got it together to do anything. Note on the fridge says that Keith and Martha will be in the Albert till about three: round the back in the beer garden if she wants to join them. She thinks about it, sitting at the kitchen table, and is still there when she finds herself hungry and puts on some toast.

Alice used to live nearer the river. With someone for three years and then that split up and she moved here: affordable, not far from the hospital, thinking it would be just until she found a place of her own. That was four years ago, and she is the longest-serving flatmate now. The one who contacts the landlord when the boiler breaks down, and the others defer to on disputes over the cleaning rota, such as it is. A4 paper pinned to the wall and ignored mostly. But it works okay, the flat, and it provides her with just enough company. Not friendship really: she knows it is not easy to make friends with her these days, and she never initiates these things, is not used to it now.

Her Grandmother was ill for over two years before she died, and part of Alice was glad of it. Knew she was in pain, of course, but every extra week meant more time to spend with her. Helping her Grandfather with the shopping, the ironing, driving Gran to the hairdresser's once a fortnight while she could still manage the hour or two under the dryers. Towards the end, when her

Grandmother was in the hospice, Alice would visit her daily. Read the interesting bits of the newspaper out loud to her: she always wanted the letters to the editor and the leader column first, and the gardening articles at the weekends. Alice carried on, even when Gran stopped asking, and then spoke to her about work and the weather and what was happening on the ward around her. Anything really. Watching her Grandmother's half-closed eyes, her thin fingers dance and tug along the edges of her hospital gown.

26 months. Alice sits in the kitchen now and counts them. Thinks about how the rest of life has picked up again, immediately, without warning, and she feels out of practice. Days off come and bring nothing with them. Nowhere to drive, nothing to fetch, no-one to sit with or bathe. Or sheets to change, or nails to cut, or cream to rub into old hands to keep them soft.

She has visited her Grandfather. Too often, and she knows it's more for herself than him. He knows too, and doesn't try too hard to conceal his irritation.

- Not working today?

Alice doesn't know what he finds to fill his days, but he seems to manage without her help, and to prefer it that way. Once a fortnight or thereabouts: that was her old visiting pattern, and she should probably return to it now. Imagines their in-between phone calls, brief and factual: what shift pattern

she is on, what's flowering well and not so well in his garden.

Three o'clock has passed so she doesn't have to think about going to the pub any more, about being sociable. Only a few hours till Monday now and work: Alice is on an early, so there will be no long morning to kill and she is grateful. Decides if there are empty shifts on the rota this week she should offer to fill them.

--

Two weeks in and Joseph feels like he's coming up again. Little by little. Body still heavy, but thoughts not so weighed down. Can keep better track of where they are going again, can bring a few things together, recent events: not just drifting, remembering. Working his way back through the last days and then forward again.

After the spasms had stopped and he had slept, he was back at Eve and Art's place. His Mum was there too, and they were all pale and quiet and not saying anything in the front room. He went upstairs and lay in Ben's room, blanket over his legs, thought they all want him to go back in there and be made better: they don't know what else to do with him.

Joseph didn't feel angry with them, not anything really. Just thought, after a while, that perhaps it wasn't so bad. *Not such a bad idea. Maybe.* Some time away where he could stay quiet, keep himself to himself and get calmed

down again. They'd give him more drugs up at the hospital, he knew that, but it didn't worry him; hoped they might help. Wouldn't be like the last ones, the hospital would make sure of that now, and they might just take the edges off everything for a while.

Could be fine. As long as he can keep himself to himself. Help him steady things up, help his Mum and Eve and Arthur, too. A few weeks where he wouldn't need looking out for all day long. And not like the times when he took himself off before: this way they could visit him, or would know where he was at least, and safe. Not sleeping on a beach with no food in him for days, or taking God knows what and hitching who knows where with no phone call to tell them anything.

Sitting in the hospital day room now, Joseph remembers their faces. When he said he wanted to go to the doctors, try for a referral. The relief, he could see it, and he didn't blame them. Was like that for him too, in a way: maybe temporary but it still felt like some kind of solution.

Joseph shifts forward in his chair, rolls a cigarette for himself, sitting alone on the side of the room with the ashtrays, where the windows reach down to the floor. Over the other side, nearer the door and the ward, some of the other patients are dealing out cards, and the old guy is here too. *Graham*. In the far corner playing chess on his own like he always does. Standing over the board to get a bird's eye view, hands in his pockets, takes left out to move white, black with his right. He told Joseph this morning that he'd be going

home soon.

A nurse comes in and talks to the chess man for a minute or two. *Anna?*
Alice. With the red hair and the voice. A staff nurse: the one who got him the injections. He can remember her voice on the other side of the curtain that day. And how, when she came in to the cubicle and he was twisted backwards and it was painful, she just acted like it was normal, and so while she was there it felt like he could deal with it, the humiliation and those few long minutes before the injections.

Drugs: medication taking so much away from him. A lot he wanted gone, of course, but it was embarrassing when she came into the dorm, a few days ago, whenever it was, to see him. He saw her, and recognised her, and then his head went blank again. Guts shrinking now while he remembers himself speaking. Asking questions he couldn't remember thinking.

- Are you my primary nurse?

He knew the answer to that already. Jamie, who reminds him of Arthur in a funny way. Same blue in his eyes and big hands, short fingers. Joseph nearly told Alice that too, while she was standing there waiting for him to speak, but he's glad he didn't now. Embarrassing details. Wonders how many stupid things he's said already and can't remember.

Whatever. Doesn't matter.

Joseph sits back again, cigarette gone out in the ashtray, eyes on the long windows in front of him, he tries reasoning. Bound to be a bit strange, everything. Before he gets used to being here and the drugs he's been given. Shows that he needs to be careful, though: have to keep a check on his mouth and what might come out of it in here.

--

Work is all there is now, and it's not enough. Alice has been trying to fill her time with it, her mind, but now that Gran has gone the doubts come back again.

- I'm sick of seeing people like symptoms. Sets of symptoms, you know?

- Yes.

She used to talk about this with her Grandmother, had been nursing for three years by then. She'd stopped feeling enthusiastic, had adjusted to the responsibility, and the questions had set in.

- I think we do help, we do. But they're gone again so quickly. What can we do for them? Get them fed and watered, and you try and keep them comfortable. Three four five weeks. No time to do anything really, just iron out the kinks with some pills.

Her Grandmother got ill, and Alice visited more often, first evenings and then days off spent together, and more time for talking. A couple of colleagues had left that spring.

- Burn out. But it's too early for me. I can't be burnt out already, can I?

She'd had a run-in with a psychiatrist.

- I'd just done a night shift.

One of the patients had been up three, four times, agitated at first and later tearful, asking her for another sleeping pill. The psychiatrist came on the ward in the morning, took it badly when Alice suggested he change the patient's medication or up the dosage.

- I don't know. Maybe it was me, maybe it was the way I said it. Not worth getting disciplined over in the end so I left it. But bloody hell.

Alice remembers her Grandmother's eyebrows raised, lids closing lightly at her choice of words. She was combing her Grandmother's hair, caught her eye in the dressing table mirror, and the smile afterwards which said carry on.

- It's not like I think we should keep them with us indefinitely, locked away from the world, you know. Only I end up feeling like we're just processing them, in and then out again. And there's always more, more coming, more needing help and we're just about keeping a lid on things.

So many of these conversations, same words, same soft hair between her fingers. Same attempt to maintain a distinction between the patients' needs and her own.

- Not about what I need is it? About what's best for them.

Sometimes laughing at herself, sounding like a stuck record: wanting to do something worthwhile, substantial, meaningful, good.

- Be a useful person. Make a difference.

And her Grandmother would frown when she talked like that, tell her it didn't suit her, sarcasm, cynicism.

- Too boring.

- Your job?

- No. The questions.
- I don't know what you mean love.
- Am I doing the right thing with my life?

Alice put on a whiney tone.

- Can't be a permanent adolescent, can I? Have to stick at something sometime, don't I? No job will be perfect.
- No. I suppose not.

The sympathetic nod and smile.

After the chemo started, the look in her Grandmother's eyes changed: Alice could see her trying not to, but knew she worried about her all the same, her Granddaughter. Early thirties and no husband, no children, not even a job she was happy with, and so many tried before and discarded. So Alice didn't talk about work anymore then, about worries, figured her Grandmother wanted to feel she was settled, at least halfway sorted before she left.

It had been a relief in a way: the illness left no room for questions, only caring. When she stopped talking about it with Gran, it allowed her to stop thinking about it too.

The chess man tried to kill himself. Not here, at home, but it's been a strange day on the ward. The staff coming on the early shift were quiet, standing in the corridors, heads close together in shocked twos and threes. They didn't say anything to the patients, not at first, only to Ally who knew Graham best and was told that he'd had an accident, but he's alright now. All came out later, when Alice came on after lunch and some of the patients heard her shouting. Joseph was one of them, in the kitchen across from the office while she was on the phone. Bawling someone out about how Graham went home last week and they should have known. All happened yesterday as far as Joseph can tell, and Graham's in the normal hospital across the road now.

Joseph went back to the dorm after he'd heard and Ally was crying on his bed. Quiet, though, just lying there, not wanting to go over it all with anyone. He told Joseph he was feeling sad and then they didn't say any more. Graham played chess with Ally, the only one on the ward the old guy would allow to touch the pieces. He'd put the board down in front of Joseph too sometimes, like an invitation, but would get all agitated if he tried moving anything. Hit Joseph once, not hard, but enough to have Joseph up and walking away, worried he might punch the old man or worse if he stayed. Alice came and found him in the smoking room after, thanked him for not getting angry with Graham. Explained that he likes to sit with someone but still stay in control of the game, and when Joseph said he could understand

that, she smiled.

She was the most upset of all of them. Soon as she came on her shift she was on the phone and shouting. Joseph was there when it happened, or near enough, other side of the corridor making himself some coffee. She left her office door open and he could see her standing at the desk, and that whoever was on the other end of the phone was getting an earful.

- When did you visit him? Still inside the week? Why didn't you go again?

Alice had the thumb of her free hand pressed white into the table, keeping it steady, but he could see she was shaking.

- He must have shown some sign. Yes I know what I'm saying.

There were two other patients, one in the kitchen, one in the corridor, both of them listening.

- Doesn't matter. Doesn't matter if he's never tried it before. Irrelevant.

Didn't sound like an accident then, more like something deliberate.

- You could fax your report over then. I would, yes.

More people in the corridor by this point, but it was quiet and still apart from Alice's shouting.

- You saw him at his flat? On your own? What's her extension number?

Yes I'm going to speak to her.

By the time the night shift came on the ward knew Graham had locked himself in the garage with the car engine running.

- I'm his primary nurse. While he was on the ward I was.

Alice sat down then, started talking more quietly. Strange mix of white and red in her face and she turned away so Joseph couldn't hear what she was saying. One of the other nurses shut the door, and Joseph felt bad for watching.

--

At home, evening. Alice doesn't eat in the kitchen, or in front of the TV as she would do normally. She takes her plate into her room and sits on the edge of the bed with it. Not eating, thinking. About Graham and what might

have gone through his mind, and how she didn't see it coming.

She remembers the patients she has grown attached to over her four, five years working. Phil. Morris. Janey who self-harmed, but stopped while Alice was her primary nurse. On her own with three children and, when she got desperate, would put cigarettes out on her own palms, the insides of her thighs. Fran and Craig. And then Graham, the chess player, who has been with them five times all told. In his seventies but Alice was the first person he told about his uncle. Came into his bed until Graham was out of primary school.

It's not everyone you know like that, and when they are able to leave again you can be sorry. Glad for them at the same time, if you feel the situation they are going out to is a good one, and she was glad last week for Graham. But the ward is different then, after they've gone, the run of your days, your rounds, because you do look forward to them.

Her food is cold and she puts the plate on the floor. Not thinking about eating now, just about the CPN and the way she shouted at her. And then how quiet people were on the ward with her afterwards and the fact that she didn't tell Jamie about it before she went home. He'll know by now of course and she wonders what he's thinking. No phone call, not yet anyway, and she doesn't know if that's good or bad. Doesn't need him to tell her she was wrong to do it and maybe he knows that, is just waiting for her to come on in

the morning. She hopes he's arranged a meeting with the staff, and a chance for the patients to talk it over. Clearing up the mess she's made. Should have thought, should have kept calm, but all she did was lose it over the phone. Remembers the woman's voice on the other end: sounded like she didn't know whether to cry or shout back.

She had no idea, so how can she blame someone who only met him a couple of times? Alice knows it is not logical but she can't stop feeling angry. Lying there on top of the covers while it gets darker, but she doesn't turn the light on or close the curtains. Goes over how Graham was behaving on the ward the last days and finds nothing. Remembers she supported him going home in the meeting. He wanted it, he was sure about it, so was she: her mistake too, and the consultant's. There will be an enquiry, but she doesn't want to think about that now. Knows the community nurse will get the worst of it. Doesn't want to remember her own angry voice this afternoon and that shaky feeling and the quiet ward after she slammed down the phone.

--

Joseph's Mum came in yesterday about his discharge. Told him after the meeting that she's made up his room at home for him, it's there whenever he wants it and he can stay there as long or as short as he needs to. Doing her best to make it sound like she cares but she's not worrying. No stress from her, no pressure. It all made him feel like crying.

She is good like that, his Mum, and Joseph curls up into himself in his hospital bed now. Thinking about the worry he has caused her, her eyes watching him, hoping that there is nothing wrong. Nothing that can't be dealt with somehow. Thinking don't let this happen to my son, he could see it. And he wants to tell her that it already has, but he is sorting it, trying to anyway. It can't be changed, but the rest of life can maybe be different again.

He'll be out in five days and hopes it will be okay.

--

A Sunday visit. The summer weather is holding so they eat their lunch in the garden. David has put the sunshade up on the patio and Alice has made a salad. She brought it on the train with her, and her Grandfather asks about the ingredients while he is serving it out onto their side plates, and looks doubtful, but tells her it is delicious halfway through the meal.

Her throat feels hot and her mouth full and she can't put any more food inside, can't chew or swallow because the tears are rising. Up from her chest, which hurts now and the garden starts to swim, green and red blur of lawn and border, all the strong summer colours gone watery.

David doesn't say anything when she lifts her napkin to her face. She wonders if she should supply an explanation. *Overtime*. Over-tired from doing night shifts: *not adjusted yet*. The report due on Graham's case. *Graham*. She doesn't know where to start.

She looks up to check on her Grandfather and he is still eating. He catches her eye briefly and looks away blinking. A couple of seconds later she hears him put down his knife and fork and then they are both sitting there.

She's not looking at him, trying to breathe a little deeper, to get air in her chest, push the tears back down again.

He reaches across the slats of the table and pats her hand a moment. Brief, brisk, she hears him pick up his knife and fork again and carry on eating, and then she is angry. Thinks she doesn't have to explain because he doesn't want to hear it. Just wants her to stop and get on with this lunch, with this visit. Later, at home, she will cry about the way he did this, but it helps being angry now at least. Stops the tears, means she can see the garden and her plate again, the food she doesn't want to eat but does anyway. Speed the washing up along and the time when she can be off back to the station again.

--

- What did they say to you then?

Jamie is waiting for her in the café across from the hospital. Should be on his way home by now to his kids and his girlfriend, but he's staying, and he's bought her coffee.

- They were alright about it.

She had a meeting with the hospital management this afternoon, tying up the final stages of the enquiry. And it was fine, but Alice can't make her voice sound convincing.

- I've apologised to the CPN already, I think that helped. She's being very fair. I think maybe someone told her about my Gran.

- I think maybe someone did, too.

Alice doesn't ask if it was him. Wonders if she should say thank you.

Probably. Jamie looks at her.

- I think the CPN's report will be accepted.

- Have you read it?

- I think it's good. I think it sounds exactly like Graham. Exactly like what

one of us would have written.

Alice has read it herself, knows he's right, but doesn't want to say it. She thought he was ready to go home, even pushed for it. She feels like crying. *Not again.* Picks up her coffee, too fast and it slops and burns her fingers. Jamie has tissues to mop it up and another one for her eyes.

- Thanks.

She tries not to let it go on too long. There are other people in the cafe, all trying not to look at them.

- Graham's still over the road, kept him in for observation. They said a week probably before he comes back to us.

- Yes. You been to see him again?

- I'm going tomorrow, said I'd bring him a chess book from the library. I think I should ask for leave, Jamie.

She looks across the table at him now, and he keeps his eyes steady. Doesn't say anything, just waits for her to continue.

- I'm just not handling any of this very well, am I?

- We were all shocked, Alice. No-one expected this would happen.

- I know. But look at me.

Jamie blinks.

- You're good at your job Alice. I'd hate to lose you off the ward.

- I said leave, Jamie, not leaving. Just some time to sort myself out a bit.

She smiles, but she can't look at him.

- I've been working too much.

- You have.

- So, I need some time off.

- I don't think not working will be any better. Do you?

Alice shrugs, tries to turn the conversation, make her voice sound lighter than she feels.

- Oh come on Jamie, stop the hard man bit. Can't we go back to me being good at my job and leave it at that?

- What are you going to do with your days?

She's thought of that one too, doesn't have an answer. Alice stares out of the window at the street for some time, screwing up the tissue, and after a while she can almost believe he didn't ask her.

She wishes Jamie would go home now, so she can too.

- I'm not trying to make you feel bad, Alice. I just want you to think about it properly.

--

Joseph spends two days cleaning. The stink makes him retch, the grey sludge in the corners where the hot, soapy water has soaked in. Neat bleach in a bucket and the windows wide open. His fingers itch all night, but the clean floor in the morning inspires him to tackle the doors and window frames, too. Art comes on the third day and they tear up the carpet in the small room, Ben screaming with delight as it lands with a dusty slap in the courtyard. Late morning he sleeps in his pushchair, while Art takes the doors off the kitchen cupboards and Joseph works on the bathroom.

His flat is in the third block: Pelham house. Art tells Joseph about it while they drive to the dump.

- Marjorie Pelham. She was a Lady. I looked her up in the library. Ran two

orphanages and taught the kids to read and write, all the basics. Didn't have much on the other two, they were local officials, one was a teetotaler. So anyway, I reckon we got you the best one.

Art smiles at him.

- And sun most of the day; bedroom in the morning, kitchen after lunch.

It is the quietest block of the three, and Joseph is glad of this; shielded from the main road by the others, and backing onto allotments. The flat is on the top floor and from the back rooms he can see trees, gas towers, canal, rooftops and sky.

Over the week, the flat fills up. A mattress from the high street, a fridge from Art's sister, and a cooker which Eve says she got cheap from a friend. One of the back rings doesn't work, but the other three are fine and the oven comes on okay. Baked potatoes and beans for lunch, with pork sausages. Joe has one pot, a bowl, a spoon and fork; Eve has brought plates with her from home.

- Not planning on visitors, then?

She laughs, but Joseph knows it is a serious question. They sit on the clean lino in the afternoon sun and eat in silence. After a while, Eve apologises.

- It's your place, Joey. You can do what you want, I was just being daft.

- I'll get some chairs in soon, can't see Mum sitting on the floor.

- No.

They smile at each other. Ben pushes the beans around on his plate with his fingers and leans happily back against his mother knees. Eve strokes her son's head.

- Okay, sister?

- I'm okay. Yeah. You?

- Yeah. Doing alright today.

Eve makes up the mattress in the small room with sheets and pillows, says she will try to chase up a duvet from somewhere over the next few days. She takes Ben home in the afternoon, leaves Joseph to it. He wasn't planning to stay, but paints on into the evening, and goes down to the phone boxes when it gets dark. He tells Art he's fine, not to wait up for him, he'll see them in the morning. Back in the flat, Joseph pulls the mattress into the big room and wraps himself in the curtains. Lies awake for hours in the street lamp glow. The long, bright shape of the window stretched out along the wall above him.

--

Six months paid. Which seems like an eternity to Alice when she requests it, Jamie's café questions running over and over. What if this is an over-

reaction to a minor problem? *Probably go on holiday and feel fine again.*

And then the endless days to fill. What if that just makes it all worse? She calls Jamie when it is approved, and when he says he is pleased for her, she wonders if he's being honest, and if she's pleased for herself.

The last days on the ward are hard, trying to get all the loose ends tied with that feeling that everyone's wondering why she's not gone already. They are all kind to her and she tells herself she's being stupid, just wanting to keep everything under control as usual.

Mental health professional who can't look after her own. How common is that? Very. Never wanted to be one of them, though.

--

There is no answer and so Joe steps back from the door, unsure what to do. Art said eleven, said they would be at home. Joseph stands looking at the house, mind repeating this, checking. Thrown now. He thinks about finding a phone box, leaving a message on the answerphone to say he'd been and gone. Maybe Art will come and fetch him later, but that means he will have to walk all the way back to the flats again, alone. Could wait here. Maybe that would be better. Tells himself he was okay getting here, so he'll be alright on the way back too. *Fuck's sake.* He doesn't go. He peers in through the frosted glass of the door instead, checking for movements inside, and then

living room window. A shape on the sofa, sweatshirt and belly. Relief. Joseph laughs, knocks on the glass. A minute or two later, Art opens the door. Eyes red, face creased with sleep.

- Morning Joey. Sorry.

He turns back to the living room, heavy-footed, and Joseph follows him inside. The house is quiet, no sign of Ben, save the toys scattered in the hall. Art has resumed his position on the sofa. Eyes closed, he talks to Joe who is standing in the doorway.

- He's been ill, just got him down. Puking all night and then dancing about happy as Larry this morning. Don't understand it.

Art shifts his legs, rubs his face, the pattern of the sofa cushions pressed into his cheeks.

- I'll be up in a minute. Just need to keep my eyes shut, tiny bit longer.

- I'll make you some tea.

- Eve went out at half five. Late for the market. She'll be shattered, poor girl.

In the kitchen, inside again, Joseph feels better. Puts the kettle on, eats the half slice of toast left on the side, watching the sparrows jump along the garden fence, the train rattling past along the high tracks. When he brings the tea in Art is sleeping again, so Joe leaves the cup next to him on the low table, goes back out into the kitchen and empties the washing machine.

Small T-shirts and trousers and socks, a pair of Art's jeans, stiff and enormous next to the kid's things on the clothes horse.

A crackle on the baby monitor and then Ben starts to cry. Joe stands, but Art is already awake and half-way up the stairs.

Joe washes up while Art dresses Ben, feeds him juice and slices of apple. Already most of the morning has gone.

- This is what it's like, you see. Dressing, eating, sleeping, shitting, changing and your life disappearing.

But Art is smiling while he says it, kissing his son, unfolding the buggy from the cupboard in the hallway.

- Let's get going, eh? He might sleep again when we get out walking.

They eat an early lunch in a café off the high street, look around the charity shops for cups and plates and glasses, things for Joseph's kitchen. At the library, Art has books to return, goes to the children's section to choose new ones with Ben and Joe wanders the shelves. Hardback novels in pink and purple, women on the covers dressed in crinolines, holding parasols. Large-type books, a few outsize volumes with wildlife photographs or yellowish reproductions of old masters. At the far end of the library is a group of easy chairs, low tables covered with newspapers, wire racks full of dog-eared magazines. A young woman sits in one, eating a sandwich that she hides

under her coat between bites. Opposite her an old man has a newspaper open in front of him and his eyes closed. His shoes are split, trouser-knees greasy. Joseph notices how the chairs sag, and that somewhere in the shelves someone has been coughing, off and on, ever since they came in.

He turns, walks back past the issue desk and past the pin-boards covered in bright posters that mark out the children's library. Art is sitting on one of the small red chairs, knees up around his chin, head leaning against a pillar, dozing. Ben holds up a book to Joseph, shouts when he sees him. Art wakes, smiles.

- Got to snatch it while you can. Eve swears she can kip standing up at the market on a slow day.

At the issue desk, Art gathers together information leaflets, passes them to Joseph.

- They get the newspapers here daily, and they've got some good books, too. You just have to look for them. Always lots of information about what's going on here, in the area.

Joseph stuffs the leaflets in his pockets, doesn't look at them. Wonders if that's why Art brought him here. Look, you can sit with the old fuckers and read the papers. Save money, something to fill your days. Get you out of the house at least.

He is quiet as they wheel back out onto the street and Art doesn't say anything either. They walk for a while and then at the corner Joseph says he needs to go home. They stand there with Art blinking and the traffic loud, people pushing past them, sound of the pedestrian crossing. Hard to ask, hard to say that he needs to be walked, too much, too scared, too scattered, to get there alone. And all of it worse because he can see that Art is upset, uncertain of what's gone wrong. They had said they would spend the day together, maybe watch the snooker in the afternoon, get something cooked for when Eve comes home.

They walk back to the estate, taking the side roads that are quieter, pushchair wheels rattling on the uneven pavements, Ben jolted and frowning, Joseph and Art left with nothing to say to each other.

Yesterday Joseph had spent some of the afternoon exploring, down as far as the canal. Had come back thinking of finding a map of the area, searching out and then marking the good places for himself. Quiet stretch of water behind the allotments, might be a good spot to sit if the sun was out. Found a high wall running along the gas tower, too. Old brick, very red, something he liked about the colour of it against the blue sky, and the tough green of the scraggy plants growing through the mortar.

He looks today as well, but can't like any of it. The streets are scabby, pigeons squatting on mangled toes, double yellow lines ending in thick globs along the sides of the road. Potholed tarmac, paving stones cracked, bin

liners spilling into the gutters, drains choked with litter, shop doorways covered by bars, crammed window displays behind smeary glass.

Everything sold is cheap and plastic, all under a pound and useless anyway and the smell from the take-away like fat a week too long in the pan.

Today he knows to avoid the high wall, that it would be a threat to him.

Looked at it yesterday thinking it was amazing that he wasn't worried about who might be behind it, maybe waiting for him. When he first went to Ireland, he would dream the same thing over and over: that he was home again and walking down familiar streets in uniform. Like a naked dream, he thought when he woke, only in cammo and green. Making you more visible, obvious to anyone who's there to see you. Has had to remind himself repeatedly in the years since leaving that no-one here knows he was a soldier. And no-one here would shoot him for it. On days like this he can never feel sure of that, though.

- Give us a phone, eh?

- Yeah.

It is a relief to be back in the flat, to pull the curtains. Jamie had warned him it would be difficult. That it might feel like it's easier, safer not going out at all, but it's important to keep trying. He knows he should call Art and try and explain, or say sorry at least, or talk to Eve later when she gets in. Shouldn't let this go on too long, probably easier to stop while he's still near the beginning. He waits, though, and then it gets dark, and he makes a deal

with himself. He doesn't have to phone until tomorrow if he makes himself something to eat.

Autumn began this morning. Her Grandmother's birthday. Alice noticed the change on her way to work, sun out but the air just a little too cool for her jacket. Long hot season turning: Gran would say it still looks like summer but it smells all different. She liked the days drawing in, another season coming, insisted her birthday marked not the end but the beginning of something. Declared autumn the best time of year for dreaming and planning, and Alice never quite understood this idea, though she liked the optimism in it. This year it feels further removed, more impossible than ever.

She phones her Grandfather and he says he's been out in the garden: starting the tidying chores, getting things in order before the bad weather. Will be planting bulbs next, broad beans, things that like being in the ground over winter. They talk a little longer than usual, and though neither of them mentions the date or its significance, when Alice hangs up she is surprised to feel comforted.

She does some tidying herself, her room, the kitchen. Makes a list which she doesn't really need and doesn't consult in the supermarket. Waiting at the tills she decides she will walk to the station. To buy flowers from the stall

there, which she'll only take home and put in the living room, not be able to give to someone, but will still mark the day. The street-lights are coming on as she leaves the shop: not getting dark just yet, but Alice thinks there will be no more long evenings this year.

At the flower stall, the woman who serves her is familiar, young and looks like she's in charge, and Alice thinks she must have bought flowers from her before. On her way to see Gran in the hospice, perhaps: getting the train from here out to the suburbs all those times after work. The young woman is looking up at her, has noticed her staring. Alice blinks, but the young woman's expression is friendly.

- I'm Eve. I'm Joe Mason's sister.

- Joe Mason.

Alice repeats the name and then makes the connection: slow, out of context.

- You're a nurse aren't you? Up at the thingie?

The young woman gestures with the bunch she is making up for Alice, over her shoulder in the general direction of the hospital, a mile or two from here.

- Yes.

Alice nods, although it feels like a lie to say that.

- I remember your brother. I remember when you came in now, with your mother, wasn't it? The meeting about him going home again.

Eve. Joseph Mason's sister smiles and Alice thinks about Graham going home and that it's not her place to worry about that now.

- How is he doing? Joseph?

- He'll be okay, I think. You know we got him a flat?

- Oh, that's great.

- Yeah, it's not a bad place. He's been doing it up a bit with my boyfriend.

Eve is adding greenery to the chrysanthemums Alice chose, and some tiny yellow flowers which Alice didn't ask for, but they sit well against the deep red of the petals. It will cost extra now, and Alice wonders if she should stop her. Cheeky really, to just add things like that, but before she can get the words together the bunch is held up for her, ready to be wrapped if it meets her approval.

- Hope you like them.

- Thank-you, they look great.

They do, the right flowers for the day. Eve smiles as she hands them over and then puts her hands in her apron pocket, shaking her head, refusing the note Alice holds out.

- Oh, please. I couldn't.

- Of course you can.

She smiles, blushing and Alice stays standing, unsure what to do. Can see no counter, nowhere obvious to put her tenner, except on top of the flowers maybe, and then she feels stupid. For not being more gracious. For having begrudged the extra pound for the greenery, too. She will have to put her money away again. Tucks the flowers under one arm, aware she is moving slowly, flustered. Purse buried under everything at the bottom of her bag, she starts walking away, fumbling.

- I'll hold them, shall I?

The sister is next to her, taking the flowers, freeing her arms for searching.

- Oh.

- I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to be embarrassing. Just a bit of a thank-you or

something.

- Don't worry.

Alice straightens up, collecting herself, smiling, holds out her hand for the flowers again.

- Thank-you.

But the sister keeps hold of them.

- I wanted to ask you actually.

Alice blinks, her hands still halfway out for the flowers and the sister's fingers curl around the crinkling paper.

- My brother. He's still on medication, supposed to be.

- Yes.

- How do I know if he's taking it?

Alice shifts a little. A work conversation that she shouldn't be, doesn't want to be having. Feels the response coming, though: automatic, to the anxious face she is looking at.

- You think he isn't?
- No. Yes.
- Are his symptoms getting worse?
- I think so. Yeah.

Blinking worry. Self-conscious. Alice remembers the mother being the same. The Masons. Jamie said they were nice people and she thinks he's right, but she still doesn't want to be talking about this. Other people are responsible now.

- He'll still have his outpatient appointments.
- I don't think he goes to them either. Not the last couple anyway.
- Does he have a community nurse?
- No. He didn't want one, said it was voluntary.
- They are.
- He was doing okay. Really. Think it was good, him being on the ward up there with all of you. He was so much better.

She is looking at Alice, flushing.

- Maybe he just needs a little reminder or a little push or something. Only I

can't do it. I don't know what to say, you know? Don't want to be making it worse or anything.

Alice knows what's coming next, can feel herself preparing.

- And then seeing you, I was just thinking. Would you be able to come see him?

Alice smiles, knows she has to keep things even: not refusing straight away, but then being firm and clear all the same.

- I'm not sure that would be helpful.

Can't make her voice sound definite enough.

- No. I am sorry.

--

The sister caught her in a weak moment, Alice thinks, and resents it now.

Walking up the piss-smelling stairs of the back block on the estate. Hopes

it's the right one because the sign was missing. If it's not she's just going home again, not chasing round all afternoon. Tells herself this to make herself feel better, more resolved. But she has the map Eve scrawled on the flower paper with her, and the directions are clear enough. Not the wrong estate, much as part of her hopes it might be. *Jesus. People live here.* She's out of breath and stops on the second floor walkway, looks out over the courtyard. Boarded up windows and litter. Oily puddles and black bags leaking disposable nappies. *Jesus. Again.* Doesn't seem like the best start for someone. Coming out into this, probably rather be in again.

They are there and waiting for him, Joseph Mason and his sister. She opens the door, Eve, and he is standing a couple of metres behind her, in the doorway to what looks like the kitchen.

- Hello.

Alice smiles at Eve, and then at her brother.

- Hello Joseph.

- You found us alright then.

- My information was good.

Alice smiles and holds up the flower-paper map to Eve, trying to keep things

light and friendly, but she can see that Joseph doesn't want her to be here. Keeping in the background, shoulders pulled up high around his ears.

There are two chairs in the kitchen, Joe sits on one of them, Alice on the other and Eve insists she's fine standing. Alice wonders if there is another chair somewhere in the flat. It all looks very bare, so maybe not. They have made tea, and there are biscuits on a plate on the table. Alice thinks Eve is waiting for her to start, and she feels stupid, out of place. *I'm on leave.* And she's not a community nurse.

- How have you been keeping?

Joseph nods, which might mean fine, might mean he hasn't understood her.

- Your sister asked me to come. Because she thinks you've not been so well this past week or two.

- *No.*

- You have outpatient's appointments, I believe.

- *Yes.*

- Mondays.

Eve says it and then apologises. Alice keeps talking to Joseph.

- How are they going? Are they helping you?

He doesn't answer and Alice feels his sister shifting next to her, looks up at Eve.

- Joe didn't go yesterday.

- Okay.

Joseph is staring at them both, he looks angry.

- Sorry, Joey. I'll go out, shall I? I'll go into the next room.

Alice thinks the sister might cry and she wonders what she's got herself into, sitting in the kitchen with Joseph Mason, not knowing exactly what the point of her being here is. *What was it Eve said: a little push in the right direction?*

He is silent, even after his sister leaves. Alice pours tea for them both and thinks she should probably make this as swift and efficient as possible.

- If you are having difficulties. With the day to day, I mean. There are always options open to you. Which don't have to mean going into hospital again.

Joseph is staring at the edge of the table, and she thinks he is listening, but he still looks angry.

- You could have a Community Psychiatric Nurse for example. I know you didn't want one when you were discharged, but if you change your mind, I can give you a number to ring, or you could ask at your next appointment. They can visit you here and organise help for you, with things like cooking and shopping. Things that might seem very hard at the moment, but when you get the hang of them again it can make you feel so much better, really.

She waits, but he doesn't respond.

- I'll leave the number, and I'll leave it up to you. You can think about it, talk about it with your sister maybe.

She gets the pen out of her bag, and when she's finished writing she asks.

- How about your medication?

He shifts in his chair.

- How are you getting on with it?
- Fine.
- Are you on a weekly prescription now or a monthly?
- Monthly.
- Can I have a look at the bottle?

He looks at her, like he can't believe what she's just asked and Alice thinks how on the ward this kind of conversation would be normal, and it wouldn't worry her unduly to ask these questions, but here, in this man's kitchen, she just feels like she's forcing something.

- I'm sorry Joseph. I don't want to be prying. I came because your sister asked me to, and I thought you might like to see someone. But I do know it's really none of my business, and you don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to.

He is still looking at her, but he nods now.

- It's okay.

Alice waits and then she asks.

- Are you okay?

- I'm fine.

He looks at the teapot, not at her, but the frown is easing.

- I mean I think I'm probably getting there or something.

She doesn't say anything. Waits for him.

- I stopped taking the pills for a bit but I'm on them again now. I think they're working. Starting to.

Alice isn't sure whether she believes him. Wonders if she should find out who his out-patient appointments are with, get them to call his GP and check he's been collecting his prescriptions. *Something*. Doesn't want to be dealing with this herself, but she can't do nothing. Check over the flat, maybe, as *she's* here, unobtrusively. Say that she just needs the loo and have a look while *she's* gone, see if the place is in livable condition. And maybe he keeps his pills in the bathroom. The thought of doing this is horrible, though. Intrusive. Everything looks fine from here, bare but clean. She shouldn't be here. She has written down the phone numbers, thinks she will make sure the sister sees them anyway. Stands to go, nodding at Joseph, who gets up.

- I wanted to say thank-you.

Not what she expected. Alice smiles, though she's not sure it's what she deserves.

- You should thank your sister, really. Don't be hard on her anyway, will you?

- No, no. I mean the day, with the injections. It was a relief, you know. When all those spasms went away.

- Oh, right. I can imagine. You're welcome.

--

Alice talked to the sister afterwards, in the courtyard, among the plastic bags. Explained the situation, the options available, and that she was taking a bit of time off now, too. Eve was more embarrassed than she was about it, apologising. And Alice was glad to be away from the litter and broken concrete down there, the complicated situation upstairs.

A week goes by, though, and she does think about it. Wonders if any phone calls have been made, and when Monday comes, whether Joseph went to see the psychiatrist this time.

A few days later and the first clear morning after a spell of cold and rain. Alice decides to make the best of it and go out on her bike. Might be the last time before the winter. She doesn't think too much about what she is doing, cycling up the main road towards the river with the traffic rushing past and the wind blowing behind her. She was going to cycle over the Thames and have a drink, a bit of lunch maybe in a pub on the water. But she turns off long before she gets there. Stopping at a red light, thinking it's not far to the estate from here, just this junction and then a left turn at the next one.

There's no answer when she knocks, and the doorbell doesn't seem to be working. At least she can't hear anything when she presses it and there's no-one inside stirring. She's not sure the flat is empty, though. Thinks Joseph may be home and waiting for whoever it is at the door to go away and leave him alone. The kitchen window looks out over the walkway, and she leans in to take a look through it. Cupping her hands around her eyes, face up against the bars over the glass. Everything clean and tidy, chair pushed in under the table, one mug lying washed up on the draining board. On the other side of the front door is the bathroom, and the glass is mottled, but she doesn't want to be peering in there anyway. He doesn't want to be visited, so give the man his privacy.

Alice finds a pen in her bag, pulls out a page from her diary. *Hello Joseph, just called round to see how you are getting on.* And then she stops, because she can't decide if she should leave a number for him to call her on.

Probably not, but then the note looks like a half-measure. Come round to check on him, but give him no way of responding. Bad if he does need help. *We care, but not that much.* Bad signal to be sending.

- Fucking hell.

Her voice sounds stupid and loud against the brickwork. Crouching, uncomfortable, paper crumpling on her knees. She screws it up, stuffs it into her pocket. *Not responsible.* Shouldn't make herself responsible for this.

Downstairs again, wrestling with her bike lock and still angry with herself, she hears a voice calling far above her head.

- Alice.

--

Joseph runs a bath after she has gone and thinks about the visit. He's cleared away the plates and mugs already, the jam they spread on their toast. Her plate was sticky with it. She pulled a knife-full out from the jar and put in on the side, spread it over the bread from there, which he'd never seen anyone do before. Meant she didn't have to dig her knife in over and over, probably, get toast crumbs in the jam. The kind of thing your parents

tell you maybe, if you're brought up that way.

Joseph gets into the steaming water, watches the condensation dribble down the tiles. Was a funny visit, different from the last time. Because Eve wasn't there stressing, could be. Alice left her bag in the hallway, took her shoes off by the door. Because that's what he does, that's what his mother always told them. Stop the carpets getting dirty. Alice is not a small woman, but she looked it, standing in his kitchen in her stocking feet while he filled the kettle, got the cups out. He could feel her looking inside his cupboards, seeing that there's not much in them, but at least what is there is kept clean and neat. Three tins, two packets lined up next to a couple of plates, his few knives and forks.

Joseph made toast, though he wasn't hungry. Wanted to show her he could do that, was feeding himself, maybe. He offered her some.

- No thanks, Joseph.

But when the bread was under the grill it smelt good.

- Actually, can I change my mind?

- Course you can.

Joseph smiles now, remembering. Got the loaf out again.

- You're off work, my sister said.

- I'm on leave, yes. Few months.

She shifted her feet a little on the lino.

- My Gran died.

Alice looked embarrassed then, and Joseph wanted to say sorry, or that she didn't have to tell him, something like that. But it didn't come out, and then she carried on anyway.

- She was like my mum, like a mother. So it's hard.

- Yeah.

She wasn't looking at him and her eyes had gone all squinty. Something changed in her face, skin gone tight across her cheeks maybe.

- Sorry.

She nodded.

- My Dad died.

- Did he? I'm sorry. Was that recently?

- No.

It wasn't the right thing to say, or at least that wasn't the point, and he felt stupid to have brought his Dad up, but he wanted to. Tell her something. Because she looked all small and alone there, sitting in his kitchen.

- No. Long time ago. I was a kid then. Wait, I'll show you.

He got his jacket from the hallway, his wallet out with the photo. She took it and looked at it, and he knew she didn't know what she was supposed to be seeing or saying, but she was going along with it, and it makes him glad to remember that bit now. She smiled a bit, frowned at the same time.

- Sorry, Joseph. I don't understand.

- He's not in any of our pictures.

- Right.

Alice was looking at him, still not sure, but that tightness in her face had gone, and she looked like she wanted him to carry on, so he did.

- Died when I was seven, but it's like even before that he was never really with us.

- That's your Mum then, and Eve?

- Yeah. That's the way it always was, you see?

Joseph thinks maybe she did understand, but she didn't say, just asked how old he was when the photo was taken.

- Eight. That was the hot summer, when we had days off school to save water.

- I remember.

- It's the year after my Dad died.

Alice was nodding and he is amazed now, thinking about it, how easy it was to say those things to her.

- 1977 was it?

- 76.

- Yes. We carried the bathwater down in buckets to water the borders. My Gran loved her garden. I was eleven, maybe just turned twelve then.

He asked her about the community nurses then. Seemed like the right thing to say. She said he should phone the numbers, or should she maybe write

them down again.

- Could you?

She went out into the hall to get her bag, and when she came back in again he asked.

- What would they do then?

- How do you mean?

- Would it be like this?

- Tea and toast?

She smiled.

- Sometimes, probably. They'd be able to get people in to help you anyway. Visits to the hairdressers, going to the cinema, getting your benefits sorted. Whatever you need.

He was sitting there trying to decide if that's what he wanted when she said.

- Why don't I just come again next week and see how you're doing?

And he doesn't really know what to make of this idea now, but he said yes, so come Tuesday she'll be here again.

--

This is not unusual. Even while she tells herself Alice knows how stupid it sounds.

Bright cold day and the streets are lunchtime busy. Alice is bringing her shopping home on the bus.

She thinks about what Jamie would say. Whether she should phone and talk to him, maybe. Tries to imagine how she might describe what she is doing. *I'm like his CPN. It's your time off. Why not just refer him to a real one?* The traffic crawls on the high street, and Alice gets out two stops early, walks the route home past the bakery to buy a late lunch. *It needn't be for long.* Joseph could be coping again in a matter of weeks: four or six. And she will be happy for him when she can let him get on with it again. Like she was for Phil and Janey. They were both still doing well a year or two after their CPN time was over, remembers how good it felt to hear that when she checked with the social worker. No need to call Jamie. No reason why it should be any different for Joseph.

It makes Alice feel steady, this logic, these patterns and comparisons.

Walking home with her paper bags in the sun.

Six weeks, eight maybe. Through the autumn and then see how things are going.

--

Tuesday, market day and they stay out longer than expected. Arthur is at the flat waiting for them when they get back with their bags of shopping. Ben is tearing up and down the walkway when they get to the top of the stairs, but he comes over all shy when he sees Alice and hides behind his pushchair.

She doesn't stay long, even though Joseph invites her to have a bit of lunch with them. She unpacks the shopping with him and asks Arthur how Eve is and tries to talk to Ben too, but the little boy is having none of it. After she's gone, Arthur starts going through the cupboards for something to eat.

- She's alright, isn't she?

- She's nice.

- Eve never told me she had red hair like that.

Joseph laughs.

- What do you mean?

- Just what I said. She's alright.

Arthur is opening a can of soup and smiling.

- Not surprised Eve never said anything to you then.

- No woman even comes close to your sister, Joey. You know that. But I'm just saying that your nurse isn't bad either. Don't you think?

- Don't know.

- Yeah, right. You going to get some toast on then?

When Arthur has taken Ben home, Joseph thinks about Alice most of the afternoon. He decides she probably is alright, like Arthur says. Only he can't really see it. She has wide shoulders. Long, strong arms. Large hands, blunt fingers, a bit too much like a man's. Not flat-chested though, and she could have a nice body under her jeans and jumpers because she looks fit. But there's nothing that obvious about her. Nice face, friendly. Her hair is red-blond and freckles run over her face and down her arms. Pale skin, a shock next to the splashes of orange-brown colour across her nose.

He can't remember if her lashes are long or short, what colour her irises are, but she wears some kind of eye make-up that gathers in clumps at the corners of her eyes. And he finds the smell of her strange, too. Like milk.

Strange to be thinking about her like this, doesn't feel right. Can't put her in that context somehow. But then he can't remember the last time he looked at a woman and felt anything. Not really. Last time he went to bed with anyone must be over three years ago. Once or twice with Julie after he came out of the army again, and then there was that time with that friend of Eve's, but since then nothing.

Lies on his mattress and feels pathetic.

--

Alice is in the kitchen when Martha lets him in. Joe Mason in the doorway, and she's making a cup of tea. He smiles.

- Alright. In the area and just thought I'd try you, see if you're at home.

It starts out casual enough, this sentence, but he is blushing by the time he gets to the end, so Alice has to look away. Down at the cup, the kettle as it clicks off.

- You want one?

- Tea, yeah.

- One sugar?

He smiles, and she notices again the creases around his eyes that make him look older. *Twenty eight*. The hair growing long over his ears now, everything about him too thin. The kitchen is small and narrow, makes him seem taller, standing between her and the door. It is dark, too. She didn't put the light on when she came in to put the kettle on. Already late, street lamps outside are lit and the bulb in the hallway. Martha is running a bath, the living room will be empty.

- Shall we go and sit down?

They stay at opposite ends of the sofa, TV on in the background. Talk about patients and staff, exhaust what they know they have in common and then they are quiet. Alice offers him a cigarette which he declines. She rolls one for herself, fetches the ashtray over, pulls her feet up on the couch next to her, between her and Joe, painted nails showing through where the wool at the toes has got thin. She curls them under. Alice smokes and they pretend to be watching television. After a few minutes, Joe reaches his hand out and rests it on her foot, fingers curling light around her ankle. Neither of them move. Alice re-lights her cigarette, finishes it. Her tea is drunk. Pulse

hammers at her throat, and she isn't sure if she wants this man here or if she wants him to go.

Not a good idea, probably none of it is.

He takes his hand away and stretches. Alice thinks he will say that he's got to be going now. And then he does, and they are both standing, him putting his jacket on by the door and her saying take care and closing it behind him.

Still there in the hallway three four five minutes later.

- Who was that then?

Martha is out of the bath, dripping in her dressing gown, standing next to her smiling.

- He's called Joe. Joseph.

- Is he nice?

- Yes. I don't know. I think so.

It's well after midnight but Alice doesn't want to go to bed yet. She turns and goes back into the living room, sits back down on the sofa. Doesn't want

Martha to come and sit next to her with more questions either, so she lies back, stretches her feet out across the length of the settee. Martha has followed her a couple of steps, but she is taking the hint now: Alice can feel her hesitating behind her, turning.

- Night then.

- Night, Martha. Sleep well.

The cushions are still warm where his legs were. The TV has been on all this while, sound low, images flicking against the walls. She reaches for the remote and then the room is darker. Outside a car turns the corner. The curtains don't quite cover the windows and the headlights pass across the ceiling above her. She closes her eyes. Stays there until morning, in the orange street lamp glow and the yellow light from the kitchen doorway.

--

- I was thinking about your Gran on the way over, you know.

Eleanor puts her bag on the ledge by the café window and sits down briefly opposite Alice before taking her coat off.

- I met her at our graduation, I think. I remember she was lovely anyway.

They trained together, nearly a decade ago now. Alice called her at the weekend, first time in ages, and it feels a bit strange, but also good to see her now. Even if the first thing she mentions is her Grandmother, she does it in an easy way somehow: doesn't require a response, doesn't need apologies for long lapses in communication, either. The right person to call, Alice thinks now, watching Eleanor weave her way through the tables to order coffees for them up at the counter. She points to the cakes behind the glass and looks over at Alice.

- No. Thanks.

She got a Christmas card from Eleanor the year before last with her telephone number. Dialed it thinking she would have moved again by now, but it was her voice on the answerphone and so she left a message. Too long, with too many pauses and repetitions, but Eleanor called back the same evening and then it seemed so simple to arrange this meeting.

- I'll come after I get them off to nursery.

Eleanor has two children now and looks, not older exactly, but different, and Alice is sure she must, too. Shorter hair, different colour, but the same grey eyes, same ready intimacy.

- What's been happening, then?

Work, babies, funding cuts, policy changes, Ellie's husband and mutual friends. All the time Alice is wondering what Eleanor would make of Joseph, but they talk for over half an hour before she can find a way to mention him.

- So how is it, then? Taking time off.

- It's fine. Good I think. I've been doing a bit of voluntary work actually. Keep myself busy.

- What kind of thing?

- Helping ex-patients out in the community. Sort of CPN work, really.

- Oh dear, are they saving money there too now. Relying on volunteers.

Alice doesn't know how to answer that. Embarrassed by her own description.

- Just the one man. Joseph. He was in the army for a while. Few years.

- Right.

Eleanor tries to keep her face neutral but fails.

- Sorry, Alice. I'm not a nurse anymore, I don't have to be understanding.

She shrugs, smiles, and Alice has to admire at her candour.

- Doesn't matter. I'd probably be the same if I didn't know him. But why do we think that?

- War. Guns, bombs. Using them on other people. Hierarchies, honour, obeying pointless orders. Boring romance of battle bullshit bonding comrades-in-arms. You want me to stop, don't you?

- Yes.

They smile at each other. Ellie pulls her bag off the ledge, feels down near the bottom for cigarettes.

- Just a prejudice like any other, isn't it? I have this picture in my head now of your Joseph, and he's all clipped vowels and moustache. What was he? An officer or a squaddie?

- Squaddie.

- Well, then I imagine he was probably too thick to do anything else.

- Jesus, Ellie. I'm glad you said the word prejudice, or I'd feel obliged to.

She stirs sugar into her coffee and Ellie winks at her.

- I remember you, Miss White Poppies on Remembrance Day and all those arguments with your Granddad.

- I know.

Alice wants to say that Joe is different, but she doesn't. Knows she can't back that statement up, not yet anyway, and Ellie is bound to ask her to.

- I don't row with my Granddad any more. I don't know what changed there. Stopped feeling worthwhile, maybe. Stopped feeling so sure about it all.

She watches Eleanor light a cigarette, decides it's an inadequate explanation, but doesn't want to go into all of that, not today.

[Alice tells Eleanor that Joseph is an ex-patient, their meetings have been privately arranged, not mediated through an official body. And that she's falling in love with him.]

She opens her eyes and Eleanor is staring at her across the table.

Exaggerated expression, but her shock is at least half real, Alice knows it.

Can understand it too, which makes it all the more difficult to think of a response.

- I take it you don't approve.

- No. Well. I don't know.

Eleanor leans back in her chair, and Alice lets her sit a moment, forces herself to wait for her friend to speak. She leans forward again.

- Can't say what I think, Alice. Don't know anything about it yet, do I?

Alice blinks. Grateful.

[]

Eleanor is nodding.

- Oh no, don't make fun, Ellie. Please. I really need your opinion, your real one.

- Sorry. Sorry. I'm just afraid of what else you're going to tell me about him.

- That's it. That's all. I mean that's all the bad things.

- And the good things are?

Alice reaches out her fingers for Eleanor's cigarette, but she pulls it away,

shaking her head.

- You stopped, I remember that.

- I started again. Just a puff or two, come on. I'm a stressed and confused woman.

- Just one then.

Alice takes a drag and passes it back again. Exhales and begins to list Joseph's good points for her.

- Gentle. Intelligent. Warm. His family are nice, they care about him.

She laughs.

- Christ it sounds so stupid, listed like that. I like him, like I said. He's good to be with.

Alice shrugs, doesn't want to sound so defensive. The more she says the more she feels uncertain. Ellie nods at her.

- I believe you. Sex?

- No.

- Meaning bad?
- Meaning none. He's still on medication.
- Right. And if he wasn't?
- No. Not yet. Not sure enough about it.
- Him or you?
- Me. Maybe him too. Bloody hell this is getting personal.
- You asked my advice.
- I know I did. I'm just embarrassed now.

She is flushing and Ellie smiles, lifts her glass of water across the table to her and Alice presses it against the sides of her face. Fishes out a sliver of ice cube and crunches it between her teeth.

- What do you do together? I mean are you seeing each other?
- I don't know. We went to the cinema once. Mostly it's just everyday things, you know. Shopping, cooking, getting benefits sorted, going for haircuts.
- You don't go on dates?
- No. Not really. We meet for cups of tea. He cooked dinner for me and my flatmates last week. He's a good cook, a roast, real Sunday food. We played cards after. They liked him. Didn't say he was a patient.
- No, well. Don't blame you.
- I mean, Joe and I agreed that together. Didn't want that getting in the way.

No reason why they need to know anyway.

Ellie smiles, Alice knows she is explaining too much.

- And you don't think he's getting better? Is that what worries you?

- No. Not exactly. Maybe. I do wonder if it's a good idea in that way. For him, I mean.

- How long?

- Since he's been out? Coming up four months now.

- And why did he come in in the first place?

- Depression. He spent two years homeless after the army. Depressed and his doctor prescribed anti-psychotics for some reason known only to himself. Joseph came in first with a bad reaction to them and then he asked for referral. Six weeks.

- And now?

- How is he now you mean? Going steady, I'd say. Taking things easy. I mean I'd not be worried about him at all if it wasn't for this. I think he's good at taking care of himself, and he's got a good family. They're very supportive, and he's letting them help him now.

- Well that all sounds positive.

- Yes, it is. But I think he might want it, too. Us I mean.

- I thought you said there wasn't an Us.

- I said I didn't know.

- What makes you think he might want it then? Has he done anything?

Alice decides against telling Ellie about Joe's visit. His hand on her ankle.

All sounds absurd now. Embarrassing, wrong.

- No. I don't know why I think that really. I just think he should be careful with himself, you know?

Eleanor has finished his cigarette, is lighting another.

- And you?

- Am I being careful?

- Yes. I mean does anyone at the hospital know?

- No. I know it wouldn't go down well, Ellie.

It comes out angry and she is sorry then, but Eleanor doesn't seem to mind.

She just smiles and nods at her. The place is filling up now, people on their lunch breaks, and Alice doesn't know how long they've been here, hours, but Eleanor doesn't look like she wants to be leaving.

- Do you want to be his nurse or his girlfriend?

Alice doesn't answer. She knows what Ellie is about to say.

- Perhaps you shouldn't be either.

- I know. I know.

She does. She thinks Ellie is right. Her coffee is cold, the milk froth fallen into a flat scum on top. She stirs it, doesn't want to drink it, put anything in her stomach, which feels acid and tight. She thinks she might cry, and that Ellie can see that.

- You can sort him out with another CPN. You don't have to feel like you're leaving him in the lurch, you know.

Alice nods.

- Sounds like he's well on his way from what you said.

- Yes.

- What about the whole ex-army thing? Do you think that's his problem?

- I don't know. That was just a lead up. To distract you from the whole ex-patient bit.

Eleanor laughs.

- Do you know why he left?

- He said he hated it at the end.

- Did he buy himself out?

- Don't think so.

- They have to hand in something like a year's notice, I think. Longer even.

Maybe he got some kind of discharge.

- I don't know, to be honest, Ellie. I haven't asked. Maybe he did buy himself out, and that's why he ended up homeless. No money left.

- I remember two patients when we lived in Cornwall. Ex-service, both of them were homeless. Don't think it's uncommon. Hard to adjust.

- Yes.

Eleanor offers her a whole cigarette and she takes it.

- They were alright after a while, though.

- Who?

- My ex-service blokes.

- So is Joe. I mean I think he'll be fine.

- There you go then. Shall we eat something?

They smoke and they smile.

[Ellie should be more harsh: Soldiering. The way they get all pious about it. The things they have seen, we can never imagine. Ellie rolls her eyes. Our silent menfolk carrying their burden. For all of us, you understand. I fought the war for the likes of you blah blah and now you drop litter and it blows into my garden. Politicians coming over all misty eyed when they can send troops into battle. Find an enemy and they'd all do it.

Alice should enjoy her sarcasm, bit of a release for her to hear this, what she maybe thinks but can't allow herself to acknowledge.]

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Been a while. Been a while now. Since there's been anyone interested. Or interesting. Reason enough not to trust it. Nearly four years. Doesn't feel like the beginning of something, more like desperation.

PART THREE

It has been over three months now, Christmas come and gone. The January days are wet and Joseph has been looking for work.

Christmas was embarrassing: got too many presents, couldn't give nearly as many in return. Looked pitiful, his unwrapped offerings under the tree at Eve and Arthur's. And today even Alice has something for him: a New Year gift which he opens in the flat before they go out to the shops. A set of bike tools so he won't have to bend his spoons mending punctures any more.

- I haven't got you nothing.

- Don't be daft.

Everyone says it doesn't matter but it does. And it took some doing but last week he got on the phone to some of the people he used to work for.

- I messed too many of them about these past couple of years.

Alice wheels the trolley round the supermarket with him and listens. None of the blokes he called have jobs on at the moment, or at least they say they don't. After the third one it felt like too much of a coincidence.

- Arguments. Walked out on too many of them.

- What about your friend, the one who trained you?

- Clive. He's moved. Down on the south coast somewhere now. I've got his number, but if he had work it would mean me going down there. Not really on is it?

Sunday morning and still early enough for the place to be reasonably empty. They walk along the wide, bright aisles and the humming fridges: Joseph has the shopping list and they add up the prices together. Joseph's maths is better than Alice's, gives them something to laugh about. Getting to be routine by now, they have a path they follow from veg to bread to frozen foods, practiced at scouting for special offers, the marked down stickers. Putting on their miser's eyes, they call it.

- I don't know, maybe it's a crap idea, but I need some money.

- You've got about six pounds left now. Enough for a chicken and some trimmings. Perfect.

They have arranged to cook lunch together. A roast. Joseph got a recipe book out of the library during the week, Alice brought some herbs with her this morning, and a fruit salad, sitting in the fridge now, back at the flat in its plastic container.

Joseph watches his week's shopping passing on the conveyor belt at the tills and it looks enough to last him, but when he's paid there's almost nothing left in his pocket to do anything with until Friday and benefit day. Soon as

one's been you're waiting for the next. Stuck in the same shitey, fortnightly rhythm. Harder now the weather's been sleety and the bike's not an option. Easier to just sit in the flat because you can't even get the bus anywhere. Not if you want milk in your tea and a roll up every so often.

- Can't move without spending. Feel like I piss money sometimes.

Alice takes one bag and he carries the other and it's not raining anymore when they get out so they walk back along the side roads to the estate.

- How do you think it would be if you got a job?

- Not likely is it?

- I just mean, do you feel like it would be alright?

- Yeah. I do.

They haven't talked about it in a few weeks, he knows that. She must feel like it's come out of nowhere, this idea, but once he'd thought of it on Boxing Day it felt like the right thing to be doing now: just what he needs.

- Nothing permanent, you know. A one-off to tide me over. Make the money side easier for a bit anyway. Makes everything easier that.

He thought she might want to talk him out of it, but Alice is nodding. Their breath comes in clouds while they talk, walking the wet, quiet streets past the gas towers, the pool hall.

- My Grandad's place needs doing. I could ask him if you want.

- No favours.

Alice looks over at him, a quick movement, a frown.

- No. I know. I was just thinking I could ask him.

They walk in silence for a while.

- I was there at Christmas and he talked about redecorating. My Gran had all these plans for the house, new wallpaper and colour schemes, and he wants to do them now because she couldn't.

The way she says it, Joseph thinks she might be hurt, and he feels a bit stupid for reacting like he did: she wants the decorating done for her Gran's sake not his.

Back at the flat they set to the cooking. Joseph reads the recipe out loud while Alice packs away the shopping and then he gets the chicken ready and she starts chopping up her herbs for the stuffing. He's been thinking about her Grandad's house and how he doesn't really like the idea but it's the only offer of anything he's had. The poor week ahead is only one of many he has to look forward to, and that leaves no room for pride.

- Is he alright, your Grandad?

Alice smiles, shrugs.

- He's okay.

- Would he be okay with me though?

She stops grating breadcrumbs a moment.

- I would have to talk to him about it. I mean I'd have to say that you've not been well so he understands.

Joseph nods. *Special case.*

- If that's alright with you? I don't want you to feel like you have to.

- Would he go for it though? Basket case painting his walls?

- I don't know, to be honest. But I think it's worth a try, if you're up for it.

He's looking at the recipe book again, but not really reading it, and when he looks up, she's watching him, waiting for a reply.

- Suppose so, yeah. Okay.

- If he does go for it, it might be ideal. You could work on your own more or

less, and so it would be easier to go at your own pace, no pressure. What do you think?

Joseph shrugs. The way Alice describes it, it's starting to sound like a favour again: rehab, not a job. And embarrassing, the idea of her Grandfather knowing, but then Alice is probably right: it might make things easier. No need for pretending if it gets too much. Depends on the old man: could be alright if he's anything like Alice.

- You get on?

- We get on after a fashion. We used to argue a lot when I was younger. We don't any more, but it's never really recovered somehow, the way we are with each other.

She's moved on to the vegetables, judging how many potatoes, swapping bigger ones for smaller as she talks.

- I think he wanted me to be like him, or he expected that. But it didn't happen and he's never got used to the idea.

- How do you mean?

- Oh, it's stupid really.

He cuts the parsnips into strips while Alice peels the potatoes and she looks like she won't say any more but then relents.

- I travelled a bit, couple of years before I went to university. I had a bit of money my mum left me and I think he wanted it to be a deposit on a flat, that kind of thing, but I spent it going to India. And then nursing wasn't good enough or something, not for someone with a degree, I don't know.

She looks embarrassed.

- He never said any of this. Not straight out. Just whenever I decided to do something, there'd be this air of disappointment. You know: family meals spent in silence. No talking about it with him, just wasn't done in our house. Soon as you said anything it would be all eyes on the dinner plates and pass the salt please.

She laughs.

- I thought you said you argued.

- We did. That was earlier. I was still at school.

She shrugs and Joseph thinks that's all she has to say about it. He's not at all sure about working for her Grandfather: sounds like it might all be a bit complicated. He thinks he'll just tell her not to call him after they've eaten, that he'll sort something out for himself, and thank-you, and then he checks the potatoes and finds they've already started collapsing in the pan. They decide on mash instead of roast, and play a game of cards until the chicken is done.

- I've made him sound worse than he is, my Grandad. We're just different.

He's been waiting for her to lay for a good few minutes, watching her fingers skip from one card to the next, rearranging the fan in her hand.

- He was in the forces. That's what we used to row about.

Joseph thinks she might be blushing.

- He was in the RAF. For his national service at first I think, but he stayed on or signed up properly. Made pilot, I think he was good at flying. Went out to Africa. This was in the 1950s, while there was still an empire, or only just. Rhodesia. Did some of his training there and then he served in Kenya.

Alice doesn't catch his eye, concentrating on her cards, but still not playing.

- He used to talk to my Gran about it. Tell her his war stories and I used to hate that. I was a bit of a bolshy teenager, all in all.

She smiles, still looking embarrassed. Discards a low suit, a useful card for Joseph, like an afterthought.

- I used to give him a hard time about it. Defending the white man's privilege and all that.

Joseph watches her face, the flush rising and then receding. Alice pulls

another card from the pack on the table.

- Like I said, I was pretty opinionated.

Joseph wonders why she's being so apologetic. Whether she thinks he might disagree with her, launch into some speech about Queen and Country and honour and duty, and he can't decide if this is irritating or funny so he pockets his hand and busies himself with the roast and the gravy and Alice sits watching him for a couple of minutes before she lays the table.

They sit and eat together and it all tastes okay, not brilliant, but edible.

Parsnips still a bit crunchy but the mash is good and the meat. They are quiet for a while, chewing, swallowing and then Alice starts talking again.

- I didn't mean any offence.

- None taken.

After they've washed up Joseph tells her she can call her Granddad, see what he says.

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- He's called David Bell. David will probably be fine.

Alice nods, her Grandfather wants to meet Joseph to talk it over.

- And we need to think how long it will take, how much you should get paid.

Things like that.

- He wants to make sure I'm not a nutcase, doesn't he?

Joseph smiles and Alice does too. On a suburban train, three stops from her Grandfather's.

- Not too much of one anyway.

- It's really not like that.

- I don't blame him. Keep me away from anything breakable. Lock up the family silver while you're at it.

- We don't have any. So there's no point in you looking, okay?

Alice laughs, but her mood is very different when they get to the house.

Sitting at the table in the dining room, teapot on a tray with cups and saucers, a plate of biscuits.

It is strange to watch Alice with her Grandfather; how uncomfortable she is with the silences. He watches her too, David Bell, while she's talking, as if he can't quite understand what she's saying or why she's saying it. Hint of a frown, mouth slightly open, head ready to turn away any second. Alice raises her voice near the end of every sentence, as if to compensate with emphasis, convince her Grandfather to keep listening until she's finished. Not her normal behaviour, nothing about her. Sitting tall, like she's holding

her breath, eyes restless.

Joe reminds himself that the Grandmother has only been gone a few months, and they must both still be getting used to the new shape of their lives. That it would take some time still, for both of them, this adjusting. But at the same time he is not sure, thinks these gestures are practiced, automatic. Can't stop themselves because they've been doing it for years already. Habits of a lifetime, hauled out at each visit to torment each other. Put away and regretted after every goodbye. Maybe.

- Alice tells me you're a painter and decorator by trade. You've had training.
- Before I was in the army, yes.
- Worked for the council, she said. You had an apprenticeship with them.
- Not exactly.

Joseph smiles. The old man looks at him directly, seems to think he is being mocked.

- What exactly, then?
- Community service. 120 hours for harbouring stolen goods. We had to paint over graffiti in the subways, that kind of thing. The man in charge of us, Clive, I got on with him, he took me on when he set up his own business.
- I see.
- I was his apprentice, Clive's, and we did do a lot of jobs for the council. Maybe that's what Alice meant.

He hears her let her breath out when he has finished.

- How long since the house was last done Grandad?

Alice is distracting him, and David switches his gaze from Joseph to her, but doesn't answer. Slight frown creasing his forehead as if he hadn't quite heard, trying to piece her words together.

- I didn't really notice it until after Granny. But it must be about fifteen years, maybe.

- Yes. I know.

- I was still at school then, the last time.

David glances at Joseph, he looks a little angry. As if this conversation were too private for him to be listening.

- My wife had made plans. It was going to be done last summer, this room and the hallway, but she then was too unwell and it was impossible.

He is standing now, pushing his chair back, and Alice makes to get up, too. Uncertain, as if he is ending the afternoon tea already, only half way through.

- No, stay. I'm just getting her things to show you.

Joseph looks at Alice across the table as David opens the bureau on the

other side of the room. The skin under her eyes is tight and he can't read her expression. He smiles and thinks she smiles back at him, but he can't hold her eye for long enough to be certain.

David is back at the table now, but he doesn't sit. He holds up a paper file to show them and then opens it, spreading the contents out on the table, pushing the tray and the biscuits away. Joseph and Alice clear the cups and plates for him as he lays out colour charts, wallpaper swatches, hand-drawn sketches of the rooms, notes and arrows of explanation on the pencil walls. Alice picks up the picture of the hallway, eyes moving across the page, swiftly taking in her Grandmother's lines and words, and then she stands. Moves to the top end of the table next to her Grandfather, waiting while he points to each item on the table and explains it in turn.

- This was the paper she chose for in here, and this for the hallway. That's to be painted of course. This colour. White with a hint of something or other, don't ask me. Cream, I'd call it.

- And a new rug.

- Yes. She wanted it carpeted at first, the hallway, but it's the original tiling out there still, and Mrs Marshall, at number 47 with the clematis and lavender, said we should keep it that way.

- Yes. I think so too.

- Yes?

He nods at her briefly and then they both look at what's laid out before them, fingertips resting on the tabletop, blinking.

- I went to the do-it-yourself shop last week but they don't stock this wallpaper any more.

He points to the living room pattern. Red stripes on a cream background, and navy blue in the border.

- We'll be able to get something similar, I'm sure. Don't you think, Joe?

She looks at Joseph, holds his gaze and he sits up straighter.

- I could try a trade merchant's for you, some of them keep things longer. And paint colours can get mixed up for you easy enough, most places will be able to match them to these charts you've got.

David looks at him now. Blue eyes hurt behind his glasses, and Joseph wishes he'd stayed out of it.

- Yes, well. I'll think about it.

Pushed it too far. First the criminal record and now the presumption. Alice and her Grandfather are both still standing, both with their eyes on the plans in front of them, but David has his hands behind him now, back straightened, and Joseph can see the french windows and the garden in the space that has opened up between him and his Granddaughter.

- Joe could start next week if you wanted.

- Yes.

Joseph isn't sure if that means the old man wants him to. He's not looking at either of them, leaning over the table, pulling the pieces of paper together.

When he has his wife's file packed he turns his back on them, and Joseph stands. He's had enough. He looks at Alice and pulls his breath in and she nods.

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- You didn't have to tell him all of that.

On their way home in the train Alice thumps his knees, but she isn't angry. Leaning over to him from the seat opposite and he's glad to see her smile. Eyes bright with relief that the afternoon is over, it's the first thing she's said since they left her Granddad's, apart from sorry, as they were crossing at the end of the road. The sky outside is torn clouds and sunshine, and she is blinking at the houses going by. Skin on her cheeks still hot somehow, but she looks better now, he thinks, not yet relaxed. Nervy but happy.

- *I've fucked it up.*

- No. No, he'll want you to do it.

- *Yeah?*

- For Gran, for me. I'll call him tomorrow. I think he felt a bit cornered. He

just needs an apology, and I think what you said about finding the wallpaper will have swung it for us.

Joseph doesn't know how she can be so sure.

- 120 hours for harbouring stolen goods.

She is making fun of him and he laughs. Recognises the tone of voice he used, the slight touch of pride.

- Bet you were the one sprayed the graffiti in the first place.

It had been easy, an easy shock to deliver the old man. A little show of loyalty to Alice somehow: two of them to be disapproved of, so she was not alone. The further the train moves, the more pathetic it seems. They are twenty-nine and thirty-two: no age to be parading teenage rebellion in front of the older generation.

They look at one another and laugh again, each embarrassed for the other. Alice wipes her eyes on her jacket sleeves.

- Oh dear. Oh dear, oh dear.

--

Alice goes to a builder's merchant with him during the week and the wallpaper they find is not exactly the same, but very close, and there's enough of it to do the living room, so David is pleased. He comes round on the Friday to take Joseph to the DIY place out by the motorway, and Alice is with him. She sits in the back seat, directing her Grandfather back out of the city again and Joseph is glad she's there. They talked about going to more trade shops on the phone, but he said it would be too much driving, the day would end up going on too long and she agreed. David has asked Joseph to work mornings only, says he wants quiet in the house in the afternoons. Joseph can't help wondering if this was Alice's idea, and the afternoons off are for him not the old man, but it suits him well enough. Means it will all take longer, but he hasn't worked for a while and he knows full time could be too much, or not worth risking anyway. Alice says she can come out to David's the first couple of times and then if he's happy she'll leave him to it.

When they get to the house, David takes Joseph out to the back garden, where he has arranged all his old tins of paint and brushes on a plastic sheet on the patio.

- What can you do with that lot, do you think?

The paint is all useless, thick plastic skin formed on the top of each, which Joseph pokes a stick through. The rollers have been carefully cleaned, though, and the brushes. The wallpaper table is in good nick, and inside the shed door he finds a decent set of steps. Joseph pushes everything into two piles while the old man watches, doubtfully. Joseph points.

- Good, no good. We could take that lot to the dump on the way if you want.
- None of these pots are any good?
- Sorry. None of them are the right colours anyway. Not for what your wife wanted.
- No.

In the DIY warehouse Joseph wheels the trolley while the old man chooses. Taking everything from the mid-price range, deferring silently when Joseph recommends cheaper or more expensive.

- Honestly, it's not worth it. I'll have to put four coats of that on, only two of this, take twice as long.

Alice goes her own way round the aisles, picking up a couple of things she says she needs for her flat. Walks past them a couple of times and Joseph knows she's checking, smiles.

At the till David pays by cheque, writing neatly in fountain pen, and signing slowly. And back at the house he insists on stacking everything that Joe won't need on Monday in the shed by himself. When Joseph tries to help, he says he'd rather be sure where he can find things, so Joseph goes into the kitchen where Alice is making them some lunch and watches the old man through the window. Stubborn back bending to lift tins of emulsion, jaws tight with the strain. Driving home, Joseph wonders if this is not all a

big mistake, but when Alice calls later to see if he's still okay with it all, he tells her everything is fine. If David wants to be in control, fine. The way he describes it to Alice it doesn't sound like a problem, and he almost has himself convinced.

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Alice comes out with him on the train, but he says he'd rather go in alone.

- Less like my mum taking me to school that way.

Thinks he can feel her eyes on him, watching from the corner as he walks down the road to the gate. Doesn't turn to check in case it's not his imagination.

David opens the door almost immediately after the bell sounds, like he has been waiting for him in the hallway.

- Good morning.

The old man tries something like a smile and waits with his hand on the door while Joseph wipes his feet and steps into the hall. They stand a moment in awkward silence after David closes the door behind him and Joseph wonders if they should be shaking hands or something.

- Shall we get started then?

It's not a question and the old man doesn't wait for an answer, leads the way into the living room. Joseph doesn't mind though: better to be doing something straight off than standing there with nothing to say. They pull the furniture away from the walls together, moving the bigger pieces down through the dividing doors into the dining room. Joseph folds the carpet back from the skirting boards and David brings in a pile of old sheets to cover the suite and the floors. There aren't quite enough and while he is upstairs sorting through the airing cupboard, Joseph moves the vases and photos from the mantelpiece, lines them up in order on the dining room table. He waits, nothing to do for a minute or two, and so he looks at the pictures, sees if he can find Alice among them. A girl with gappy teeth, a school photo: same hair, same eyes looking out of a puppy fat face that is almost embarrassing. There's a woman in the next, wearing lipstick, holding a wine glass who looks more like Alice does now, shorter hair but there's something the same about her anyway. Joseph thinks it must be the Mum or maybe the Gran when she was much younger. The last picture is an old one, black and white: a woman in gloves with a man in uniform. Her sitting, him standing and there's a palm tree behind them only they're inside and it looks like a proper portrait, taken in a studio. David comes in with an armful of sheets and Joseph moves away from the pictures. Doesn't want the old man to think he's being nosy, but then he feels stupid for acting so guilty. *Only pictures, only looking.* They spread the sheets under the window and

he thinks he should say something.

- You were in the Air Force.

The first thing that comes to him, and it doesn't get a friendly response.

- I suppose Alice told you that?

- I saw the picture.

Joseph nods over to the table and the old man follows his gaze.

- Oh. That. Yes, yes.

He keeps his eyes on the row of frames a moment or two, blinking, and when he turns back to Joseph he looks almost apologetic. Joseph doesn't know why. Maybe for his tone of voice, because now the old man leans back on his heels and makes conversation.

- And you were in the army.

- I was.

- Alice told me that.

A stiff smile. A joke at his own expense.

- Pilot Officer Bell.

Like he's introducing himself, in lieu of the handshake that didn't happen in the hallway. And it's embarrassing, but Joseph can't sit there opposite him and not return the gesture.

- Infantryman. I was infantry.

Half-hearted, he knows it, and he watches the old man nodding, certain he's thinking ordinary soldier, squaddie, and that he's trying but can find nothing more to say now.

- I'll make a start then, shall I?

David brings Joseph some tea halfway through the morning. Stands in the doorway after he's put the tray down, doesn't seem to want to go back upstairs again but he doesn't saying anything either. It's the same awkward quiet of the hallway and the bungled introductions earlier and Joseph tries to carry on working, spraying the walls and then scraping, but it's hard with David's eyes on his back like this. Like community service all over again. First day, only the first of God knows how many. Joseph picks up the mug

and drinks, smiles.

- Two sugars. Lovely. Thanks.

David nods, and then they are just standing there and Joseph wonders if David thinks he needs to be friendly. Because of Alice, or because of something Alice has told him. *He's been ill, so be nice to him, won't you?* The old man walks over to the dining table and picks up one of the frames.

- This the one you saw?

He holds up the studio portrait, a futile gesture which irritates Joseph. It's the only picture of him in the room, and Joseph can see from David's tight expression that he knows it was a stupid question. He looks at the photo instead of at Joseph.

- With my wife.

Joseph takes another mouthful of tea for something to do.

- Or rather she wasn't my wife then. I'd just proposed.

The statement is too intimate for both of them somehow and Joseph puts a biscuit in his mouth and turns back to the wall. Knows he's being rude, but thinks maybe it will help the old man leave the room, leave him to it now. He sprays the wallpaper and hears the frame being replaced on the table, but David stays where he is. A couple of minutes pass and then he tells Joseph that he's glad of the time he had flying.

- I'd never have met her otherwise.

Joseph is aware of the silence after this statement. Knows he is supposed to break it, takes the biscuit out of his mouth and turns round again.

- Alice's Gran was in the services?

- No, we were in Africa at the same time. In Nairobi.

David steps away from the table, walks past Joseph and up to the window. Hands in his pockets, looking out over the street, and at his front garden. Joseph starts stripping paper again. It is easier to carry on with the walls while David has his eyes elsewhere, and Joseph keeps working, quietly, steadily, and then after a while the old man leaves the room.

--

David comes and watches Joseph again the following day. Brings tea with him and then stays. Silent again, but sitting this time. For about ten, fifteen minutes on one of the dust-sheeted armchairs in the centre of the room. Enough time to drink his cup and then put it on the floor next to him.

- I'd not long finished my Lincoln training when the Mau Mau business started.

Joseph has almost got used to David being there, the quiet, had been concentrating on the walls and when he turns the old man is blushing. Not looking at him, but aware of being watched now, he continues.

- State of Emergency in Kenya and that's where I met her.

He nods at Joseph briefly, stiff-necked, and then he is quiet again, but it is not an expectant silence, not as though he is waiting for Joseph to respond in any way.

- Nearly half a century ago now.

He draws in his breath, as if he's surprised himself.

- Still so many things I remember about Nairobi, though.

The wide avenues, the large, new and very square buildings in the centre. The brilliant pinks and greens of the suburban gardens. The quiet, daytime calm of the house he stayed in, the hub and buzz of the regular evening guests.

The old man's eyes drift a little while he is talking: squinting, remembering. Moving away from Joseph, across the half-bare wall to the window. Joseph peels back a scrap of damp paper with his fingers. Careful, quiet, wanting to get on, but not to interrupt or draw attention.

- Eastleigh. That was the airfield. Just outside Nairobi.

But he was in the capital on leave when he met his future wife, convalescing. It was not uncommon during the state of emergency for wealthier Nairobi families to open their homes to officers this way.

- I suppose to show their gratitude for what we were doing.

He'd come down with ---- and spent two weeks laid up in the hospital, had six more to recover. Still yellow from the jaundice, his palms and nails, the whites of his eyes. Still shocked him in the mornings: the bilious gaze that greeted him in the shaving mirror.

David laughs, glances round at Joseph, then back again to the window. He looks more comfortable now, in the armchair with his memories and Joseph starts working again in the quiet that follows. Still careful, still listening when the old man starts speaking again.

His hosts were convivial, frequent entertainers, and while they invited him to everything he knew he was not obliged to attend. It was a good arrangement, because he still felt weak, but illness was a lonely business, away from the squadron, all those who knew him. It sometimes helped to join the guests out on the veranda or in the large drawing room. He would not usually stay long, but liked to listen to conversation for an hour or so.

- Gave me the illusion of company at least.

Joseph doesn't stop when the old man pauses. Thinks David will continue, that he's just watching him working for a while. Strange, having him there, but Joseph doesn't feel observed by the old man, who seems to be thinking. Eyes turned inward, not seeing the damp curls of wallpaper lifted by the scraper, layers falling away to reveal the grey-pink of the plaster. Joseph stops to rest his arm and in the quiet David says.

- I think I'll stop there.

--

There are two days when David doesn't come into the living room at all, barely acknowledges Joseph as he comes in the door in the morning, says goodbye from the kitchen or the upstairs landing, doesn't come and see him out at lunchtime. It unnerves him, and he worries that he has offended the old man in some way. Perhaps because he carried on working while the old man was talking: maybe he misread the situation and should have downed tools, listened, asked questions. Was his wife part of the host family or how did he meet her? How long did he stay in Kenya? What was a Mau Mau anyway? When he gets home on the second day he calls Alice to ask her what she thinks, but he's angry now from mulling the situation over and hangs up before she answers. He's there to decorate not do care in the community, not what he's being paid for.

On the third day, David comes out to the front step where Joseph is eating a late breakfast, reading the paper in the thin winter sun. He walks down the path to the gate and then back to the porch where Joseph is sitting.

- I was telling you about Alice's Grandmother wasn't I?

Joseph has his paper spread on the ground in front of him, doesn't want to close it, to encourage conversation, but he also feels uncomfortable leaving it open like this.

- You were talking about Nairobi, about being out in Kenya.

- Yes. Would it bother you if I continued now? Just until your break is over?

- No, no.

Joseph hears himself: the automatic, polite response. Thinks David is very well aware how difficult it would be for him to say yes. The old man is standing at the edge of the gravel path, between him and the gate. Joseph is sitting two metres in front of him on the porch steps. David is half turned towards Joseph and the house, half over to his roses and the neighbour's hedge.

- The family had servants. Went around the house barefoot.

He had a dhobi boy up at the camp, did his washing and ironing for him, but this was different. Seemed to be so many that he couldn't keep track of their faces, but despite their number, they never seemed to fill out the rooms. Nothing compared to what some families out there had, the people he was staying with were comfortably off but not part of the elite.

- Still took a bit of getting used to.

It also took a while to adjust to the climate. In Nairobi the air could be cool all day, but the sun still so strong that it burned. As he learnt to his cost.

Sitting out in the garden writing home, only half an hour, and with a sweater on, yet come evening the tops of his ears, and the backs of his hands were pink and sore. One of the maids brought vinegar solution, in her bare feet, to his room. She was assigned to him, and he could remember her face at least, knew her name back then too, but now it has gone.

- Alice would smile at that one. It would confirm things for her, I'm sure.

Joseph looks up. The old man is standing in front of the sun, and so his face is shadowed, but Joseph can see that David is smiling, his gaze directed away now, turned inward, held by his memories. And there is that same feeling again, just like in the living room: that nothing is expected of him, that he only has to sit there and let David do the talking.

There was another guest in the house.

- At least I presumed she was a guest.

And they were introduced, of course, but he was not told who she was. He only found out a week or so into his stay. A young woman, Scottish. She sat opposite him at the breakfast table and was for the most part not included in conversation.

- I thought it odd, but it did seem to be by mutual consent.

She had a small daughter with her, not yet at school, and David assumed they were recent migrants, staying in Nairobi while the husband set up the farm or the business or the home in another part of the country. Shy or perhaps unfriendly, he couldn't decide, the only thing he learnt about her the first week was that she was called Celia.

- Turned out that everything else I'd imagined about her was wrong.

At a sundowner evening with his hosts, he learned that she was their daughter-in-law: a post-war migrant out from the home country and married just under five years. Another guest commented to him later, out on the veranda, that the smart money was on a divorce. David blinks.

- Gossip was easy to come by, I soon discovered that.

Just had to phrase a name like a question and the information flowed. Celia's husband, the son of the house, had had an affair, and the in-laws were doing the honourable thing until the whole business could be put behind them. The family was in coffee, and the son had been sent up to the plantation, away from Nairobi and its temptations. In the meantime the daughter-in-law had a room in the house, use of a car, a nanny. Calm and time to think things over. David's source had his own opinion on the matter.

- She was looking for a way out, is how he saw it. Decided to stop turning a blind eye, she was scouting for an escape route. And not just of the marriage, out of Kenya too.

Inside the phone rings, and David looks over Joseph's head into the open door of the house. Frowning, interrupted.

- Want me to get it?

Joseph stands but the old man doesn't answer. The sun has gone in and it is cold now, out on the porch, and the phone is loud, jangling.

- I should get inside anyway, get some more work done.

Joseph pushes his newspaper into his bag. David nods, looks disappointed. Joseph goes back into the living room, aware that the old man waits outside another minute or two and doesn't answer the phone.

--

It is easier the next day, a kind of rhythm established between them. Joseph starts working, David brings refreshments, stays, starts talking. No preamble, no would you mind if I carry on this time, and no sense that he wants Joseph to stop working.

- I was getting better, less tired, but there was still not much I could do until I was fully recovered, so this young woman became a diversion.

Not attractive, really, he didn't think then, more distracting. Something about

her, a hardness to the way she held herself. He watched her leave the house in the mornings from his seat on the veranda. Wide hat and gloves, set shoulders, taking the car into town, sometimes with, sometimes without her daughter. She would return later, around lunchtime, pile of books tucked under her arm. Spent her hours reading, walks with the little girl: early and late in the day when the sun was not so strong. She rarely showed up for the sundowners, put in only brief appearances at meals, often taking them with her daughter in her room, at the far end of the corridor from where David was quartered.

When she turned up next at breakfast, he asked whether he might take the car to the library with her.

- Thought if I asked her in public like that she wouldn't be able to refuse me.

He told her it was boring being a convalescent, and her mother-in-law said it would do him good, a drive and then a bit of reading. Colia smiled and nodded a silent assent, but once in the car she was remarkably candid.

- My husband played around, I suppose you've heard. It's an occupational hazard out here, infidelity, or maybe just a hobby. Other people don't seem to mind so much, so perhaps it's just me.

He was a little taken aback, he remembered. Watching the wide streets go by, mimosa and flame trees. The cynicism. Her accent was sharp, but her voice, the tone was calm and clear. He couldn't look at her a while after

she'd finished speaking. In the library, he walked his own route around the shelves and they said little to each other while she got both of their books out on her card and drove back out to the suburbs.

In the morning, she was not at breakfast, but she found him later out on the veranda, dozing. She touched his arm to wake him, and when he opened his eyes she whispered:

- Don't move, go back to sleep again, I just wanted to apologise. In the car. Told you things you don't need to know, and I'm sorry.

Joseph has finished a wall and the spray gun is empty, so he can't start on the next without leaving the room to fill it with warm water. He's been waiting a while, and now the old man has stopped speaking.

- David. Sorry. Two minutes for a refill.

He holds up the empty bottle by way of explanation, moving to the door. The old man clears his throat.

- About lunchtime isn't it?

- Getting there.

- Do you eat at home?

- On the train mostly. Get myself something down the road.

- I'll make us lunch today. I'll let you know when it's done.

He makes his way downstairs while Joe goes to the bathroom, runs the hot tap thinking *fucking hell, fucking hell*. He's got a routine going now for the journey home, it's been working for him and he'd even been looking forward to going home. Outside air, some chips on the bench at the station, and then the afternoon and evening, time to himself where he could be in the flat and get ready for the night and the morning. On his way back across the landing he hears the kitchen radio on, cupboards and drawers being opened. The upstairs extension is by the door and he thinks again about calling Alice, but he decides against it. If he tells her David's been talking to him, she might want to know what about, and then all this will start spilling over into his time outside the house as well. He scores the wallpaper with the short knife and sprays it, thinks it's okay, he can handle it, just today, best not to make a fuss, try and keep this all contained.

--

Pork pie, salad, boiled potatoes. Jar of pickle and pot of tea waiting at the far end of the table with its cosy on.

- I tend to make the things that she did. This is a Tuesday meal.

David smiles, Joseph nods at him, finishing his plate.

- Much better than what I'd have bought myself. Thanks.

He can't go until David is done and the tea is drunk. He knows that, or at least he can't bring himself to be rude and just get up. But they have nothing to say to each other, and now that the eating is over, the quiet is unbearable, so he asks.

- You were saying. About how you got to know your wife. Alice's Gran.

David nods and Joseph tries to sit back in his chair, get himself to relax while the old man starts.

He went to the library with her again, a few days later, and with her daughter. And on one of the wide tables, she laid out an atlas and pointed out the town in Scotland where she came from. Small place on the east coast, north of Montrose.

- Beautiful beaches, but my the water up there is cold.

She smiled at him. Margaret wanted to know where he came from, and so he pointed further down the page.

- Here, near London. Near the capital of England.

- You're English!

The girl's whisper was loud against the cool walls of the library.

- Yes.

He smiled and she looked at her mother.

- He's not from Scotland, Mags, but he's from home all the same.

David lays his knife and fork side by side on his plate and sits back. When he doesn't seem to want to move on to the teapot, Joseph pulls the tray across the table and pours a cup for them both.

Their library trips became regular, David says. Sometimes they would walk afterwards, if Margaret wasn't with them, talking. Or drink Italian coffee in one of the city centre tearooms. The first few times their conversation was polite, and awkward. He couldn't find a way to ask about her husband, unsure at first that he wanted to. She had grey eyes and he would catch her watching him, waiting. But she stuck to her apology, and they kept to the safe areas of her biography.

She had come out as a nurse. Some of the other girls working at the hospital in Scotland had been all over: Italy, North Africa. It was the war that had taken them there, of course, but she didn't think about it like that, just thought about the few places she knew.

- Montrose and Aberdeen, a few of the hills and the towns in between. Seemed tiny. Dark and cold, too.

Most of the girls she applied with went to Kinshasa, but she chose Nairobi, and had fun there, the first year. While she was still working. Always nights out being organised, and so many clubs to go to. And she had fallen in love, but life was very different then, once you were married.

- Boring, if you want to know the truth of it, for the wives. Endless coffee mornings and nothing to talk about except each other.

He remembers her looking at him after she'd said that. As if asking permission. And then.

- I'm supposed to decide to stay with him, but I'm afraid that's not likely. I don't think this place is good for me, or for Maggie.

Couldn't say now what was in his face that gave her leave to tell him, but after that their walks and talks got longer, and their books were returned to the library largely unread.

- They will be gossiping about us, of course, will have started long ago already, nothing you can do will stop them.

David says that it bothered him later, this comment. At that evening's sundowner, when he felt so many eyes on him, particularly of the women in the room. But at the time, in the park, it even pleased him, the association with this woman with her long pale fingers and sharp tongue. They walked under the tropical trees, past the very British bandstand, and he felt pleased

and proud to be with her, to be feeling the blood in his cheeks and hands, the thrill of this mild flirtation.

She wore a white hat, its wide brim covering her eyes. And when they passed out of the shade of the trees, the holes in the weave let through bright spots of light, pin pricks of sun scattered across her cheeks.

She smiled, but her voice was quiet, perhaps mocking.

- You like it here then, do you?

David glances at Joseph after he says that. Eyes unclouding again, he looks down at his teacup. Undrunk, cold, he stirs it.

- I should let you go home.

- I'll wash these up first.

- No. Leave them.

Joseph gathers his jacket and bag, uncertain about leaving the old man sitting at the table, but relieved to be going all the same. The wind is in the trees outside and he can hear the traffic passing as he puts the tools away neatly, quickly, thoughts already on the journey home.

David comes to the door with him for the first time in days.

- Thought you may as well have these.

He holds an envelope out to Joseph who takes it but doesn't open it.

Doesn't say thank-you either and is annoyed with himself as he walks down the road to the station. House keys. Sitting in the train he can feel them through their brown paper wrapping, hand in his pocket held around them.

Roofs and gardens passing the train window, suburbs. The old man alone in his house, him alone in the carriage.

--

[Alice and Joe meet up, Alice asks how it's going and Joseph is mildly defensive of the old man. Says he's not as bad as Alice makes out, and Alice says she knows that, but she's still taken aback.]

--

There is no answer when he rings the bell, so he lets himself in. Takes his jacket off in the cool, quiet hallway, pulls his overalls on. Alone, he notices detail for the first time: the dark, worn wood of the banister rail in front of him, and the red and green light falling on the tiles at his feet, through the coloured glass panels in the top of the door.

- Joseph? That you Joseph?

The voice is upstairs, sounds muffled by distance, and it takes Joseph a

couple of seconds to adjust: not alone.

- Yes. Only me.

No reply, and Joseph isn't sure what to do, why the old man didn't answer the door. He calls:

- I'll be making a start then.

But stays in the hallway, looking up the stairs to the empty landing.

- No. Come up. Would you come up, please?

The old man's voice still sounds far away, further than upstairs somehow, and hurried now. Halfway up the stairs, Joseph sees the trapdoor to the attic is open, old wooden ladder pulled down and bending on its hinges. *Jesus fucking stupid.* He takes the last steps two at a time, thinks David must have climbed up there and fallen, but when he starts up the ladder, the old man is above him, stooping over the hole in the gloom.

- I haven't been up here for years.

He is smiling.

- Found a couple of things to show you.

One of the bulbs has gone, but the other still casts its forty watt glow from the far end by the water tank. Joseph moves away from the square light of the trapdoor and waits while his eyes adjust. Lagged pipes and loft insulation, trunks and cardboard boxes. In the middle is David, watching him, nodding.

- We can see enough, can't we?

He points at the dead bulb.

- Didn't want to risk another journey down and up that ladder to get a spare from the kitchen. Celia's knitting patterns.

He is pointing at a box stuffed with magazines, their pages swollen with damp. A trunk is open next to them, clothes, summer dresses, pastels and flowers for a middle-aged woman. David lifts one of them out, holds it up.

- I'd forgotten all of this.

The dress hangs empty from his fingers but he is still smiling, and Joseph has to look away, down at the daylight next to him in the floor, and the landing.

- Sorry. I didn't call you up for this. Thought you might be interested in my old service things.

The old man is making his way over to the water tank. He sits on a box and pulls an open case up onto his knees. Joseph follows, squatting down next to him under the dim bulb.

- Our squadron.

Men in uniform on wet tarmac. A hundred, maybe more: five or six rows of them in front of an airplane, the highest with their heads level with the wing, propellers on either side marking the edges of frame.

- See if you can find me.

He passes the picture over and Joseph tries but they all look the same. Front row on chairs, hands on knees, men behind them standing, arms by sides. All stiff backs and cheerful faces.

- Fourth row down. Third from left.

David prompts, but doesn't seem offended. And the face looks like him now, long with a thin mouth smiling, but then so does the man next to him. All with their caps on.

- That was Norfolk. This was Kenya.

He has a pile of small, white-framed snapshots ready. Passes them over to Joseph, explaining the views of forest and cloud taken from his cockpit, mountains rising at the end of a wingtip.

- Those are the Aberdares. I have one of Mount Kenya too.

Snow-capped, with another plane flying ahead: sun glare on the metal, propellers blurred. And the last is of the forest canopy far below, taken through the bomb bay doors.

Joseph hands the small pile back to David, who looks through them again, nodding.

- Did you always want to be in the army?

Joseph wasn't expecting a question, certainly not that one, can't find a ready answer.

- When you were a boy I mean.

- Don't know. Can't remember.

- I did.

The response comes quickly, almost before Joseph has finished speaking.

- Always wanted to be in the airforce. I was a schoolboy cadet, while the war was still going on.

Joseph feels the old man's eyes on him now and looks at him. David meets his gaze and smiles, tells him it was what he looked forward to, all through the school day: Morse code and aircraft recognition in the church hall weekday evenings.

- There was an RAF training ground a few miles from my parents' house, and I'd cycle there at weekends.

Stand for hours at the gates, watch the men in their uniforms coming and going, listen out for the planes. See one if he was lucky.

- I could recite names and wing spans. I'd check wind direction, try to guess which way the pilot would land. Wished it hadn't ended, the war. What a terrible thing to wish for.

He laughs, glances round at Joseph, then back again at the photos in his

lap.

- Still had National Service then, of course.

He'd have been out in under two years, and would never have been given an interesting job as a National Serviceman, so he signed up immediately. Did well on his aptitude tests and they suggested air crew.

- That pleased my father.

And the fact that his training took him out to Rhodesia. Something to be proud of then, a son in the Empire Training Scheme. He takes a checking glance at Joseph, as if to make sure he is still there, still listening. And then he looks away, starts talking again.

- The war had made everything seem closer somehow.

Had meant looking places up in the atlas you'd never heard of before: daily, it seemed, new places to imagine. Deserts and mountains; bird's eye, pilot's eye views of snows and oceans.

- I mean, this is all schoolboy stuff, I'm very aware of that.

But it was exciting and his head had been full of that before he'd joined, and suddenly it was a reality. Nine months in Africa learning to fly Tiger Moths and Harvards.

- And then, I'd just got back to England, really. Just finished my training and then came Kenya and Celia.

He looks at Joseph, blinking, and Joseph isn't sure if he's meant to say something now. To keep the memories flowing, or if the old man has finished. For today anyway.

- I've been going on haven't I?

- No.

- I have.

- I don't mind.

David smiles, like he doesn't believe him, but Joseph doesn't feel as though he was lying. Strange, squatting up here with the old man, between a bin liner of table cloths and some empty suitcases, listening to another life, a man talking about his dead wife. But not bad, not uncomfortable really, not today.

- I found a picture of Alice to show you.

Small eyes looking tired at the lens, uneven parting.

- Six, I think. Or seven. Her school reports are here too, old exercise books.

Funny. Tent and things she stored here last time she moved house.

David points over towards the trapdoor, at two fruit crates, packed with books and papers and Joseph is tempted, but knows he can't ask to look through them. Underneath the picture in his hand is another girl, but the photo is older.

- That's her mother. Margaret. With first glasses.

David nods.

- Wee Madge they called her. The family in Nairobi, not Celia. I remember she told me I don't call her that, meaning please don't call her that either.

They sit quiet a minute or so and Joseph can feel the air moving in from under the eaves, cool against his skin. Can see the slit of sunlight and garden away to his right, hear a passing car, bus stopping, receding footsteps and conversation after it has pulled away again. His ankles, knees are stiff from squatting and he shifts and then the old man clears his throat and stands.

David lets Joseph go down first, and the old man switches the light off once he has his feet firmly on the ladder. When he is back on the carpet, Joseph asks if he should close over the trapdoor for him.

- No, no. Leave it, leave it. Plenty up there to keep an old man busy.

Alice runs the conversation over in her head while she washes up.

- I saw your school photo.

- On the mantelpiece at David's. I know. Terrible, isn't it?

- No, different one.

Sunday morning and they'd been shopping as usual, playing a game or two of cards. She was on her way out, unlocking her bike from the walkway railing, Joseph standing in his socks in the flat doorway. She looked round at him when he said that and saw he was smiling.

- Which one? Where?

- He said you were six, David. You look a bit tired and you've got a blazer on.

Nice to be smiled at like that, teased a bit, but Alice didn't want to show it.

She struggled with the lock, the key was stuck and she didn't understand about the photo.

- David showed you?

She's embarrassed about it all again now, alone at home in her kitchen. About the way she must have been blushing and fumbling and insisting about this photo. But it didn't make sense to her, the idea of her Grandfather sitting down with Joseph and going through the family albums. They never did that, she never did that with him, had only looked at them alone or maybe sometimes with Gran. As far as she could remember everything was up in the attic anyway, stowed away, which means David went up there and brought the photos down for Joseph which seems all the more unlikely.

- Green blazer, stripy tie and you've a tooth missing.

She knows the photo, so he must have seen it. St Philip's primary, kept in the same box as her reports and the junior school photos of her mother. Alice wonders now if David showed Joseph those too and is surprised at how the idea hurts her. Face hot, hands hot in the soapy water, she tries to picture them: at the dining room table, on the sofa, passing photos back and forth in the kitchen while they're waiting for the kettle. Irritated: none of her mind's eye images seem remotely plausible.

She scrubs the pots and then the surfaces, angry now, and can't decide why. Thinks he shouldn't have shown without asking. Her childhood, her

mother. But it doesn't last long, this righteousness because she can't imagine how he'd ask her permission, just like she knows he wouldn't, couldn't sit down and go through old pictures like that with her.

She remembers her teenage interrogations. How her Grandfather sat turned away from her in his easy chair, and she would put her feet up, into his eyeline, onto the coffee table, to annoy him. Never let up on the questions, though he'd always have a book or a newspaper open in front of him. They'd fall quiet for a minute or two, he'd start reading, she'd start in again. All these memories are familiar, along with the discomfort they bring with them. But what occurs to Alice now, this Sunday lunchtime in her kitchen, is how her Gran would always stay out of those conversations.

She didn't expect her Grandmother to agree with her. Not that, not really. She wasn't in the services, but she'd been out in Kenya too after all, working in the white hospitals. But to Alice, these questions were important, and she always presumed that her Grandmother saw that. And that if David wasn't going to, she would have to ask them.

- You're not very fair.

Only once: her Grandmother spoke to her about it. And that was all she said. After David had left the room, gone upstairs to find some peace and read his paper. Alice remembers her heart, thumping hard in her throat, sitting tight amongst the sofa cushions, and that strange, sickly mix of close-to-tears and triumph. That was when Celia had made her quiet comment,

and they had stayed there, the two of them in silence, Alice never quite knowing what to say to that idea, or think about it either. *Not very fair.* Doesn't know now, even fifteen years later.

The kitchen is quiet and clean and her fingers are soft from the water. Alice thinks about her Grandparents and knows it was something they always had: each other. Something gentle, undeclared about it but you could never come between them.

David still worked then: her last years at school, his last years tying his tie in the hallway mirror weekday mornings. Commuted halfway across the city, always caught an early train, and rarely came home before evening. She and Gran would eat most of their meals together, just the two of them. Breakfasts after David had left for work and often their suppers too, before he came home. Her Grandmother would talk to her about school and friends, and they ate in the kitchen, and she always liked this better than the meals when her Grandfather was home and their places were laid at the dining room table.

Weekends were different, though. Alice remembers comparing her family with others: how friends went shopping for clothes with their mums, were driven places by their fathers and she never did things like that with either of her Grandparents. She was allowed to do as she pleased: friends, cinema, shops, TV: happy enough and old enough to be doing her own thing by that stage and she never felt neglected. Used to put it down to them being old, too tired, but now she thinks their weekends were for being a couple. It was

their time, in the garden and kitchen: Alice remembers how they would sit together, hands held, eyes closed, hot Sundays after lunch in the shade on the patio. And she was never told or reprimanded, there was no need, she just didn't intrude. Got her bicycle from the shed as quietly as possible, carried it round the side of the house rather than wheeling it past them.

Doesn't know what she feels now, about David and Celia, or David and Joseph, but whatever it is she doesn't like it. Sits at her kitchen table with her small, tight shame and thinks: poor little Alice excluded.

--

The living room walls are all bare now, the hallway too and the holes in the plaster filled. Too much papering to be done alone, the high walls from the downstairs hall to the landing, and Joseph is relieved when David says he can't help him.

- Thought you might have a friend who could come. I'd pay him, of course, the same rate, as agreed.

Arthur is reluctant at first, says he's only ever done his mum's front room and the corners in there don't bear looking at, but Joseph persuades him.

- Cash in hand, you can bring Ben no problem. Haven't seen you in ages, Art.

- No, I know, I know.

He brings the child gate with him from home and fixes it across the foot of the stairs, calling.

- Don't mind, do you Mr Bell? For when we're doing the landing. Don't want the nipper breaking his legs.

- Indeed not.

David is watching from the front door, keys and shopping bag in hand.

- I'll be back early afternoon. After lunch.

Which Joe takes as a signal that they should get their own.

They work through the morning, Ben playing with his truck in the middle of the room. He gets impatient after an hour or two, though, and cries when neither of them will lift him, too busy pushing the paper up and down the wall matching the pattern to notice his upraised arms.

Happy again when they walk down the street to the chippy, chattering on Joseph's shoulders and swaying while his uncle keeps a firm grip on his calves. Joseph is glad, too. To have uncomplicated conversation with Arthur in a café, to be away from the house for an hour or so. Feels himself smiling, properly, relaxing, conscious now of how tense these last days have been. They have been working fast, though, might even get it all done by tomorrow, and the idea of the day after back alone with David makes him

uneasy.

- We should take it slower, you know. Not like he can't afford it.

They make their way back along the suburban pavements. The town hall clock strikes two thirty and Ben is asleep, mouth open, arms draped over his father's shoulders. They lay him downstairs on the sofa with his blanket and the baby monitor on, move quietly up the stairs and carry on working.

David comes home shortly after three, but doesn't call up to them. They hear his movements downstairs, amplified crackles on the baby monitor, keep on with their work. He is unpacking the shopping and Joseph, listening, sees packets and tins put into cupboards, feet walking into the living room, a dining table chair pulled back, and then turning of newspaper pages.

A little later a little boy's cough and Art puts his brush down mid-stroke and heads for the stairs.

- Hang on.

Joseph whispers, he holds his hand up and Art stops and listens with him. On the monitor, they can hear Ben shifting on the sofa cushions, coughing again. And then David's voice, soft, in the background.

- Hello fella. Didn't see you there.

Joseph and Art duck their heads in smiles, almost giggles, although it is not entirely clear what is funny. Listening to someone who doesn't know it, perhaps. They hold their breath, hands over their mouths. Ben's breathing is loud but steady, and he doesn't seem particularly upset by this stranger, who speaks again now.

- Can I get you something? Glass of juice or a biscuit perhaps?

Joe and Art wait to see if Ben will trust him enough to answer.

- Biscuit.

Art rolls his eyes, mouths *please* and goes downstairs.

- Righto.

The paste is drying on the sheet in front of him, but Joe listens instead of working. To David rummaging for biscuits in the kitchen and Arthur's apologies.

- It's no problem, really.

- Dad, the man said I could have one.

- I know, and that's very nice, but just one now because you never finished your peas at lunchtime, did you?

- Yes.

Joseph imagines David awkward, standing between them, and his mind's-eye picture embarrasses him. He folds up the sheet of wallpaper, dumps it, *wasted*, lays out another, starts working again. The baby monitor goes off and Art comes upstairs with Ben and a plate of biscuits from David for all of them. The boy is happy on the floor now, with his digger and chocolate digestives, and they finish the landing before the day is over. They don't talk much, and Arthur sings a little while he works, and Joe is very aware in those afternoon hours of David alone downstairs.

--

- We flew so often. If you take away the time I was ill, I was flying for about three months. Flew something like 50 attacks in that time, bombing and strafing.

David looks at Joseph.

- That's every other day, you understand. More than. I arrived September 12th, lunchtime, I was out September 13th on a morning bombing raid. That's how it was.

An unreal existence in some ways. Dawn they'd be out flying over the Aberdares, and they'd be back again before people in Nairobi had started work. The rest of the day was difficult to fill.

- I mean we had briefings, we had to fly up to Aden sometimes too for parts, more bombs. But I often felt I had idle time on my hands. Too much of it.

Eastleigh, the airfield, was different from any other he'd known. A single runway, only metalled at each end. Hard, red earth in the middle.

- Murram they call it. Dusty in the dry weather, muddy in the wet.

Low buildings, corrugated iron roofs, nothing like the level of facilities he'd been used to in Britain, although there was a swimming pool. They shared the military side of the airfield with 1340 squadron and their Harvards, and there was a civilian part too, where the commercial flights landed.

- Nothing like airports we have now, of course. Nowhere near the size.

Just one small terminal building, little more than a customs office and lounge.

- We'd often go over there, drink a coffee, talk to the air crews after we'd got back from a raid.

Added to the sense of unreality: sitting with stewardesses and businessmen: hitching rides over to Lake Victoria or up to Aden if you had weekend rest. Swimming out at the NAAFI facility at Steamer Point, overnighting on a veranda at Khormaksar if the camp was full.

- You have to understand this was hugely exciting. To be 23 and flying across Africa to go swimming. This was a time when few people flew anywhere. Long before holidays on the Costa del Sol and so on.

Joseph thinks David has chosen a reference he will understand, the kind of holidays David thinks he would take, and he is right, but it is still irritating. The old man doesn't notice that he has turned away to continue painting.

- I had to fly down to Mombasa once, took us past Kilimanjaro on the return leg. One of the most magnificent things I'll ever see. Knew that then, too. While it was happening. That's just what it felt like.

The most enormous privilege, and much of the time it was as though nothing serious was happening.

- It was a state of emergency, an insurgency we were there to combat, but we saw so little of it.

It only impinged on their lives occasionally.

- We weren't allowed to walk off Eastleigh, for example. Buses or taxis would take us into Nairobi.

And they were required to carry handguns. For their own protection. Some only took them on flights, in case they came down in the jungle. Others took them out into Nairobi, too.

- I did, once or twice. In one of those webbing holsters, you know?

And though that felt strange, he soon learnt that it wasn't at all unusual in that context.

- I remember sitting in an ice cream parlour and seeing the woman on the next table to me was also carrying a weapon.

One of the other officers thought she must have been down from the country.

- Either paranoid about the Mau Mau or she liked hunting.

He stopped thinking about things like that very quickly: he had a different set of priorities. Came into Nairobi to get away from the mess food at Eastleigh, corned beef in everything, pineapple and evaporated milk. In the city you could get Italian coffee and curry.

--

- I have read enough afterwards. To know that we didn't do so much damage. Not by military estimations. Most people agree, in fact, that we were responsible for very few enemy deaths. The air contribution was mainly in supply. Keeping the ground forces serviced with food, munitions. Some go as far as to say it was a costly waste of time us being there, the

bombers.

David nods.

- I know that and then I think of the craters we made in the forest. 70 yards across, 30 feet deep I read in one book. Splinters of trees thrown I can't remember how far. But I never saw that, you see.

He describes the white flare the spotter plane would leave, marking the target, and then there would perhaps be a darker grey cloud created by the bombs they dropped. Nothing much more.

- Even when we flew low for the strafing. 500ft above the trees. It was so dense, you really couldn't see much, just the canopy. The ground, where our bombs finally hit, our bullets, that was somewhere further below. Much further.

David is quiet a moment, eyes narrowed.

- Seems as nothing when you compare this with Nagasaki, with napalm in Vietnam, burning down the forests, the people living there.

He bites his bottom lip, then looks up.

- But that wasn't me. It's the marks I left behind I want to see.

He looks at Joseph.

- Why do you think that is? That I want to see them, after all these years?

After all the time, you'd think one should, one could at some stage let things rest.

Joseph can't decide if this is a question, if he is supposed to respond. David touches his fingertips to one-another, watches them, hovering above his knees.

- Joseph? Why do I think about it now?

David looks up at him but Joseph doesn't know how to answer.

--

- Some crews painted Mau Mau on their aircraft. Recorded their kills, as it were. Small brown figures carrying shields and spears. Alice would shout if she knew that, eh? Wouldn't be allowed now, I shouldn't think.

He smiles, but he looks embarrassed. Joseph wonders if he painted these cartoon tribesmen on his aircraft too, but he doesn't ask.

--

POSS STRUCTURE FOR DAVID'S MEMORIES:

SOME THINGS WERE EASY TO REMEMBER, MOST OF THE YEARS WERE TAKEN UP WITH THOSE MEMORIES. NICE THINGS, PERSONAL, HOW THEY MET, FIRST IMPRESSIONS. PAINFUL ONES TOO, THE LOSSES, THE SYMPATHETIC EXPLOSIONS INCIDENT. THESE WERE ALL THINGS HE COULD SHARE WITH HIS WIFE, THINGS SHE WOULD LISTEN TO, EVEN WHEN THEY WERE DIFFICULT. THEN CAME THE INTERVIEW AND HE STARTED READING UP ON THINGS, THAT IT WAS A COSTLY WASTE OF TIME ETC. HE TALKED TO HER ABOUT SOME OF THIS TOO. BUT NEVER MANAGED TO TELL HER ABOUT HOW HE WANTS TO SEE THE CRATERS/DAMAGE (?).

- I was in my fifties before I started thinking about it.

Never dwelt long on memories before that. Life was so different after he left the service, never had cause to think about it. There were the photos of him in uniform, and occasionally a guest would comment.

- But not often. Not unusual to have pictures of men in uniform on your

mantelpiece, I suppose, still so close to the war years, not like now.

He was interviewed once, by a man writing a book about Lincolns, and he read it afterwards. Got him started. A couple of years where he would spend weekends in libraries. Go out to Hendon sometimes, days off at the RAF museum there, the reading room in the archive.

--

He started talking to Celia about it all then.

- She read the book, too. She was curious.

There was just one chapter about the Emergency in Kenya, but because they'd both been there, it was the most interesting.

- Funny how we'd never talked about it before.

But there had been the rest of life to get on with. Her divorce, their marriage, a house, school for Margaret. He left the air force, didn't want to be travelling, knew that Celia didn't want that for herself, her daughter.

- At first we remembered things about ourselves.

How they met, what their first impressions had been. David smiles a little, self-conscious at the pleasure these memories still bring. But the more they talked, the more they talked about the air campaign.

- It was about my memories then, not hers anymore. I would talk and she would listen.

Got to be like he needed to do it, talk to her. Especially after he'd been reading up on it, if he'd been at an archive or library. Fill up during the day and then come home and spill it all out again. All sorts of things she'd never heard about and he'd forgotten or only half-known, half-remembered.

- The earliest memories were the good ones.

But then it got painful. It was as though what they'd talked about before were just the preliminaries, a way of practicing for the harder parts that came later. Flying was dangerous. He knew that even before he joined, saw a couple of crashes at the training ground as a schoolboy. Or rather the aftermath, the burnt out wrecks at the edge of the airfield waiting for removal.

- Everyone knew that, we were all aware of that. Goes without saying.

Some crew had flown in the war, too. Through flak countless times, lost countless friends. One or two had been shot down and survived. David stops a moment.

- I think I'm just trying to explain.

He stays quiet a moment, searching for the right words.

- I think you have to know the context we were working in. But you'll know what I mean.

- Yes.

Joseph nods, he does.

- It seemed so much harder to remember than it was at the time.

He blinks. His squadron was one of six that covered the Emergency, and they were the last out there. There had been a few accidents, he remembers hearing about one crew lost night flying out over the Rift Valley. Reading about others in the squadron dropping wreaths over the crash site later.

- Celia didn't like hearing this at all. Couldn't bear me talking about it.

The thing he couldn't understand is why he'd never told her before: one of the worst incidents happened to a crew in his squadron.

- I was flying with them.

Not in the same aircraft: there were three planes out that day, bombing in a line.

- The spotter would mark the target, and then you'd go in one by one.

They'd had a run of clear mornings, which was quite unusual. It would often be very misty, pale sunrises and cool. Lots of moisture in the air. But because it was clear they could see each other flying. His was the last in the line and the second had just gone in over the target.

- One of their bombs, 1000 pounder, went off prematurely.

Might have been barometric pressure set it off, freak accident. Might have been just because they were working with old bombs. A lot of the time they

were making do out there, and the equipment they were given was often substandard.

- After it was out of the aircraft, you understand, but before it was fully clear and the explosion triggered all the others in the stick, all the smaller bombs dropped after it.

Worked its way up through them, one by one, up and up until it got to the aircraft. The bomb-bay doors still open, nothing to stop the shrapnel. Ripped through the aircraft.

- We couldn't see them anymore by this stage.

But they could hear them. The pilot was unable to turn off radio contact, so they had to listen to it all, his crew and the crew in the first aircraft.

- Terrible noise. Terrible what those men went through.

Most survived. The engineer bled to death. David nods a while and then he says he has often thought about the others. What it is they remember.

- Celia always found that one difficult.

--

- I have thought about this a great deal, whether it was an uneven battle. They had no flak, no anti-aircraft defenses. Unless you count the forest, of course, the sheer denseness of it, the difficulty of us ever knowing if we were dropping anything on target.

- They were terrorists. They did the most terrible, cruel things. Cut the legs off a farmer's herd. Didn't kill them outright, you see. Left that for the farmer to do, because they knew that would hurt him all the more: not only financially ruined, but he had to kill his own livestock.

- I was a pilot. So I could say I only did the flying. Which means the bomber on my crew was the one who did the killing. Or the bomb aimer, the navigator, or perhaps the man who flew the spotter plane, decided the target. He'd be the one to drop the signal flare, the smoke for us to follow.

- What is my part in it then? This doesn't match with my experience. Not how I felt: there was no separation then. We all had our jobs, our specialist

areas of course, but I was not divisible from my crew like that. How can I divide myself afterwards? Don't want to shirk my share of any of it.

- Besides, it was thrilling.

- We'd come back high as kites sometimes. Flying low across the plains. Scattering the gazelles. One chap got himself killed, his crew too, flying stunts. Showing off, foolish really, and most of us weren't like that. But it was all part of that time, I think. That feeling. I am not excusing it, you understand, just want to paint a picture.

--

Going home, on the train and then walking, Joseph thinks about David, sitting like that on the paint pot in his neatly tied shoes. Polished leather, patterned with holes, narrow laces, well-kept soles. His trousers pulled up by his knees, section of pale skin above the dark sock showing: hairless and thin. The old man kept talking, and Joseph knows he listened, that he even wanted to be listening today, but still it frightens him. *Can't stop himself. Why do you think that is Joseph, eh?* Turns his gut, the thought of it. Talking and talking until you're an old man and there's still no end of it.

--

- I was thinking. Maybe it's that people say it was a waste of time.

Joseph has moved on to the hallway now. He is up the ladder with the long roller and David is sorting through the post, standing in the porch. He has been out in the garden, has not spent any time with Joseph this morning, save a brief progress check while Joseph was pulling his overalls on. How many days so far, an estimate of the number of days to go. Joseph knows his comment has surprised the old man, and he waits, resting the roller against the wall until David looks up.

- You were asking me yesterday. You talked about it, to Alice's Gran all the time. Maybe that's why. Because people said it was pointless and it makes you angry that they think that.

- But I agree.

David puts the envelopes down and steps closer to the ladder.

- I agree with them, Joseph. They're not telling me anything I don't know, do you see? When I read that it was like lightbulbs going off. I came back from the library and read them aloud to Celia while she was cooking, five paragraphs I had copied out.

He is looking up at Joseph, eyes behind his glasses blinking, excited.

- When we were there, we would be told how much damage we had done. I told you about the little brown men painted on the sides, yes? Well, I don't know how many we ever did kill, you understand. Don't know how we could have known, so why did they do that? The army, they were on the ground up there, of course, KAR, Black Watch. They said 203 at one point, I remember that. I have my doubts. Had them then, but you wanted to believe it. I wanted to. What does that say about me?

Joseph doesn't hear the question at first. Only when David keeps looking up at him does he try to find a response.

- You were doing your job. You wanted to be making a good job of it.

- That's service logic.

David's tone is impatient.

- But do you see? That's the logic of it then, at the time. Can't apply it afterwards. Doesn't work that way.

- Alice says it was brutal. How can I deny that? I have heard myself talking, in this house all these years. I can hear how brutal it sounds.

--

He's been waiting for a good time, a pause, a bit of silence, where he can say something without interrupting, but it doesn't come, and he is just left listening. Feeling more and more helpless and frustrated and a kind of panic rising.

- Why are you telling me all this?

David stops, looks up at him. No answer.

- I mean. What do you want me to do about it? I can't do nothing can I?

His voice is rising, tight in his throat, and the old man doesn't say anything, just sits with his old eyes blinking.

- I'm going now.

Joseph reaches for his jacket. Only just gone eleven, but David makes no protest.

- Call it a half day or something, eh? Or just don't pay me.

Joseph is shaking, can hear it in his own voice. Thinks David must hear it too, and it makes him angry. That and the fact that he's done himself out of a day's money. Head crowded with it all now, he can't say any more and just has to go. But even after the door's closed and he's down the road, he's still thinking: *what the fuck? Don't pay me.* Like saying sorry, but what for? Should be getting extra for the listening, putting up with it all. And still he's got the old man's blinking eyes there, his shoulders bent forward, his silent shock.

--

At home again, he sits and feels terrible. Bought two cans at the off license by David's house, his official limit, but when they are done he gets three more from the shop on the corner. He's on the second of these when Alice calls, can hear his own breathing against the receiver. Expects her to ask him about this afternoon, but she just chats for a while and there's nothing in her voice to suggest anything wrong.

- Just wanted to hear how you're getting on.

- We're getting on fine.

- You and Grandad?

She laughs a little and Joseph wonders again if David called her, but she just carries on.

- That's great. I meant is the decorating going okay, really, but that's good if he's being alright with you.

- He's fine.

Joseph is aware his answers aren't really good enough, but can't say what's in his head: that he is the one not being alright, nowhere near alright with the old man. Alice should be worrying the other way around, but he can't tell her that, so he keeps quiet. Holding his drunk breathing in, hand cupped a little over the receiver.

- Are you okay, Joe?

He tries to think of something that would sound right.

- Would you like me to come round?

- No. No, I'm alright. I've had a can today. Sorry, Alice. It's just a bit. I don't know. I'll get in my bed and I'll be fine.

- Yeah?

- Yeah.

She lets it be quiet on the line a while.

- A can every now and then, it's alright you know. Too much is not the best with your pills, but you know that, don't you?

- I do.

- And if you want a day off. Or longer. I could ring David, and it won't be a problem.

- No days off. Honestly, I don't want to do that. Better if I carry on.

- Friday tomorrow. You'll have the weekend after that anyway.

- Yeah.

After she hangs up he gets into bed, still dressed but under the covers. Can next to him on the floor, turns the light off and lies eyes shut and thinking.

David's memories sound brutal to him, his own voice the same. He hears what he said to the old man this afternoon and feels ashamed. Cruel. To let him think he was being judged that way. He should tell him. If he is going to tell anyone then it should be David. Because he knows how it is, what David means, and because then David would know why he said the things he did today, why he threw the pots and brushes around the room. Joseph lies on his back and feels the tears in his hair and his ears. Sounds so simple now, to tell him. But he knows he'll go there again tomorrow and say nothing.

Angry, but not with the old man. Not his fault that Joseph knows how he feels.

--

David is out when he gets there in the morning. A little hungover, and a little late because he missed the right train and had to wait over twenty minutes for the next one. Standing feeling hot and dizzy with the pigeons on the platform. Rehearsing his excuses to David over and over, and then the old man isn't home anyway. Key under the rain barrel in the back garden, note on the kitchen table to help himself to tea and to food if he's hungry. No indication as to where he's gone, but then Joseph figures he doesn't have to tell him anyway. He takes two aspirin from the bathroom cabinet and a pint of water upstairs with him.

He's cleaning the brushes when David comes home, with string bags of shopping. He comes round the back way and nods at Joseph with the turps on the patio.

Joseph can't tell if he's angry about yesterday. Seems like he might be, but he can never tell with David. Normal for him to be silent like that. He can hear him packing away the shopping, radio on to hear the latest on the cricket. Joseph has just about finished the brushes when David steps out into the garden, holding a box of something, he waits while Joseph stands

up and then he asks him.

- Perhaps you could give them to my granddaughter, if you see her over the weekend?

Luxury oatcakes, organic.

- She likes them. She bought them for Celia while she could still enjoy them. They're very good.

David holds out the package to him and then looks at Joseph's hands.

Fingers oily, smeared with paint and turpentine. Joseph wipes them on his overalls and David apologises.

- I'll let you wash your hands first, leave them in the kitchen for you, shall I? On the counter. I'm going upstairs now. Bit of a lie down.

On the train home Joseph looks at the biscuits in his lap. Wonders why David presumed he'd be seeing Alice at the weekend. What kind of relationship he thinks they have. Makes him edgy, but also makes him think he might ring her. Has an excuse now, a present from her Grandad to pass on to her.

--

Joseph tries to put it into words.

- You said that you did it. You want to feel that you did it.

David smiles a little.

- Yes.

- Those were your orders, but you're still the one who did the flying, got the bombs to their target.

- I am.

- Your responsibility.

David nods, firm. Not smiling any longer though: he is watching Joseph now.

- The way I see it. You need to feel guilty about it because that makes it alright. Makes you alright. A better person than the one you were before, who bombed the forests and didn't think about the people in them.

Joseph has to stop to draw breath, and he thinks David can hear him pull the air in, fill his chest. He can feel the blood in his neck, its high singing noise in his ears. They are sitting in the living room, on the easy chairs, on the

dustsheets. Both of them awkward, leaning forward on the soft cushions. Joseph reaches for a paintbrush, something to hold, hard to be sitting there empty-handed, aware of David's eyes, blinking behind his glasses.

- That's very cynical.

- That's the way I see it.

Joseph puts the paintbrush down now. His hands feels weak, and he's afraid of dropping it. Head light as he straightens up, the old man is still quiet, still watching and Joseph feels he is drifting. Opens his mouth again, lets himself start talking.

- Doesn't fit in with the rest of life otherwise, does it? House, wife, daughter, job, killing. Your next door neighbour. Bet he's never killed no-one. The bloke eating in the mess next to you, the one who flies the next plane out after you. He might have done, or if he's not yet, he might do tomorrow. No different, is he? So you don't have to think about it, do you?

Joseph's throat feels hot, his tongue, warm breath coming out across his lips, making him sweat. He doesn't think he's making sense, but David isn't saying anything, so he carries on.

- I say you're just trying to feel better about yourself. If you feel guilty about it

then it makes you okay.

- No.

Quiet denial. Joseph stops. The old man looks like he will get up and leave if he starts again, but Joseph doesn't want to say anything now. Feels like he might start crying if he does and he doesn't want to show David that. Keeping his breathing steady, staying still, not letting himself fall back into the chair, holding everything in one place for a minute or two.

David said no, but Joseph doesn't believe him. *You can live with it, can't you? That's how you live with it. Talking.* Find someone who will listen, will let him, help him feel guilty. Celia has gone and so he's the next best thing: captive audience, come every day and needs the job so he's not likely to go in a hurry.

Joseph stands now, picks up the brush again, loads it, starts painting. Keeping his back to the old man, and all the strokes even. Has to work again, distract himself, can't be talking any more now, has to do something.

--

Doesn't think about it before he does it. It comes without warning. But then there he is in the middle of the room and the paint being thrown across walls

and windows. Thick mess of it stinking, shoes sliding on the oily slick across the dustsheets. Looking for the next tin to throw, something else, anything to create some damage. Wherever he moves he's leaving marks. Footprints, fingers coated, paint oozing up his arms. Last pot he gets through the window, smashed. Jags of glass dripping with colour, can't see through any of it now except the hole, above head height and it's raining outside. Cold air coming in and he has to be going now.

--

He doesn't go out to David's in the morning. Doesn't get up even. Lies with the curtains shut and he thinks when Alice calls he won't answer, won't go to the door if she comes round, and then he wants to cry but he can't because he's too ashamed.

--

[2 DAYS PASS, DAVID COMES TO SEE JOSEPH.]

He's in the hallway when the doorbell goes. Can see the shape behind the glass. Not Alice: her Grandad. And though Joseph still stands there a while before moving, he knows he can't not answer.

He expects anger but there is none, just David standing on his doorstep, looking neat and small.

- I got the mess cleared up. The glazier's been.

It's not friendly, his voice, but not unfriendly either. Just matter of fact, and Joseph doesn't know how to react.

- I haven't told Alice.

He blinks. And perhaps because Joseph still doesn't respond, he says.

- I won't be telling her about it.

- You can take it out of my wages.

David shrugs, impatient now. He frowns.

- I haven't come about that.

He looks up and down the walkway, squinting, and Joseph thinks how strange he looks in his blazer and tie against the damp brickwork.

- Can I come in?

[ideas of what he might say]

- I told you that I regret not telling my wife. But I'm not so sure now. I was thinking about what you said. Now she's gone and I'm left with my guilt, you see. No chance that she can take it away from me now, and perhaps that is exactly what I need.

- It was good of you to let me talk. I do appreciate that you know. It was thoughtless of me, though.

- The way you carried on working, but quietly, carefully, and standing still sometimes, waiting in the pauses. I thought perhaps you did that so I would know you were listening.

He shifts, embarrassed.

- And now I'm making excuses.

- So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. That's from St Paul.

He looks up at Joseph and then he smiles a little, apologises.

- Yes, I know. The language is a little difficult to take, isn't it? Sometimes I find it helpful.

- What you said. You were right of course. It doesn't change anything, my regret. Remorse. Whatever you want to call it. What else do we have though?

--

After the old man has gone Joseph stands a long while in the kitchen, hardly moving. The kettle boils and when it finally clicks off, the sharp noise startles him, the silence afterwards. He doesn't remember filling it, wanting a cup of tea. He wonders if he put it on for David, but the clock shows twenty past, outside it is already getting dark. It's over half an hour since he left.

He can hear no cars, no airplanes, no TV or washing machine from next door. And in the soft quiet of the flat it seems impossible now that they spoke so much, inside these same walls, just a few short hours ago.

Joseph sets the kettle to boil again and pours the water, goes to stand in the bedroom now, by the window, staring out into the darkening shapes of the allotments, the bushes by the canal. Until his eyes can no longer focus and

he sees only his reflection, brow and jaw picked out against shadow, light just reaching him through the open kitchen door.

That afternoon, most of the time, the old man didn't look at him while he was speaking. Left Joseph free to watch the creases shifting, sparse lashes blinking, the yellow-white eyes, and the broken veins scattered across the skin. And Joseph thinks now of how he thanked him, for all the mornings when the old man talked and talked and he just carried on working.

He stays standing where he is a long time, not wanting to interrupt the quiet, the memory of this afternoon, the old man's voice, his own silence: an uncomfortable mix of shame and excitement. What had he said? How had he put it? Joseph can't remember the exact words now, but it was like David knew, or knew enough, and he didn't have to do any telling.

--

After Joseph tells Eve, she doesn't say anything for quite a while. She doesn't shout or cry or get upset at all. Doesn't even seem surprised.

She is cleaning out the lock-up, end of a good weekend and all her stock sold, the straggly bits left over chucked away now, too. She and Art will go away in a few days: two weeks in Spain, in a hotel with a pool so they can teach Ben to swim. She told him about it on the phone and how much she's been looking forward to it, and it's all he can think about on his way to her

place, how he'll be spoiling it for her. *Stupid*. As if there would ever be a good time.

And then, after he's finished talking, he doesn't know what to do because there is so little reaction from his sister to go on.

- Did you know already?

- I didn't. No.

The air in the lock-up is cold and damp, but fresh, full of the green scent of petal and sap. Eve has been hosing the floor, and the gutters swim with broken leaves and pollen.

- But it had to be something, didn't it?

She sweeps the water across the concrete floor while she speaks. It was a question, but not one she wanted an answer for, so Joseph waits for her to continue.

- I know people who leave the army have troubles sometimes, get homeless and everything. I phoned all the right organisations and they told me. Art got leaflets off the library, you know what he's like.

The cold rises from the floor, and Joe sees that his sister's fingernails are blue against the pink-white skin. She stops sweeping, holds the broom

upright in the crook of her elbow, hides them in her palms, to warm them, or maybe to stop him looking.

- I mean, we're not stupid.

Eve laughs a bit, but she looks angry. Or sad. Something that doesn't go with it.

- No, I know.

- We had to be thinking something had happened, didn't we? Or what did you think?

He doesn't answer.

- You were in the army.

She seems to want to leave it there for a moment or two, but then she says:

- I figured the chances were. You'd done something, seen something done.

Joseph wonders if the difference is important to her. He can't decide from the way she says it: she seems to weigh it equally, but he can't believe that. He tries to find a way to put the question.

- You never asked.

- Mum did. She said she asked but you weren't telling.

He can't remember that, but he doesn't say it. Maybe when he was staying there, the last time, before he went into hospital. Could have asked him a lot of things then.

- Art said you'd tell us if you wanted to and that was it. After a bit I got used to the idea.

- After a bit?

- I don't know. It's like he said, you'd still be my brother. What were we to do, Joey? Leave you? Hate you?

She stops and he wonders how many other possibilities she has been through over the past two, three years. And which one seems most likely now, whether she will tell him or if he'll have to wait and find out. Eve puts the broom away, coils the hose around her arm and stows it under the sink in the corner. When she walks back towards him, she says:

- I never liked you being in the army, you know that.

He nods.

- Will you say anything to Mum?

- Not if you don't want me to.

- Art?

Eve sighs.

- Please, Eve?

- Ok. No. I'll not tell Art.

He smiles his thanks, and she nods, looks round to see if there is anything else she could be busy with, but the place is clean, her work finished.

- What do you think?

Eve looks at him.

- I mean. How do you feel about what I told you. What are you thinking?

- I've had a long time to get used to the idea, Joe. Think over the possibilities.

- But now you know.

- Yes.

He keeps looking at her and then she sighs, but still doesn't say anything, so Joseph tries again.

- I was thinking it must be different.

She is frowning, she can't look at his face, brushes her hand across the

clean surface of the table in front of her.

- I don't know, Joey. I don't know. I'll be able to tell you later, maybe.

Joseph thinks he will have to leave it there, wait for her, but he doubts she will say later. And he knows it is not really fair, this question. How long has it taken David? A lifetime, and he is still left wondering.

- Alice doesn't know.

- You've not told her?

- No.

- You telling her?

Eve is pulling her jacket on now.

- No. I don't think so. I was thinking you could maybe not say anything to her.

It doesn't come out like a question. He's not asking, not telling either. He watches his sister, picking up her bag and searching through her pockets, and he waits to see if she will say something. Her face is hard to read: angry maybe, confused. She thinks he is wrong not to talk to Alice, he's sure. But she doesn't know if she should say it. Maybe she's glad to know something that Alice doesn't; maybe that's part of it. Joseph knows she wouldn't like to admit that, but he could understand it if she felt that way.

She locks up and they walk down the road together, Eve keeping a couple of paces ahead of him, and he lets her. At the corner he sees her eyes are wet, her lashes, and he lifts an arm to her, but she stops him.

- No. I'm okay. I'll be okay in a minute, yeah?

She tries a smile and then the traffic clears and she crosses the road ahead of him.

--

Alice is gathering her things to go, and it occurs to Joseph that she has been gathering them for some time.

- You don't want to stay for a tea or anything?

- I should get on. Thanks Joe. I just really should be going.

Her smile is self-conscious, acknowledging the jacket she has been holding for the past 15 minutes. They stand, and the chairs squeak across the lino.

- How's David?

- He's well. I think he's very well.

Alice nods, hitches her bag onto her shoulder as she leaves the kitchen. At the door she says.

- I'm going to meet him now, actually. He's coming into town. Buying me dinner.

She's smiling. As if she can't believe it.

- Give him my best, will you?

- Yes. He always asks after you, you know.

Joseph thinks she is blushing, but the door is open and the sun is strong so he's not sure. And she's walking away now, but still talking. Backing along the walkway, smiling.

- He's excited, planning a holiday.

- Sounds good.

Joseph takes a step out, but Alice is still moving, away towards the stairs and he thinks she doesn't want him to follow, so he stops. Concrete cool under his socks, late afternoon sun in his eyes.

- Wants me to help him. Book places.

- Where's he going.

- Africa. Zimbabwe and Kenya. Memory lane, I reckon: where he met Gran, where he trained. Do you think it's a mad idea?

At the stairwell now she stops, still smiling, waiting for an answer. Joseph blinks, the sun is on her hair, blowing across her face. Joseph shrugs. He doesn't know what to say.

- I do. A good one though.

He hears her quick laugh as she moves down the stairs. Joseph waits and then watches her across the courtyard, brief flare of red as she passes from shade into sun and back again. She doesn't look up, and then she's gone.

Afterword

Afterwards is the second book of a two-book deal with Random House UK, the first of which was *Field Study*, a collection of short stories published in March 2004. William Heinemann also published my first novel, *The Dark Room*, in 2001. All three books have had editorial input from Ravi Mirchandani (William Heinemann, Random House UK) Dan Frank (Pantheon, Random House US), Toby Eady (my agent) and from Professor Willy Maley (University of Glasgow), as *The Dark Room* was written during the course of my MLitt studies in Creative Writing, *Afterwards* as a PhD thesis, and Professor Maley also read and commented on all of the stories in *Field Study* before publication. However, perhaps because it is my first full-length work, *Afterwards* had more input from my various editors than the previous two books, and as a consequence went through more changes too. This Afterword and its Appendices are intended to throw some light on this process.

False Start?

I wanted to know how the novel *A Suitable Boy* was going to end and I knew that there was no way I could find out unless I actually wrote it. So, as the goalpost retreated from 200 to 600 to 1000 pages and the end was not yet quite in sight, I just went on and did finally finish it. [...] There are lots of false starts, sixty or seventy pages down the line you often find that this isn't working out, but I don't know how else one can

write.¹

Vikram Seth

Afterwards took four years to complete. I wasn't working on it full-time throughout those years, as I also had two children during this period, and so took two extended breaks from my writing desk after the birth of each. However, I think the time spent is significant, as a novel is not only written at the desk, but also in the 'down time' between, when the material settles and some readerly distance is established, allowing you to be a more effective editor of your own work. Good editorial feedback can have the same effect. Crucially, it can help you identify where the novel on the page differs from the ideal novel you hold in your head.

Having *Afterwards* reflected back to me in my editors' words often crystallized what I *didn't* want the book to be. I started with the research for the book in the early Summer of 2002, and while this work continued through to the late Spring of 2003, I also started to write scenes from the Autumn of 2002, so from that point the research and writing were done in tandem. This was done partly to allow me to organise my thoughts, and partly because I was pregnant with my first child, and wanted to get a sense of structure in place, so that I would have something solid to return to after my maternity leave. By July 2003, when my son was born, I had written around 50,000 words (here submitted as *A First Attempt*).

1 Vikram Seth in *Writers on Writing*, edited by James Roberts, Barry Mitchell and Roger Zubrinich (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002) p.16

I returned to writing in the late Spring of 2004, and while there was indeed a structure in place, and I considered some individual scenes to be successfully rendered, the manuscript as a whole was an uncomfortable read. I already knew the problem had something to do with Alice (see Appendix One), and had been trying to make changes to her character (see Appendix Two). However, the problem lay not only with Alice, but with her context, and the changes I had been making were effectively compounding rather than solving the issue.

Willy Maley had been commenting on scenes as I produced them, and during that Summer, he described the manuscript as 'dark and painful'. At this stage, Alice was a psychiatric nurse and Joseph one of her patients, and I was trying and failing to write a love story between them. I knew from interviews I had conducted with a former psychiatric nurse (Jayne Herriot, see Bibliography) that such relationships are not infrequent, but of course they are proscribed, so I had to create a plausible motivation for Alice to step over this professional line. The scenario ran as follows: Graham, a former patient, attempts suicide after release. He has been on the ward three times, twice in Alice's care. She was the first person Graham entrusted with the memory of his abuse as a child. Alice is hurt by the limits of her ability to help him, and frustrated by the protocols of her profession, as they seem to get in the way of human contact. Alice and Joseph get on well on the ward, and with the Graham subplot, I hoped the ground was laid for her to overstep the crucial mark after Joseph's return to his family (see Appendix Two for sample scenes).

I was reasonably pleased with some of the conversations I had written between Alice and her colleagues and patients, and with the descriptions of life as a patient on a psychiatric ward (see also Appendix Two). However, there were major problems with this narrative, and Willy's comment, although I understand it was intended as positive, finally allowed me to identify them clearly.

Firstly, while Alice being a psychiatric nurse was a logical (and rather convenient) way for her to meet Joseph, it also provided some large obstacles to overcome, the taboo of nurse-patient relationships being only the first. Alice the psychiatric nurse was, by definition, knowledgeable about mental health issues, and having her meet Joseph on a psychiatric ward meant that his reticence was immediately cast as a psychological disorder. He is diagnosed from the outset, and so his character development is constrained², as is their relationship: it is always taboo, furtive, potentially disastrous to both. The novel at this stage was too dark, too painful, because there was further darkness and pain to come in the form of Joseph's memories and David's revelations, and the difficulties these pose to both men and their loved ones. How much of this could a reader tolerate? Bluntly put: if Alice and Joseph are a bad idea to start with, then there is no reason to wish their relationship well and continue reading in the hope that they might work things out.

Secondly, in this early draft, Joseph's past was revealed, in part, through his

² See also Appendix Four. This problem with Joseph's character seems to have persisted into the first draft for Dan Frank.

conversations with his psychiatrist and nurse (see Appendix Three), and this was just too clichéd. The information being conveyed was okay, but the context made me grind my teeth whenever I read it over. This structure had been fine to help me get his background clear, but it was an obvious crutch and so had to go.

Thirdly, setting the beginning of Joseph and Alice's relationship on a psychiatric ward meant I would have to give room to issues I didn't want to cover in the narrative. I knew from my research that treatment of former military personnel is complicated and the resources are generally not available. I feel strongly about these issues, but I wanted the novel to be about memory and culpability, not an indictment of the National Health Service or Ministry of Defence.

I had tried taking Alice out of her professional context, by giving her six months leave after Graham's attempted suicide. I hoped this might allow some room for her relationship with Joseph to breathe. However, having done that, I realised I was spending a lot of narrative time setting up a scenario (Joseph as patient in an inadequately-resourced health service, Alice as nurse with professional misgivings) only to ask my reader to disregard it again a few chapters later.

I had written around 55,000 words, but the pages I had produced since the end of my maternity leave had been hard going, and I found it increasingly difficult to write on. The time away from the novel after my son was born had loosened my attachment to the research I had done into the psychiatric

treatment of former soldiers. Willy's 'dark and painful' comment forced me to focus on the love story I had intended *Afterwards* to be. So, if they were not to meet on a ward, how else could I bring Alice and Joseph together? As an experiment, I wrote what was to become the first section of chapter two³, and enjoyed writing it. Two people meeting each other in an everyday situation, innocent of each other's past life, just attracted to one another. It felt like a hopeful beginning, which was exactly what the book needed: an ordinary, everyday happiness which could be disrupted later on. A week or so later, I stripped out all the scenes on the psychiatric ward, and Joseph and Alice's uneasy friendship and courtship after his release. I cut out most of Joseph's breakdown too, and put what was left into the past tense. I also did away with many of David and Joseph's conversations in part three, particularly those where Joseph started responding, as these felt forced. I was left with around fifteen thousand words, but I thought these were of far higher quality, and had far more potential.

Hindsight allows me to look upon this early, discarded work as a process of writing up my research, and perhaps also as a process of writing away from it. I kept Joseph's symptoms and strategies for managing them, as it seemed to me that guilt can work on an individual in a similar way to trauma, and so the latter could usefully stand as a metaphor for guilt in the narrative I was creating. The conversations I had with the staff and patients at the Rivers Centre trauma unit in Edinburgh never revolved around notions of cure, or a return to a former 'whole' or 'healthy' self. Instead, the focus was on coping strategies. The past - the event which precipitated the trauma -

3 Rachel Seiffert, *Afterwards* (London: William Heinemann 2007) pages 11-15

cannot be altered or erased, and continues to mark those involved: remembering is not synonymous with recovery. I wanted to draw a parallel with guilt in Joseph's story: remembering means feeling the pain of responsibility (again), for events which cannot be changed. The Joseph who inhabits the final version of *Afterwards* is not after atonement, but rather he looks for a different grace in forgetting, a kind of willed amnesia:

All the questions Alice asked her grandad, and him too now. That's what she wanted, or thought she did maybe: for him to squeeze it all out, every last guilty drop. Prove it to me, just how sorry you are. Should have asked her gran, the old girl could have told her: there's no end to it, it's just self-pity, and it just goes on and on.

You think about it and think about it, you do nothing else. Only remember, and then you let yourself stop. Not overnight and never completely, but that was the way it happened, and Joseph couldn't see that as wrong.

*If it's not going to help. If you're never going to change it. Why touch the sore part any more than you have to?*⁴

This key aspect of Joseph's character is clearly based on my early research, but the narrative had to leave the hospital environment because it was stifled there. It took me rather longer than Vikram Seth's sixty or seventy pages to realise this, of course, but these provisional structures and scenarios were necessary stages in the development of Joseph, and his love story with Alice too.

4 Seiffert (2007) p.292-293.

Confession and Closure

By this time, I had been working on *Afterwards* for two years, and my UK editor, Ravi Mirchandani, took me out for lunch to find out how I was getting on. So far, only Willy and Toby had seen the manuscript in progress. They knew I was in the process of discarding and beginning again, but I didn't yet feel certain enough of the direction I was taking the book to reveal as much to Ravi. I told him about the three principal characters and how they interrelate, and because Alice was still in the early stages of being reworked, I still described her as a psychiatric nurse. Publishing schedules are set down well in advance, and at this stage, we were aiming to publish *Afterwards* in the Autumn of 2005. Ravi wanted to start thinking about cover images, and he emailed me a draft flap copy a week or two later.

Serving in the British Army in Northern Ireland, Joseph has shot and killed a man in the course of duty. A subsequent inquiry has cleared him of any inappropriate behaviour, yet torn with guilt, he has ended up in a psychiatric hospital in London.

There he meets Sarah [sic], a psychiatric nurse of his own age and – through her – her grandfather David, himself a veteran of the armed forces. In the '50s, David served in the RAF in Kenya, where unbeknown to his granddaughter, he bombed Mau-Mau jungle hide-outs. In all probability – and all in the course of duty – he too has

blood on his hands.

As the two men come to know each other, they reveal their stories and share their experiences – and their feelings of remorse. As soldier and pilot, both are innocent; as men, both – perhaps – are guilty. In a powerful exploration of guilt, war and the power of mankind's greatest – yet all too frequently broken – taboo, 'Thou shalt not kill', Rachel Seiffert delivers on the remarkable promise of *The Dark Room* and *Field Study*.⁵

The flap copy rarely does justice to the book it urges you to buy and Ravi would be the first to admit this. Also (and again, in his defence) this blurb was based on my own description of the characters, and on a brief conversation at that. I did not recognise these characters as mine, nor did I want to own them, 'torn by remorse' as they were. I especially did not want to have anything to do with the 'sharing of experiences, and feelings of remorse'. This blurb set up exactly the book I didn't want to write: the confessional narrative, in which everything is confronted, revealed, clarified and resolved. Remembering and recovering become conflated for the sake of narrative convenience. Willy had given me *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, by Frank McGuinness, quite early on, while I was still researching *Afterwards*. The lack of closure, for all the talking, is crucial to McGuinness' play, and Pyper's opening lines had stood out for me, so I looked them up again after reading Ravi's email. Indeed, I stuck them

5 Extract of an email from Ravi Mirchandani to Rachel Seiffert, sent 3rd Oct 2004. For full text, see Appendix Six

on the wall by my desk, so I could see them whenever I strayed into confessional territory:

'Again. As always, again. Why does this persist? What more do we have to tell each other? I remember nothing today, absolutely nothing.'⁶

Communication in *Afterwards* is often indirect. It is Sarah, for example, not David who tells Alice about the sympathetic detonations he witnessed. Sarah didn't hear about them from her father either, but from Isobel, her mother, and David is unaware that Isobel betrayed his confidence. David doesn't tell Joseph about these explosions in their scene together in the hallway, but their influence on his thinking is implicit: 'I know what kind of damage the bombs we used can do, when they explode.'⁷

The reader has all the above information, of course, but I had to shuffle the order of the scenes around a fair bit between drafts, in order for them to have maximum effect. In draft three, for example, the reader only learned of the faulty bombs after Joseph had wreaked havoc with the paint in David's hallway. I was, in effect, asking my readers to fold back on themselves, reinterpret a scene after the reading. Given that the connection is not explicit, and I did not want to make it so (in an additional scene, for example, where the link is explained) I did worry that it might be lost. So I moved Alice's walk with her mother to an earlier point in the narrative, before David

6 Frank McGuinness, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986) p.9

7 Seiffert (2007) p.249

tells Joseph about bombing the forests. The information gives Alice pause for thought about her grandfather, making her feel more 'tender'⁸ towards him, and I hoped the same might go for my readers. I knew I couldn't have Joseph attack David directly: this would be out of character, and it would close off the relationship with Alice, be too final an act. However, I thought that if David is made more vulnerable in their scene together in the hallway, the violence implied in flinging the paint becomes more shocking, without the need for a direct, physical attack.

Communication is also imperfect in *Afterwards*. The reader may be in a more privileged position than the characters as regards the sympathetic detonations, but they are not privy, for example, to how David revealed his experience to his wife. David may have found solace in talking to Isobel, but talking doesn't put a stop to his discomfort. In Chapter 14, Joseph remembers a previous girlfriend and her curiosity:

What was he supposed to tell her? What did she want?

Joseph remembered being on edge the whole time, after she started asking. They grew up in the same place, knew all the same people, he thought there was only one thing he'd never told her, and he was sure she wouldn't want to hear that, not really. It wasn't just the problem of where to start, or how to explain. There was just no way of telling what she would do or think after he said it, after she knew.

Not likely to be the end of it, was it? Wouldn't solve

anything. Just the beginning of a whole new set of problems.⁹

As with the paint-flinging scene, a confession can complicate as much as it can clarify.

First Draft

The first draft was completed in the Spring of 2005, and I sent it to Professor Maley, Dan Frank in New York, and to my agent Toby Eady. It was a shade over 52 thousand words and still skeletal. Dan's response, which I received at the end of May, was puzzled, and was not happy reading for me.

Dear Rachel, Toby sent AFTERWARDS to me. And I was delighted to read something new by you. Your writing always succeeds in weaving a spell, at once delicate and sinewy. And I was not disappointed by my experience of reading these pages. Your ability to use the smallest of detail to create affecting portraits in [sic] a great gift as is how you manage to depict characters at once with detachment and with emotional power. There is something remarkably visual about your writing. I had no trouble imagining Afterwards as a film, in part because of the specificity of the story's focus: the character of Joseph. But that specificity, I realize, is also responsible for the

9 Seiffert (2007) p.290-291

story's limitations. Indeed, these pages have more of a feel of a film treatment than a novel.

Let me try to explain. The unfolding drama here hinges on Joseph's inability to integrate what has happened to him, his inability to come to terms with it even in the most basic sense of recollecting exactly what did happen, even to recognize what he did or didn't do. We are given an account, through his eyes, of what happened at the outset that is obscure because it is through his eyes. We are given an account later by his army buddy Jarvis that the reader is not sure whether to trust or not, and we see how in a variety of ways, Joseph's post traumatic syndrome/ psychological disorder is the source of his inability to deal not only with the past but anything that he encounters which triggers the recollection of that event. The problem with portraying a character with such a defining malaise is that the reader has a very tough time of getting any sense of him beyond [sic] whichever label one uses to define his problem.

In some way, he ceases to be of interest because of that. But also because the triggering event remains obscure/elusive for the reader. We don't know what has triggered Joseph's trauma. What exactly happened at the inspection checkpoint? Are we to assume that Joseph feels

guilty because he accidentally killed a man who may or may not have been an IRA member. That seems considerably less horrifying/dreadful than what Alice's Grandad witnessed. The disclosure of that moment has an immediacy, a force of revelation that only diminishes whatever it is that happened to Joseph. Or is your point that it doesn't take something truly horrendous to affect a post traumatic stress disorder, that we civilians have little idea of how hardened the military must become in order simply to accept what they are going to see, have to accept as part of their ordinary routine. But does that mean Joseph is simply [sic] too sensitive a soul. Why exactly was he damaged so severely by an event that seems hardly, by today's standards of terror and inhumanity, hardly noteworthy. That may be your point, but it doesn't work dramatically. In short, the aetiology of Joseph's traumatic disorder remains too shrouded, too hidden from us, and becomes another reason why we lose interest in him. Which brings us to Alice. It is hard to understand why she is interested in Joseph in the first place (of course ,companionship is preferable to loneliness [sic]), what she sees in him beyond some physical attraction. The conversation between the two of them is minimal, only about the prosaic and the mundane. Alice's curiosity about Joseph's peculiar behavior seems oddly muted, too easily deflected. Indeed, Alice's curiosity seems non-existent.

And shouldn't she be curious about say, for instance, who her father is? Does she have no curiosity about herself, her own story. I don't mean to sound like a dreary Freudian, but shouldn't she be interested in knowing who her father was, in tracking him down, in trying to create (in her mind, if not in reality) a relationship with her father. Joseph and Alice seem these two incomplete individuals, one doesn't want to look too deeply, the other can't.

At this point, AFTERWARDS refers primarily to Joseph and his coping (or failure to cope). It needs to be Alice's story as well. Without her story, one doesn't know what she sees in Joseph, why she is interested in him, or even what she wants for herself [sic] (besides her own flat). What happens after she learns about her father, for instance. As it is, even the unsentimental ending of Alice disappearing from Joseph's life, the last piece of color in his life, doesn't seem especially bleak because in some way there was never that much of a relationship between the two of them. Are you suggesting that we are guilty of turning away from people like Joseph [sic] because we don't want to be reminded that there are things in the world that can't be endured, and that we don't know how to handle that knowledge? Why does no one push or prod or confront Joseph? I didn't find his account of his failed attempt to tell a previous girlfriend especially convincing or strong. Why

wouldn't his outburst at her Grandad's been more of an occasion for some sort of confrontation, rather than one more instance of sweeping under the carpet /turning away from the reality of Joseph's dysfunctionality. Why does Alice's grandad "protect" Joseph and not tell anyone what's he done. [sic] Why can't Joseph turn around to the grandad and unleash a torrent of verbal abuse that spurs the grandad as well. Joseph is damaged, but all the characters around him also seem damaged or unresolved about their own desires or self-knowledge, so that one begins to wonder why all of them seem paralyzed... I am trying to be helpful and to understand your intent. I may be far off base. So, once you've digested this, let's talk. Hope you are well. Fondly, dan¹⁰

Dan is a courteous and sensitive editor, but this did indeed take some digesting. However, responding to his questions allowed me to clarify many aspects of the novel. I disagreed with Dan, for example, about the need for a verbal confrontation, but I agreed with him about Alice needing to be explored further, particularly her relationship with her father. In the first draft, his absence provided the reason for Alice to be so close to her grandparents, as they helped her mother to bring her up. When Joseph asked her, quite early on, whether she ever missed having a Dad, Alice replied 'not as often as you might think', and with that the subject of her

10 Email from Dan Frank to Rachel Seiffert, 31st May 2005. See also Appendix Four

father was laid to rest. Dan was right: in the first draft, Joseph's reticence seemed to have infected Alice too.

By the time I received his comments, I had had about a month away from the book. This, along with Dan's 'outside eye' on the manuscript, provided some very valuable distance. I took another week to re-read and to think, and then replied. Appendix Four contains the text of Dan's email with my responses inserted, and further emails between Dan, Toby and me, reflecting on this first draft.

Having clarified many aspects of the book to myself, of course I had to do the real work of transferring this clarity to the page. Appendix Five details the progress of one scene through this process. David and Joseph already had their encounter in the hallway in the first draft, and it already resulted in the paint flinging which appears in the final version too. However, the scene was far too brief to allow for any dramatic tension to build, or to be released. My first attempt to improve it put all the drama into the dialogue, and dissipated it in the process. However, I thought I had done some good work in extending the scene, and in the third reworking, pulled back the dialogue, and put the tension back into the subtext, into actions and eyes, both encountered and avoided.

Refinements

Ravi Mirchandani's approach to manuscripts is quite different from Dan Frank's. Dan writes letters or emails which summarise his thoughts and ask questions, while Ravi does detailed line-edits. His comments on the fourth

draft (October 2005) concentrated on the first third of the novel, and were mostly concerned with Alice's family, and with Joseph and Alice's early relationship. He wanted more detail on the former, and more passion between the lovers. I agreed with him, and added scenes in Yorkshire to the manuscript¹¹, and I also worked on making the sexual attraction between Joseph and Alice more apparent.

In chapter 4, for example, when Joseph stays away from Alice for a week, but can't quite understand why he's doing this, he remembers watching her walk half-naked around his flat in the morning, looking for her socks. Joseph enjoys the easy intimacy they share, the fact that Alice is unconcerned by her lack of clothing and messy hair, but I thought there was room for some desire, so I added:

The sandy red hair growing back in under her arms, that she apologised for, laughing, but that had sent him searching, unbuttoning, with her lifting and shifting and helping him find the same shade curling over the top of her knickers.¹²

Also, in chapter five, when they spend a weekend together down at the coast, Joseph remembers this time as being:

Some of the best days they'd had together. Nothing

11 Seiffert (2007) see for example chapter 3, where Alice, her Mum and Gran discuss her father.

12 Seiffert (2007) p. 56

complicated about them.¹³

In the fourth draft, he left it at that, but again I thought this scene might profit from some passion, so I added:

Her arms and legs all rough and cold from the sea and wrapped around him. Sitting stomach to spine on the sand, her warm mouth against his shoulder blades, talking and shivering, smiling and sweet-talking him back into the freezing water with her. He liked to remember that feeling, of having her pressed up against him and laughing.¹⁴

At this point, however, my working time ran out, as my daughter was born, and so I took another break from writing, this time for around seven months. In September 2006, the manuscript was copy edited, and I checked through the suggested changes. Reading over the manuscript convinced me that Ravi's comments from the previous winter – about Joseph and Alice – still stood. Their relationship was warmer in my head than on the page, so I concentrated on refining this in the weeks before publication.

In Appendix Seven, I have included two versions of a scene in chapter two, when Joseph pays Alice an unexpected visit and finds her in the bath: a key scene in their love story, and one of the areas which I tried to warm up. The first version is taken from the proof, the second from the hardcover. The

13 Seiffert (2007), p.93

14 Seiffert (2007)p. 93

word 'awkward' comes up often in 'Afterwards', and is perhaps the best collective description of the various relationships in the novel. I am fond of the word, and have indeed used it at the end of the scene in question

They smiled at one another then, their wet faces, awkward limbs pressed against each other, held by the high sides of the bath.¹⁵

However, I felt there was too much awkwardness between Alice and Joseph in this scene. I had often attempted to change the tone before, unsuccessfully, and I was reluctant for the book to go to press before I was satisfied. At this time, I re-read some chapters of *Zugzwang*, Ronan Bennett's novel, serialised in *The Observer* early in 2006, and was taken with the description of an older man made unexpectedly shy by a younger woman.

I had spotted Anna as I neared St Isaac's. She was walking quickly, as though concerned about lateness, though we were both slightly early. [...] She stopped as I climbed out of the Renault to open the passenger door. I felt her eyes on me as I helped her into the car and placed a rug on her lap. She took hold of my hand.

It was preposterous that at my age I should have felt shy but there is no other way to put it. I felt shy under the

15 Seiffert (2007) p. 32

frankness of her gaze. I felt disadvantaged - by her beauty, by my lack of the same. By the years that separated us.¹⁶

'Shy' seemed to me a far more hopeful word than 'awkward', and as previously indicated, hope for the future was essential at this stage of Alice and Joseph's love, so I began to rebuild the scene around that word. In the proof version, they smile at each other across the rim of the bath, and Alice's response is to shift down in the water, to make herself less visible to Joseph. I liked the smile, the shared moment, and the strangeness of the rim of the bath between them, but Alice's response closed the moment off too abruptly. She is naked, he is clothed, and she didn't know he was coming round, so she is surprised, and feels a little vulnerable, all of which is understandable, but there is a sense of distance maintained between them, and the risk is that the reader takes Alice's response - hiding herself - to be unfriendly, unwelcoming. So I cut the line, and Alice does not become so aware of her nakedness until later, as Joseph climbs into the bath with her. Here, I inserted my new keyword for the scene:

The water was loud as Alice sat up. Cooled on her back in the silence while Joseph undressed. Made her aware of the damp hair at the back of her neck and her temples. Her pale breasts, hidden now by her knees, and the sweat on the skin beneath them. It was strange to feel so shy, and Alice tried to remember the last thing Joseph had said, a

16 <http://books.guardian.co.uk/originalfiction/story/0,,1712823,00.html>
date of access 13/02/07

thread to pick up.¹⁷

In the proof, Alice seems reluctant to engage: she is 'a little too full of wine and smoke and chat', for example, and wants an evening alone. In the revised version, I have 'filled her up with wine and smoke and conversation'¹⁸, but she is not 'too full', allowing room for her to be 'curious'¹⁹ about Joseph's family. This way, her questions about them become real, are no longer simply attempts to make conversation. Alice also thinks 'how much she would like to spend the rest of the evening lying down [on the sofa] with him'²⁰. Her awkwardness comes from shyness rather than reluctance to be in (his) company, and it is clearer that she desires Joseph. He is aware of this, and teases her gently, with handfuls of water and with words, and I was pleased to get this sense of playfulness between them.

After Afterwards

(See Appendix Eight for the full text of all reviews discussed below).

It can be difficult to assess whether what you have written has succeeded. Third time around, I still hope reviews might help me decide, but again I realise that this is naïve. They can be contradictory, for one thing. Charlotte Moore, for example, writing in *The Spectator* comments:

17 Seiffert (2007)p. 28
 18 Seiffert (2007) p. 27
 19 Seiffert (2007) p. 28
 20 Seiffert (2007) p.27

This is an intelligent, responsible novel about repression and failures of communication. The portrayal of Joseph, a potentially good man who has failed to defeat his demons, is especially convincing. The trouble is that large sections of it are quite dull. Seiffert reproduces the minutiae of quotidian plans and decisions so faithfully that reading the novel is like sitting in a train and finding yourself the involuntary confidant of your garrulous fellow traveller.²¹

While Allan Massie, writing in *The Scotsman*, had some reservations about the veracity of my portrayal of ex-servicemen, but thinks I am:

very good on the ordinary, very good indeed. Some of the early chapters are comparable to the fiction of Stanley Middleton or Alan Sillitoe, high praise indeed. [...] [Seiffert] is very good indeed at evoking the feeling of life being led, and her dialogue is nicely judged. Almost all the minor scenes ring beautifully true, and the novel is consistently absorbing and enjoyable.²²

An added complication is that the bound proof was sent out to reviewers, so they were not working from the final version, with all the revisions I made in the autumn. The publicity director at William Heinemann sent out hardback copies, as soon as these were available, and followed up with phone calls, in

21 *The Spectator*, 10/02/07 p.37

22 *The Scotsman*, Saturday 20th Feb 2007, *Critique* page 15

the hope that literary editors would pass them on to reviewers. I know some worked from the hardback (*The Sunday Telegraph*, for example, and *The Sunday Times*), but many had already filed by the time the final version was available for them to read. (My revisions may, of course, have made no difference to those who had reservations about the book: the fact that the two reviews mentioned above are both positive may very well be a coincidence - especially as another very good review, this time in the *Financial Times*, was from the proof.)

I still have reviews to come when *Afterwards* is published abroad²³ However, I do feel I am beginning to draw some valuable conclusions for my next book. In reviews - not just of *Afterwards* - there are persistent adjectives used to describe my writing style: precise, unsentimental, spare, tough, lean. These are usually intended as praise, but this time round they bother me:

Perhaps the price to be paid for such a tough, unsentimental style is that some of the novel's characters **fail to come fully to life or to remain alive in one's imagination.**²⁴ [my emphasis]

Literary Review

Alice and Joseph's relationship unfolds carefully, watchfully, delicately.

The dialogue, with its lack of quotation marks, keeps the

23 Publication to follow in Germany/Austria/Switzerland, Australia/New Zealand, Canada, the United States, Spain, Denmark and Israel. Review from *The Sydney Morning Herald* included in Appendix Seven

24 *Literary Review*, February 2007, page 53.

personalities at a distance from each other - and from us. Yet the characters seem real, they do real things - but they are not so ordinary as to become boring.²⁵ [my emphasis]

Financial Times

Afterwards is a quietly ambitious book which demonstrates Seiffert's determination to probe at the raw wounds of history. But though one admires the simplicity and precision of the writing, **the extreme economy of language can leave you feeling short-changed.** [...] Seiffert has won acclaim for a style dependent on what she withholds as much as what she chooses to reveal. But **it is an increasingly fine balance**, and there are passages where the spare, enigmatic and austere tone could conversely be described as cryptic, unforthcoming and dull. **It's a means of writing which permits little scope for warmth or humour.** Perhaps a certain **emotional detachment** should be diagnosed as part of Seiffert's Syndrome as well.²⁶ [my emphasis]

When I was interviewed for *Nightwaves*²⁷, Phillip Dodd said I kept a 'respectful distance' from my characters. I think this, and the above highlighted comments bother me because this is not the effect I wish to achieve. I do feel respectful of my characters and (if I may say so) I think this is a strength in my writing. I was conscious, for example, that the effect

25 *Financial Times*, *FTmagazine*, February 17/18 2007, p.32

26 *The Guardian*, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,329725106-110738,00.html> date of access: 27/02/07

27 BBC Radio 3, 29th January 2007

of David's 'confession' on Joseph could cast the old man in a negative light: pouring out his hurt but insensitive to his interlocutor's pain. I concentrated on introducing small intimacies in the scenes between them, moments of understanding such as the shared joke in chapter five:

Joseph couldn't decide if he was checking his credentials as a decorator, or as the right kind of boyfriend for his granddaughter. He asked David at one point:

– Do I pass muster, then?

And he was glad when the old man took it well.

– You'll do, I'm sure.

A quick smile and nod. Joseph thought he was alright, a bit dry maybe, but at least he had a sense of humour.²⁸

Out of moments like these came the idea that David should keep his counsel when questioned by Alice and Sarah about what happened between him and Joseph in the hallway. I never wanted David to appear selfish in relation to Joseph, so I hoped that any thoughtlessness on his part would be redeemed by his discretion.

As I hope the above suggests, I don't feel distant from my characters. But again, what is in my head may not be conveyed so effectively on the page, so I intend to avoid creating the impression of emotional distance in my new novel. *Afterwards* was in large part about reserve, and the characters were tight-lipped for good reason: Joseph and David because of the difficulty of

talking to civilians, and the difficult nature of their memories, and Alice because her experience with her father has taught her that intimacy cannot be forced upon another person. This will not be the case with the next book as the subject matter is entirely different. *Gwai Lo* is to be about a Chinese-Glaswegian girl and her friendship with a young, white catburglar. The narrative will take place over the course of a summer, during which the teenage Lily has been sent to stay with her Grandfather, so she won't miss school while her parents are away in Hong Kong on business. Her Grandfather is a landlord on Garnethill (historically the heart of Glasgow's small but long-standing Chinese community). Most of his tenants are elderly and of Chinese origin, and boring to Lily. The recently arrived Billy is an exception, because of his youth and white skin, but also because of his nocturnal habits. A skilful thief, he's been stealing from the other tenants for weeks, and Lily rumbles him, but instead of handing him over to her Grandfather or the police, she blackmails him into teaching her how to burgle: it's her form of teenage rebellion, kicking against the insularity of the community, and against her parents for leaving her there. There is plenty of room for adventure here, and for garrulous Glasgow: the warmth and humour which some have found lacking in *Afterwards*. However, since brevity and precision has been a hallmark of my style (and since the latter in particular is something I value) I think I should be careful not to finish the writing too soon. Previously – with *The Dark Room* and *Field Study* - I had always pared back during redrafting. *Afterwards* was a new experience, as I added to every new draft, even after the proof stage. The characters, and particularly their feelings about one another took time to evolve, David's respectful silence about Joseph's outburst being a case in point: it had not

always been clear to me that David would not tell, it was the process of adding small moments between the two men, the slow build of a friendship, however uneasy, which laid the ground for this idea. *Gwai Lo* already exists in (unpublished) short story form: eight pages I wrote in 1999, while taking a break from *The Dark Room*. I decided not to include it in *Field Study*, because it never quite felt finished, hence the notion to try it as a novel. Billy, for example, is more of a cipher than a character in the short story: the stranger who intrudes on a closed world, and in so doing reveals Lily to herself. Where Billy comes from and why he steals (so well) is one of the first elements I am curious to explore. Expanding upon what is already there is the starting point of this new book, then, and I hope the process begun with *Afterwards* can be pushed further with *Gwai Lo*, and be productive for the development of my writing style, too. Even if I have to start cutting back again before the hardback goes to the printers.

Appendix One

Rachel Seiffert PhD in progress

June 2003

Notes on work completed so far, and intentions/changes etc.

Just under 50,000 words submitted, split into three sections. The first deals with Joseph and his deteriorating mental state after leaving the army: what happened while he was in Northern Ireland and how he feels about it since. The second concentrates on Alice, the loss of her grandmother, the state of her relationship with her grandfather (David), her working life, and the friendship she develops with Joseph. The final section covers the relationship between Joseph and David, and Alice's reassessment of her ideas about her grandfather.

While I am not sure this is complete enough to call a first draft, I feel the novel has a shape now which I can work with on my return. I also feel that I have written enough to identify three crucial problem areas, linked to the three main characters, and have made a start at the necessary changes. The submitted work therefore contains contradictions which may be puzzling for the reader (perhaps particularly in part two, where I have made changes to Alice's character at the beginning, but the scenes which come after Joseph's discharge have not yet been revised), and some scenes in part three are still largely in note form.

What follows is an assessment of these problems and an outline of their potential solutions.

Joseph: He is too reticent. On the one hand, I am keen to keep his difficulty articulating his experiences, as the merits of talking/confession are a key question in this novel. (The function of guilt and forgiveness in the process of accommodating uncomfortable facts/events: who can forgive, does guilt simply assuage without altering anything, how else can we live with transgressions of our sense of moral order?)

However, at the moment Joseph is too reluctant to tell. It is as if he has come to the conclusion that talking is pointless without ever trying it. While this may well be the position he adopts at the end after hearing David's story/confession, it is not particularly useful to me to start with him like this as it makes it difficult to create relationships for him with Alice and David. It also does not allow me to explore the merits of telling/not telling particularly fruitfully.

I think the key to this may be how close he is in time to the events which trouble him. As it stands, he has only been out of the army a couple of years when the novel starts. I have decided to try changing the timespan of the novel slightly. It currently takes place over a year in the mid 1990s, with Joseph having served in his early twenties and the shooting taking place late in 1992. I will shift the action of the novel to the late 1990s (perhaps also allowing for some of the peace process to impinge upon the action, Good Friday agreement, optimism and then stagnation) and while the incident will still take place in late 1992, Joseph will have been a couple of years younger (19/20) when it happens. His problems (inability to hold down jobs, maintain relationships, leading him to 'go missing' increasingly often) will therefore have stretched over a number of years, and will cause him to see that he

has to try something (i.e. perhaps talking). This way, there is more of an imperative for Joseph to articulate, at least for himself, what he feels about what he has done.

Alice: I had drawn her as a serious professional who got over-involved in her work as a way of compensating for her grandmother's death, of coping with bereavement. She was a top-ranking ward nurse with almost a decade's experience to draw on and the respect of the rest of the staff. The problem with this strategy is that when she comes to befriending Joseph, I required her to drop this consummate professional, dedicated psychiatric nurse persona, since I don't really want the book to be about problems of diagnosing and treating PTSD. Rather it is to focus on Joseph's ethical dilemma and how he tries to work through it with Alice and David.

As it stood, Alice's character also did not have anywhere particularly convincing to go, too much her job, not enough a person somehow. Would she be able to just drop her nursing head? What does she get out of befriending Joseph? Having her fall in love with him (even if unconsummated/unrequited) feels like an imposed plot element rather than credible character development.

Changes (in progress). Alice is a staff nurse now (i.e. low ranking ward nurse), valued by her superior on the ward and by her colleagues, but has had doubts about her abilities/wish to be a nurse for a while. These are based mainly on whether she is really able to help people, frustration with

the limited contact offered by general ward psychiatry. She has tried a few jobs/career paths (a bone of contention between her and David, she thinks he sees it as a lack of application/discipline), and is disappointed as much in herself as with the psychiatric health service. This sense of disappointment is compounded by her grief and her decision to take six months off feels more credible to me now, more in-keeping with someone having a crisis of confidence.

In this context, her friendship with Joseph also makes more sense. Her disillusionment with ward nursing means she is more open to a different kind of carer/dependent relationship: she is more able to relate to him on a personal, more intimate level, less bound by the strictures of professionalism. Her crisis of confidence in her own abilities also means that helping Joseph, seeing tangible improvements in the first weeks/months would be gratifying for her personally. The above factors combined with the neediness of grief makes her getting confused about Joseph, falling in love with him, more plausible, indeed understandable.

Making her a more vulnerable character also leaves her relationship to David, or her attitude to him, more open to question. The previous Alice was too fixed as a professional, and also in her political/ethical attitudes. Getting her to look at her Grandfather differently felt like a quantum leap to be making. Now, I imagine this re-evaluation is triggered when she feels David replacing her as Joseph's 'helper'. She has been able to help him cope with the practical aspects of life, given him support and confidence, but because she knows too little about his underlying problem, she can't help him further

than that. David, however, because of the similarities between his and Joseph's post-service experiences, offers Joseph a way of confronting his own dilemma which Alice can't. She is not party to their conversations, of course, but sees the changes in Joseph (not all positive!) and the developing bond between the men: however uneasy this is, there is a closeness there which excludes her. This will be what makes her look at her own attitudes towards David and his military background, prompts her to ask what it is that makes her so uncomfortable. On the one hand she can't bear what his past represents, on the other she can see that it gives him a link to Joseph, and maybe a way of helping him, that she has no way of matching. And this gives me a chance to explore notions of personal responsibility in the civilian world: Alice being the outside eye, the civilian. Can we forgive the trespasses of war/conflict? Can soldiers kill and then be accepted as ethically untarnished when they are civilians again? Who is in a position to forgive? To what extent does forgiveness involve judgement? Do the different rules of peace and war make such a judgement (on a personal level at least) impossible? And (returning to the personal and the level of character again) where does this leave Alice and her feelings towards her Grandfather and Joseph? She has always presumed David to have an uncomplicated, unquestioning attitude towards his past, and has allowed herself to occupy the moral high ground. These certainties are disrupted by Joseph coming into their lives, but can she/does she want to accommodate the idea of Joseph/David having killed?

David: I have made the most changes in the last section already. I was

uneasy about how/why he starts talking to Joseph in the first place, and had written him telling his story in chronological order, starting with his days as a RAF schoolboy cadet during the war. This felt too much like plot/exposition, so I decided to start with him talking about Celia, his late wife. It feels more credible that this would be the first thing on his mind given her recent death. And given that she played a crucial role (as 'receiver' of his confessions) in his dealing with his past actions, it feels right that he should then try to 'use' Joseph in a similar way when he proves to be a good listener.

There is an uneasiness about David forcing himself on Joseph in this way which I am keen to keep, but I'm not sure is working quite as well as it could. I think this is primarily because I have not yet worked through how Joseph should react, at what point he should perhaps want to try talking himself, about his own experiences.

I need to give the historical background, explain for the reader about the state of emergency in Kenya and the role of the RAF. To avoid this coming in as exposition, I think I will spread this over a few scenes, and use it to illustrate the difficulties in Alice and David's relationship as well as having David explain things in his conversations with Joseph. Alice already gives Joseph a little background when she explains why she didn't get on with her Grandfather as a teenager, and I think spreading the information in this way will allow it to become part of the characters/story rather than just (necessary but plot-heavy) information. I am keen for the information given to be accurate, of course, but the novel is not 'about' the Kenyan emergency or the Troubles. The historical details are important but should serve to

underpin the issues of guilt/responsibility/forgiveness I wish to explore in the novel and not become its focus. Indeed, one thing Joseph and David do have in common is that neither of them were/are clear about the political role they were playing as British servicemen in both conflicts.

Appendix Two

Author's Note: A former patient attempts suicide after release: Graham has been on the ward three times, twice in Alice's care. She was the first person he entrusted with the memory of his abuse as a child. Alice is hurt by the limits of her ability to help him, and frustrated by the protocols of her profession, as they seem to get in the way of human contact. Alice and Joseph get on well on the ward, and with the Graham subplot, I hoped the ground was laid for her to overstep the crucial mark after Joseph's return to his family

Alice has been off a week and three new patients have been admitted, four others discharged: she reads over the names on the whiteboard in the ward office. She's early, waiting for her Charge Nurse. Jamie said he wanted her to check in with him before her first shift back and she flicks through her own patients' files while she's waiting, going over the covering nurses' updates. There are two cards in her pigeonhole, lilies and remembrance; some of the staff put their heads round the door as they pass, say they were sorry to hear her news and Alice smiles and thanks them. Jamie finds her reading through one of her patient's notes.

- Alright girl?

- No-one's arranged a CPN appointment for Graham.

- How did I know you were going to say that?

He sits down heavily, blinks at her with end of double-shift eyes.

- He's due to go home, though. End of next week. Graham needs to know who his community nurse will be. His appointment should have been made days ago.

- You're telling me how my ward should be run.

Jamie has his serious, teasing face on. He takes a swig of her coffee.

- You may mock, Mr Turnor, but I bet you Graham's getting anxious. Siona was covering, she should have done it.

- She'll maybe have had her reasons. What do you reckon?

Jamie smiles, but Alice knows he's telling her to be careful. Siona is a Charge Nurse too, more experienced, more senior. Jamie isn't one to pull rank, but Siona is, and Alice feels the familiar impatience with ward business rising. Politics and procedures. Back at work again. Graham's file is still open on her lap and she starts checking it over a second time.

- I haven't found anything in here about it.

Jamie pulls another patient's file off the desk and put it on top of Graham's.

- Have a check on Joseph today, would you?

- Thought he wasn't back till later.

Jamie nods, yawning.

- He requested, apparently. Sister came with him. She looks a lot like him.

Nice people.

- What happened?

- Hasn't told me yet. Maybe you could have a chat to him later? See if he'll tell you.

Alice nods, thinks Jamie is finding special tasks to keep her occupied, take her mind off things.

- I'll do that, but I'm alright you know.

- I know you are.

- It was a long time coming.

One of her Grandfather's phrases, and Alice is embarrassed to have used it.

- I know it was.

Jamie passes her coffee back to her, almost finished, and stands to go.

- Listen, Jamie, there's nothing in Graham's file, so I think I should call the CPN team today. One of them has to come and see him.

- Fine by me. Just make sure you check it with Siona when she comes on.

He makes a face and Alice smiles, glad he's not sparing her that task, couldn't bear any cotton wool today.

- You're too kind.

*

Alice finds Graham in the day room, a chessboard open on one of the coffee tables in front of him. It's stifling in there and Alice pulls a couple of the top windows open before she goes over. The morning has turned hot and still, no breeze outside to get the air inside moving. The old man is standing as usual, pacing, rattling the taken pieces in his pockets, calling to her as she crosses the room:

- There she is. I said it was your day back, I told him.

Graham points to the sofa opposite. Joseph lying down so it's difficult to tell if the game involves him. Graham smiles at Alice, and nods at Joseph who doesn't move.

- He's not himself today, this one.

Alice says hello but Joseph doesn't react, and Graham shakes his head, pulls a chair over for her to sit down.

There are patients she's grown attached to over her five years working. Fran. Morris. Craig. And Janey who self-harmed, but stopped while Alice was her primary nurse. On her own with three children and, when she got

desperate, would put cigarettes out on the insides of her thighs. Graham has been with them three times since Alice started on the ward. In his seventies but she was the first person he told about his uncle: came into his bed until Graham was out of primary school. It never fails to touch her: being trusted like that. The old man's hair is combed and neat today and he looks pleased when Alice tells him a CPN will be coming in the week.

- Tuesday lunchtime.

- I'll get myself scrubbed up then.

- You're looking very dapper this morning, Graham, if I may say so.

- You may. Went down the road yesterday. Barbers' and a wet shave.

He rubs his clean jowls, happy with the compliment, and then his eyes turn back to the chess board and Joseph. Alice is sitting on one of the easy chairs between the two men. Joseph is lying on the sofa: a long body, all knees and cheekbones, looks like he wants to be sleeping, but can't get his eyes to close. She doesn't know him as well as Jamie, but she's sure he's been better than this the past few weeks.

- It's Alice. Just thought I'd say hello.

It takes a few seconds before he smiles but it's genuine. Joseph sits up.

- You've been off.

- You have too. I was wondering how it went.

- Yeah, okay.

Alice gets another smile, briefer than the first, but still wide enough to show that gap in his teeth: eye tooth, first molar, strange in a young face, so you can't help but notice. More than one missing and quite recent, Alice thinks, because when Joseph smiles he always half-lifts one hand, as if to cover it. An involuntary gesture, still not used to the idea himself. Jamie says Joseph has a problem with fighting, but he's been homeless too and Alice prefers to think that's how he lost the teeth: less painful. Or maybe just less violent. She can't imagine him hitting, has only ever seen him being gentle. Alice knows this is naïve, worse: it shows up her tendency towards favouritism amongst the patients. Joseph is good with Graham: that's why she likes him. The old man is walking up and down between them now, eyes fixed on the chess board, but then he nods over at Joseph.

- He came back early.

- I did, yeah.

- Looks to me like he never slept last night, what do you think?

Joseph's hand comes up again and he rubs his face, embarrassed. Alice thinks how Jamie said he was nice too: she's not the only one who thinks so. Not many have the patience for Graham on the ward, and there are only one or two he'll ever play chess with. The old man always puts the board down like an invitation, but gets all agitated if the other person tries moving anything. Hit Joseph once, not hard, but enough to have him up and walking away. Worried, Alice thought, that he'd punch the old man or worse if he stayed. She remembers finding Joseph in the smoking room afterwards and

thanking him for not getting angry. She explained that Graham liked to sit with someone but still stay in control of the game, and Joseph smiled and said he could understand that. Alice looks at him now, sunk into the day room sofa: the poor bloke does look pretty rough this morning.

- It was this heat, I think. Keeping me awake. Making me slow, too.

Joseph lifts his hand, drops it onto the cushion next to him, arm loose, faintly amused, as if it doesn't belong to him. Alice thinks he's not going to say much to her with Graham there.

- See how you go, ok?

- Joseph will be going home next. After me.

Graham moves a white piece and then, immediately, a black for Joseph.

- If he wants to, yes.

Alice looks at him but can't tell what Joseph is thinking.

- You'll come and find me if you need anything?

He nods and Alice thinks she should leave him be.

Joseph has been in hospital twice now, in two different places. The first was only for a week, and he's never told Eve or anyone about it. Put himself in after he got thrown off a job, but took himself out again because he thought it was making him worse. This time it was longer. He'd be in over six weeks by the time he got out again, properly, not just for an afternoon or a weekend. Hadn't thought he'd stick it this time either, but he's come to appreciate it, the drugs that take the edge off things, the routine, and he was relieved to see the ward doors closing after he said goodbye to Eve. She looked thin and sad and Joseph was sorry. Just getting light out and she had her pyjamas on under her coat. Drove him back early because he asked her to, no fuss or bother: just got out of bed and into the van and didn't ask him to explain it.

Years this has been going on for now, off and on. How many? Joseph can't say when the change came, but he used to be different, another person. When he meets people who knew him from before, he sees them looking at him, talking to him like he's someone else, and he would ask them, only he knows how mad it would sound: what did I used to be like then?

Could hold down a job if I wanted. Could talk to women. Could work on a hangover, could go days and no drinking, no smoking, never even thinking about it. Could run, eat in the morning. Sleep at night, use the phone without getting edgy. Just did things then, didn't think about them, didn't have to. Not tired all the time. Got hungry. Could stay in the room if someone got angry. Just be somewhere and not thinking he might have to be gone

again.

Used to have a different body too. He was a skinny kid, but turned solid when he hit his teens: all shoulders and chest, his mum said, from one day to the next. None of his clothes fit him now, but it's not like his boy's body returning. More like a stranger's bones come to replace his: too thin and toothless, thirty going on forty-five. Joseph's ribs are narrow, arms too long, his hands flat and useless.

He's been worse than this, but he isn't better, and the time off the ward has taken it out of him. Joseph feels like he did the first weeks in hospital, when his body was adjusting to the medication and he ate and sat and walked and life was like a perpetual sleep, sometimes with the lights off and then with the lights on again. Out of breath at the corridor's end, he has the lungs of an old man, heavy hands and feet and tongue. It's comforting though, being back, knowing what to expect. Meals and pills and showers, the once-weekly assessment with the psychiatrist, and the patients' meetings where they argue about who's stealing the tea bags. Fag burns on everything: carpets, lino, cisterns in the toilets. More new people on the ward since he went out Friday, it feels like every day someone gets discharged and another comes to replace them. It was hard to tell the staff and patients apart at first because everyone wears civilian clothes, but Joseph knows what to check for by now, when he doesn't recognise faces: ID badges for staff, slippers for patients.

His world is the cool blue-white of strip-lights again, the too-warm feeling of underfloor heating, oily smell of the lino, the buzz and hum. There are large windows at one end of the ward, but their city dirt smear barely lets the sunlight in. Early heatwave, nearly summer, everything outside is damp and green: street full of leaves pressing up against the greasy window panes. At one end of the corridor, by the nurses' station, a single fan with a lopsided head gently shifts the warm air around.

Appendix Three

Author's Note: The following scene was cannibalised, and the bits I was happy with eventually appeared at the end of chapter two, by which time they were elements of a conversation between Joseph and Alice in the bath.

In the first hospital there hadn't been much talking. No time, just pills and sleeping and then Joseph said he was going. In this place, it feels like people sit down with him all the time: Jamie and the other nurses on the ward, and the psychiatrist who comes every week to go over his medication. Took some getting used to because Joseph couldn't tell what it was they wanted.

The first assessment with the psychiatrist was the strangest. There had been more of them in those early weeks, every other day it seemed like. They went through how he was feeling and the drugs he was on and why, and then the doctor explained that they would spend the next few sessions working out a care plan. It would be based on what he told them, and so he should let them know anything he felt was important. There was still a bit of time to fill after that: not enough to say anything but too much for no talking. Joseph had been waiting for a sign to leave the room, but when it fell quiet he thought maybe he was the one should do or say something, because the doctor wasn't moving. It was like he'd missed a question, and the doctor was waiting, so he just said the first thing he could think of.

- Left school when I was 16.

The doctor nodded, so Joseph carried on.

- Three CSEs, Maths O'Level. I was a painter and decorator for a bit, in the army four years, then painting and decorating again. Can't keep a job now, can't get one anyway.

The doctor wrote things down while he was talking, had a face on like he was interested, but Joseph didn't think this was what he was after. Not a bloody job interview, and he felt like an idiot while they went through how much he drank, how many he smoked, that he'd sometimes get hold of some weed or speed, though not as often as he used to. Building a picture is what the doctor called it, and Joseph wondered what sort of a mess it would look like when they were done.

His family filled out the next session's talking time.

- Mum, dad sister, brother-in-law, well they're not married, but you know. They've got a boy.

Dr Sanchez drew a tree with all of them on it, asked if that was right and then said it would help him to know something about them.

- My mum's a hairdresser. My dad's retired. Took redundancy a few years back.

They still live in the house Joseph grew up in, bought it from the council with his dad's severance pay. He carries a photo in his wallet and showed it to

the doctor.

- Here's a picture for you.

All four of them together, out in front of a red brick box.

- That's twenty years ago or something. Any good to you?

Eve gave it to him once, said it was so he could see who'd be missing him next time he went lost. It had pissed him off, but he'd kept the picture because he likes it. The grass is yellow, dusty, they are all wearing summer clothes, pink cheeks and squinting. Joseph's chest is bare and skinny, and you can see where the tan line stops at his neck, his upper arms, where his t-shirt would normally have been.

- It was that hot summer. Seventy-six, was it?

They're all standing by the car: new second-hand, never had one before.

- My dad just bought it, so we had to get a photo.

Eve is in her pushchair, with Joseph behind, holding on to it with his big brother's hands. Standing on the low brick wall that marked out their patch of dry grass from the neighbours'. He's smiling; camera had caught him talking, head tilting towards his Mum in the foreground, who looks so young. Same age as he is now, with two kids and an uncertain expression. Arms

folded, face somewhere between a smile and a show of defiance. Proud of them, Joseph thinks, leaning against his dad, who has one arm around her, his other hand on the new car bonnet. He's all beard and heavy glasses, so much on his face you can't get past it. He can't tell if his dad was smiling, what he was thinking, but looking at him makes Joseph remember how he lifted the square black frames when he was tired; the damp skin underneath; light sheen on his closed lids; soft creases around his eyes. He's a fat man and you can always hear him breathing. Joseph likes that noise: it's comforting.

He told Dr S about how his dad worked nights at the car plant back then, came home before they left for school so they had to be quiet about breakfast and dressing. His mum had cleaning jobs when he was little, learnt to cut hair later: after Eve started school and she had more time, could earn them a bit more money.

- Is that enough?

It made him uneasy, talking about them to the doctor. As though his Mum and Dad were part of the problem. Joseph put the picture away: nothing there to be angry or sad about, none of this was their fault.

- It's got nothing to do with them.

Dr Sanchez didn't react when Joseph raised his voice. Assured him that what he said was confidential and no judgements were being made. Ended

the session by saying he'd like to see him again tomorrow. He's always calm, the doctor: takes the wind out of your sails. Joseph thinks that must be on purpose, because Jamie's the same. It works anyway, and it doesn't make you feel like too much of a wanker, either.

Later, when Joseph was sitting in the day room, he went over the conversation again and thought he must have missed something important. But how to cover it all? You couldn't. The rest of life, the most of life which was at home. The estate, out in one of those dog-end bits of London that felt nearer the coast than the centre. Not great, but not so bad either, rows of brick-and-tile semis built after the war, roads laid out in crescents, endless pavements, kerbstones dipping for the countless driveways. Shops on one side, primary school on the other, and beyond that industrial units and the railway siding. Their house was in the middle, where the gardens backed onto each other, long grass and low fences, all sagging and ignored by the kids, their games played across and through them.

Plenty of good things to remember there: kids' things mostly. Walking to school the long way by the canal, after his paper round, football and cigarettes at the rec, Sunday dinners with everyone at his Nana's house. Auntie Jean, who wasn't really his auntie but lived next door, kids grown up and gone. She looked out for him and Eve after school if his Mum was working late, took the fence down between their bits of back lawn. His Mum and Jean used to sit together on the back step, smoking in the evenings after his dad left for work, and Joseph liked to listen, not to what they were saying so much as the sound of their talking. Lying on the rug in the front

room with the gas fire on; cool air and warm cigarette smell from the open kitchen door; half listening to his mother laughing, half watching the telly.

Seems to Joseph like he should have said all that to the doctor, hasn't told Jamie or the other nurses about it either. He's never had to talk about himself like this before, and he can never find the bits that matter.

Appendix Four

Text of Dan's email, with my responses interspersed. I sent this to Dan and Toby by email on the 5th June 2005

Dear Rachel, Toby sent *AFTERWARDS* to me. And I was delighted to read something new by you. Your writing always succeeds in weaving a spell, at once delicate and sinewy. And I was not disappointed by my experience of reading these pages. Your ability to use the smallest of detail to create affecting portraits in [sic] a great gift, as is how you manage to depict characters at once with detachment and with emotional power. There is something remarkably visual about your writing. I had no trouble imagining *Afterwards* as a film, in part because of the specificity of the story's focus: the character of Joseph. But that specificity, I realize, is also responsible for the story's limitations. Indeed, these pages have more of a feel of a film treatment than a novel

[My response: people said that about *The Dark Room* too, and the short stories. It's not always meant as a negative comment, so I'm curious. Do you think there is too much description and not enough explanation: that the characters feel like they need to be realised through a performance? I think I partly aim to spark a performance in the reader's imagination... More cues needed?.]

Let me try to explain. The unfolding drama here hinges on Joseph's inability to integrate what has happened to him, his inability to come to terms with it even in the most basic sense of recollecting exactly what did happen, even to recognize what he did or didn't do. We are given an account, through his

eyes, of what happened at the outset that is obscure because it is through his eyes. We are given an account later by his army buddy Jarvis that the reader is not sure whether to trust or not, and we see how in a variety of ways, Joseph's post traumatic syndrome/ psychological disorder is the source of his inability to deal not only with the past but anything that he encounters which triggers the recollection of that event. The problem with portraying a character with such a defining malaise is that the reader has a very tough time of getting any sense of him beyond whichever label one uses to define his problem.

[My response: I hope to give a sense that he has managed to lead quite a good, normal life for quite a few years before he meets Alice and David. He has a loving family, has built a good career for himself, I've detailed his childhood/teenage years too, plus his time in Ireland before the shooting. Are all these entirely overshadowed by his later difficulty for you? I think what I've tried to portray is a working class British man trying to live with something impossible, I don't personally see him as a basket case...]

In some way, he ceases to be of interest because of that. But also because the triggering event remains obscure/elusive for the reader. We don't know what has triggered Joseph's trauma. What exactly happened at the inspection checkpoint?

[My response: He shot someone, I hoped that much was clear. What I wanted to remain an open question is whether he was right or not to do so. Joseph's inability to clearly remember is triggered by that question, indeed I

think his trauma is too. He doesn't know whether it was the right thing to do.]

Are we to assume that Joseph feels guilty because he accidentally killed a man who may or may not have been an IRA member.

[My response: yes!]

That seems considerably less horrifying/dreadful than what Alice's Grandad witnessed.

[My response: I'm surprised you say that. Also, I wonder which event of David's you are referring to? The bombing raids he flew or the sympathetic detonation? I think what eats at David is that he killed people and didn't think about it. This is what he talks to Joseph about, tries to 'confess'. In my mind, the sympathetic detonation event he described to his wife is only one part of his 'trauma', in the same way that the other events in Ireland contribute to Joseph's. This is why I had Sarah describe it, rather than David. My point here is also that you can't tell everything to everyone. Admitting guilty feelings can be far harder than talking about something which happened in front of you, however terrible. David finds Joseph far easier to talk to than anyone in his family. That Joseph is easy to talk to also ties in to how I propose to develop Alice's character, see below. Working on this aspect of Joseph's character may also help to make him more rounded].

The disclosure of that moment has an immediacy, a force of revelation that only diminishes whatever it is that happened to Joseph

[My response: again, I am surprised. What about the incident which Joseph remembers with the ballcocks and body parts scene? Or the victim of the punishment beating he finds out on patrol? All this is part of Joseph's difficulty, as is the fact that he watched the workings of the community he was policing, felt an affinity with the teenage boys in the town.]

Or is your point that it doesn't take something truly horrendous to affect a post traumatic stress disorder, that we civilians have little idea of how hardened the military must become in order simply to accept what they are going to see, have to accept as part of their ordinary routine.

[My response: All the various events which both men are witness to/involved in contribute to their trauma. I think I will have to get other readers' feedback on whether Joseph's shooting is frightening to read or not, I rather hoped it was...]

But does that mean Joseph is simply too sensitive a soul. Why exactly was he damaged so severely by an event that seems hardly, by today's standards of terror and inhumanity, hardly noteworthy.

[My response: I am very surprised you say that, a killing is a killing, and Joseph's is close range and of debatable necessity. In all the debate about the second Iraq war, this has come up again and again: if soldiers are unsure about why they are fighting, it makes fighting a great deal harder (and the incidence of PTSD far higher). The fact that this is used to try and

stifle debate back home does not make it untrue. Plus I think I have detailed that Joseph got familiar with the community he was policing, and even his best soldier mate Townsend said he'd have been in the IRA if he'd grown up in Armagh]

That may be your point, but it doesn't work dramatically. In short, the aetiology of Joseph's traumatic disorder remains too shrouded, too hidden from us, and becomes another reason why we lose interest in him. Which brings us to Alice. It is hard to understand why she is interested in Joseph in the first place (of course ,companionship is preferable to loneliness), what she sees in him beyond some physical attraction. The conversation between the two of them is minimal, only about the prosaic and the mundane.]

[My response: They talk about their families, Alice tells him about caring for her grandmother while she is dying, these things to me are not mundane, but intimate and are what shape them, but please see also later note on how I propose to develop Alice's character, as I hope that might help].

Alice's curiosity about Joseph's peculiar behavior seems oddly muted, too easily deflected. Indeed , Alice's curiosity seems non-existent.

[My response: Yes. Her curiosity is too muted as the manuscript stands. Alice should be very interested in other people (but this should also prompt her to be sensitive about asking questions. Micha in The Dark Room was not. He was in many ways an unbearable character and I didn't want a repeat of that!) For the first half of Afterwards, while Joseph's behaviour is

not peculiar, Alice's curiosity should be concentrated on her grandfather, asking him about her grandmother and Kenya. Once Joseph starts acting strange, Alice does get curious, remembers asking him about Ireland, (while they are both reading about Drumcree in the newspapers, for example, and wonders whether what she took for a moment of revelation about the Docklands bombing was actually a diversion.) Thinking about that also prompts her to ask him why he joined the army a few scenes later. She is aware of the holes in his biography and they make her uneasy. She should come back to his week 'AWOL ' a few times in the book: she can't just dismiss it as her friend Clare suggested she should. But please see below for how I propose to develop Alice further, esp in relation to her father] .

And shouldn't she be curious about say, for instance, who her father is? Does she have no curiosity about herself, her own story. I don't mean to sound like a dreary Freudian, but shouldn't she be interested in knowing who her father was , in tracking him down, in trying to create (in her mind, if not in reality) a relationship with her father.

[My response: I agree with this. Toby made a similar point and since then I have been writing additional material to weave into the early part of the book. It is to come where Alice is telling Joseph about herself, and during the dinner with her flatmates, just before Joseph stops calling her for a week. Alice's mother never kept her father a secret from her, always kept hold of his parents' address, in case Alice should want to track him down. In her late twenties, shortly after she moved in with Martha, Alice initiated an exchange of letters with her father. At first, she was hopeful they might meet, but

eventually he said he didn't want to, citing his wife as a reason: he had not yet told her he had a daughter and wasn't sure how to. In response, Alice sent him a photo of herself: everyone always said she looked like her gran because she had her colouring, but she'd always been curious whether she looked like her father too. She was hoping to get a photo in return and waited, but he didn't contact her again, a painful fact which she only ever told her mother and Martha. She does tell Joseph, however, and she finds it surprisingly easy to tell him, because he is so still, and doesn't offer judgement, either of her or her father, just a sympathetic silence. Having revealed something so intimate makes it doubly painful when he doesn't call her for a week. However, unlike her father, Joseph does contact her again. Perhaps this can go some way to explain Alice's attachment to Joseph? It is also another intimate detail they share, not so mundane. Alice feels she pushed too hard with her father - pushed him away - and is reluctant to make the same mistake with Joseph, another reason for her hesitation in tackling his strange behaviour. I hope all that might help, plus see below for how this sub-plot might play out for Alice at the end.]

Joseph and Alice seem these two incomplete individuals, one doesn't want to look too deeply, the other can't. At this point, AFTERWARDS refers primarily to Joseph and his coping (or failure to cope). It needs to be Alice's story as well. Without her story, one doesn't know what sees in Joseph, why she is interested in him, or even what she wants for herself [sic] (besides her own flat). What happens after she learns about her father, for instance.

[My response: I shall be adding some more about Alice towards the end, to

extend what we learn earlier about her attempt to contact her father. As it stands, I see Alice and David as having developed a closer relationship through Joseph. David may never be able to tell Alice about Kenya, but he does start taking a more active part in her life, helping her look for flats, planning her garden. Which is David's way of being close to people, as demonstrated with Sarah: their political divisions can be set aside when talking about plants. I know many people who have such coping strategies, particularly elderly parents and adult children. I find them quite moving... However, I want to extend this closer relationship between Alice and David further by having him talk to her about her father, or rather her father's parents. David tells Alice that he and Celia went to visit them when Sarah got pregnant, to discuss what was to be done. David says he always had the impression that they regretted their son's decision to break contact. He's always wondered whether they wanted to get to know their granddaughter, and he suggests she write to them rather than her father. Alice is angry that she was never told about the meeting of her two sets of grandparents, and David admits to her that he thinks it was a mistake. This is about as honest and direct as David will ever be with Alice, and I think she knows it, is disarmed by it. Alice decides to write to her grandparents once she has moved and she feels more settled again. This is how I see Alice's Afterwards: through Joseph a closer relationship to her grandfather and because of that, the possibility of a relationship with her other grandparents, and maybe even with her father at some distant point].

As it is, even the unsentimental ending of Alice disappearing from Joseph's life, the last piece of color in his life, doesn't seem especially bleak because

in some way there was never that much of a relationship between the two of them. Are you suggesting that we are guilty of turning away from people like Joseph [sic] because we don't want to be reminded that there are things in the world that can't be endured, and that we don't know how to handle that knowledge?

[My response: Yes, and we don't allow them the space to find their own way of accommodating. My research into PTSD suggested there is no cure, just strategies of coping, and Joseph's is to forego a level of intimacy. Harsh for anyone he tries to have a relationship with and harsh for him too, but perhaps necessary. Please also see later note about Joseph's sister]

Why does no one push or prod or confront Joseph?

[My response: I'm sure you don't want me to write some sort of cathartic nonsense that bears no relation to real experience! If only he could remember properly, then he'd be ok? No! It's a moral question he faces, not what happened and in what order. Would the man have killed his mate? Was shooting him the only thing Joseph could have done? These questions cannot be answered definitively, which is precisely their difficulty. If you like, Joseph's PTSD has a moral not (just) a bloody or shocking basis.]

I didn't find his account of his failed attempt to tell a previous girlfriend especially convincing or strong.

[My response: Oh dear, that's one of my favourite scenes, because it's like an anti-confession. Why does Joseph have to tell anyone? There is no neutral ground here. We can see that through David, and how talking to his daughter and son in law for example has a political dimension which loads the situation (against David). David thinks he's found some kind of neutral ground in Joseph, maybe, but of course Joseph is a human being with a history too. Revelation can be a burden as well as a relief. And as Joseph says, it changes nothing. Having said all that, please see my next note about Joseph and how I might extend some of his reflections towards the end.]

Why wouldn't his outburst at her Grandad's been more of an occasion for some sort of confrontation, rather than one more instance of sweeping under the carpet /turning away from the reality of Joseph's dysfunctionality.

[My response: I don't think Joseph will turn away from it: the way I see him, he knows he is dysfunctional and regrets it. I shall work on clarifying this. Towards the end, he reflects on his relationship with his sister and why she's never challenged him. He thinks she couldn't bear the idea of him having killed, and wonders therefore whether she's protecting herself from uncomfortable truths rather than him. Is this clear enough? Perhaps I should extend this to having Joseph wonder what it would be like to be confronted by Alice? Perhaps he should regret not giving her that opportunity. Joseph doesn't want to end up like David - a lifetime of confessing and never feeling bad enough. No hope of resolution, so why do that to yourself and those around you? But he can also see that his silence is impossible for Alice, makes a relationship impossible, and he can see how

unfair that must feel.]

Why does Alice's grandad "protect" Joseph and not tell anyone what's he done.

[My response: Because he understands him, because he can recognise guilt when he sees it, even if he doesn't know what Joseph did to feel guilty about. Does David need to indicate this to Alice later, perhaps? I must say I cringe at this idea a little, but if you think I really am being obscure at the moment, then I should try it!]

Why can't Joseph turn around to the grandad and unleash a torrent of verbal abuse that spurs the grandad as well.

[My response: No! Too Spielberg for me, I'm afraid, and entirely un-British! Given the choice between that and an explanatory aside from David to Alice, I shall opt for the latter.]

Joseph is damaged, but all the characters around him also seem damaged or unresolved about their own desires or self-knowledge, so that one begins to wonder why all of them seem paralyzed... I am trying to be helpful and to understand your intent. I may be far off base. So, once you've digested this, let's talk. Hope you are well. Fondly, dan

From me to Toby on 6th June 2005

Hello Toby

Some overnight thoughts.

Dan suggested having a confrontation between Joseph and David, which I am still wary of, but I think I may have found a way of tackling two of Dan's questions by altering the big scene in chapter 6 when David tells Joseph about his remorse. Dan asks why Joseph's problem is never addressed head-on, and why does David protect Joseph, not tell anyone about the damage to the house etc. My suggestion is that after Joseph says 'are you done?' and before he throws the paint around, there should be a short exchange between them in which Joseph is angry and dismissive of the merits of talking and David asks him whether he has found a better way. I see this latter as a quiet but very direct question. And Joseph can't answer, so he throws the paint around. His subsequent (interior) arguments about not touching the sore part etc can therefore come back to David's question, as can his thoughts about Alice and whether he should have told her more, let himself be challenged by her.

This could tie in with my Alice changes, too. I now think her early 'confession' to Joseph about trying to establish a proper contact with her father and her feeling that she pushed him too far or too fast should end with her saying 'I've never told that to anyone before'. Not even her mum knows Alice thinks it was her fault he stopped writing. When Joseph stops calling her early in their relationship, he remembers her saying this and it's one of the reasons he makes contact again: the trust she invested in him touches him. At the

end, he remembers it again and regrets his inability to trust her in return.

So, there you are. If I could have another few weeks to make these changes, that would be great. I've also been reading two recently published books about Kenya, so a little fact checking etc will go into this new draft too. I feel pretty clear (and excited!) about what I want to do to address Dan's concerns, so if you are in agreement, I'll aim to have a second draft for both of you around the first week of July.

Love from Rachel

From Dan Frank 7th June 2005

I appreciate the thoughtfulness of your reply--and your patience in dealing with my many musings. And I wasn't serious about my final suggestion of a scene full of verbal abuse, but I do feel that there is a way to give the character of Joseph more depth, more resonance. His trauma grows out of the fact that he shot someone, but that he doesn't know whether it is the right thing to do or not. What is it that is preventing him from telling others that he shot someone? Yes, there is shame. But he was in the military after all; would his family be so disapproving that he killed someone, regardless of the circumstances [sic] going on. Can we really believe that no one in his family would not begin to wonder about his unpredictable behaviour, not be mystified --allow him continually to deflect their concern. Wouldn't his sister perhaps confide a little bit more in Alice about her incomprehension, her

frustration a little. What I am struggling with is the fact that he refuses to express his moral anguish, or that silence is the only form that anguish takes. He reminds me a bit of Melville's *Bartleby*. How do you make Joseph's [sic] silence, his invisible torment something the reader can find compelling; His silence in effect become the way of condemning himself to a life of isolation, of cutting himself off from life--as someone who in effect has judged himself guilty and does not deserve to be part of life. Is this your intent? I do feel that David may be some sort of dramatic key --a character who could help the reader better understand Joseph. Best, dan .

From me to Dan Frank 7th June 2005

Dear Dan

Indeed, I am working on a scene with Alice and Eve, which I hope might explain Eve's attitude. I think she presumes he has done something 'in the line of duty', and were his reaction less extreme, she would not be frightened by that idea. She's maybe less afraid of what her brother has done than what it's done to him. Also, he has been fine for a few years before he meets Alice: do you think I need to emphasise this more? His family thought he'd found a way to deal with what he had seen or done. I get the feeling you see Joseph as strange, whereas I'd prefer the reader to see him as a nice person who starts behaving strangely (again).

Also, I'd like your response to one question, if possible: Joseph is not silent with the reader, as I have detailed his memories and thoughts - not clearly enough yet towards the end, of course - but I wonder why you feel he needs

to speak to another character?

With best wishes

Rachel

From Dan Frank 10 June 2005

Dear Rachel-- In the interim, I have given this more thought and don't feel that Joseph needs to speak to another character; I understand that his silence is at once an expression of the pain of his incomprehension of what he's done as well as in some sense his judgment upon himself. But I am more and more convinced that you need to do more with Alice--she remains too passive, too incurious, and even the new material that you are thinking of adding regarding her search for her father will be frustrating to the reader. Her father pushing away will be paralleled then by Joseph's [sic] pushing her away. Why can't Alice be more like Misha [sic]. The reader needs to see how her intersection with Joseph changes her. I want "AFTERWARDS" to be dual-edged, referring not only to Joseph, but to Alice as well. Can't she be more aware of how much is never spoken both in the house where she grew up, and now with Joseph [sic], and can't she push against this?

Over the summer, I redrafted three times, and then sent what was by then the fourth draft of Afterwards to Dan Frank.

From Dan Frank 3rd October 2005

Rachel--What you have done is simply fantastic. You have taken Alice and Joseph, and given each of them emotional complexity and nuance that makes their stories intensely moving - you have created two characters whose lives are ordinary and familiar but by the sheer power of your sympathy, you succeed in articulating the expectations each carries, the anguish each struggles with, the happiness, each longs for, the self awareness that they try to hold onto and create for themselves, their efforts to protect themselves when their desires make them vulnerable. You have found a way to give voice to what would otherwise (and had previously in the earlier draft) had been mute. Thank you, dan

After this came the line edit with Ravi Mirchandani, and the refinements to Joseph and Alice's relationship, as detailed in the Afterword and Appendix Seven.

Appendix Five

Author's Note: The aftermath of David's 'confession' to Joseph in Draft 1

The old man stayed where he was, but Joseph knew he'd finished. Still sitting on the stairs, hands folded in his lap, shoulders curled around him. He looked small and old and it made Joseph angry. After what felt like a long time, he said:

- Is that you done now?

It came out quiet and cold, and the old man looked up at him.

- Because I'll get on with my work if you are.

His pale eyes were hurt behind his glasses. Joseph hadn't come here to be cruel to him, but it was like he couldn't stop himself. Pot of undercoat by his feet, he opened it, and stirred the paint. Calm and deliberate, only that's not how he felt. There were two more pots over by the door, but he couldn't see the brushes now. Brought them in from the van this morning, and they were still at the other end of the hallway where he'd started. The old man stood up and walked past him: into the kitchen first and then out into his garden.

Joseph saw it happen, even before he'd started. Paint hurled across walls and banisters. Undercoat, heavy and stinking. Thick, oily mess of it under his shoes, slipping on the dustsheets. The floor turned slick and grey and he was already looking for the next tin to throw. Something else, anything to

create more damage, and wherever he moved Joseph left marks: footprints, palms and fingers coated, paint oozing up his arms. Last pot he got through a window, smashed. Top of the door all spikes of glass. Dripping white, he couldn't see through any of it now except the hole: above head height and showing autumn sky, outside air filling the hallway. The old man must have heard but he never came. Joseph stood in the doorway with the shock of what he'd done. Flung across the floor and the windows and seeping into the carpet.

Author's note: The aftermath of David's 'confession' to Joseph, reworked in response to Dan Frank's comments

[...]

The old man stayed where he was, but Joseph knew he'd finished. Pot of undercoat by his feet, he opened it, and stirred the paint. Calm and deliberate, only that's not how he felt. There were two more pots over by the door, but he couldn't see the brushes now. Brought them in from the van this morning, must be still at the other end of the hall, where he'd started. He'd have to walk past the old man to get them, but then he'd be the first to move, disturb the quiet in the hallway, so he waited. David was still sitting on the stairs, hands folded in his lap, shoulders curled around him. He looked small and old and it made Joseph angry.

- Is that you done now?

It came out quiet and cold, and the old man looked up at him.

- Because I'll get on with my work if you are.

His pale eyes were hurt behind his glasses. Joseph hadn't come here to be cruel to him, but it was like he couldn't stop himself. It turned his stomach.

- What are you telling me all this for?

He wasn't shouting. Trying hard not to, but his voice was loud, and the old man was only a few feet away from him.

- You want me to say it's all right or something?

David blinked.

- Doesn't matter. No harm done. Long time ago now.

- No.

- What then?

The old man sat there watching him.

- What the fuck do you want me to say?

He wasn't saying anything, just looking at Joseph, like he was thinking. He used to talk about it with his wife, that's what the old man told him. Joseph

thought about them both, sitting here in this house, all those years and years of talking, talking and trying to work it out. Couldn't see what it amounted to.

- You feel bad about what you've done. My heart bleeds. I believe you. So you can stop now, can't you? Let me get on.

But Joseph couldn't move. Thinking about Alice: all the questions she asked the old man, and him too now. That's what she wanted, or thought she did maybe: for him to pour it all out like that, every last guilty drop. Prove it to me, just how sorry you are. Should have asked her gran, the old girl could have told her: there's no end to it, it's just self-pity, and it just goes on and on.

The old man said:

- Have you found a better way?

Joseph looked up at him. He wasn't angry. Not getting defensive. He wanted to know and he was waiting for an answer.

After what felt like a long time, the old man stood up and walked past him: into the kitchen first and then out into his garden.

Joseph saw it happen, even before he'd started. Paint hurled across walls and bannisters. Undercoat, heavy and stinking. Thick, oily mess of it under

his shoes, slipping on the dustsheets. The floor turned slick and grey and he was already looking for the next tin to throw. Something else, anything to create more damage, and wherever he moved Joseph left marks: footprints, palms and fingers coated, paint oozing up his arms. Last pot he got through a window, smashed. Top of the door all spikes of glass. Dripping white, he couldn't see through any of it now except the hole: above head height and showing autumn sky. Outside air filling the hallway.

The old man must have heard it all but he never came. Joseph stood in the doorway with the shock of what he'd done. Flung across the floor and the windows and seeping into the carpet.

Author's Note: Joseph returns to David's question a couple of chapters later:

No phone calls, no visits from Alice. Not even to shout at him, and Joseph thought she might just leave it at that: no way to get things back now, he didn't need her to explain it.

Her grandad returned the cheque he sent. Joseph knew that's what it was, soon as he saw the envelope. It'd been a pathetic thing to do really.

Pathetic gesture. But there was a letter with it: street and date written top right, kind regards at the bottom, a few polite lines between. Not necessary. The repairs were carried out quickly. In any case not substantial.

Everything downplayed: *nothing owed or due now, everything over.* The old man said Alice had given him the address, but there was no word from her

with the letter.

Can't set things right: Joseph thought that was understood. It hurt him to think about David putting his house back in order, and he didn't like to think what Alice had seen or heard when she went round there. What she'd thought of him.

Have you found a better way? Joseph couldn't get rid of the old man's question. David had his wife, someone who knew, that was how he did it. But Joseph had been alright too, for years: from before he went to Portugal, up until now. *Just this past few months.* Too many questions coming from Alice, and all the things the old man told him. Joseph thought he didn't need reminding like that: he knew what he'd done. Jarvis said it was the right thing, but that didn't matter, it was just the fact of it: the dead man was always there, didn't matter how you looked at it, and Joseph was still the one who killed him. He didn't have to go over it, not the way the old man wanted to. Never knew him while his wife was alive, but from what Alice said about her grandad, having her there and listening didn't stop him being difficult.

Maybe you can't stop that, not completely: Joseph didn't want to blame him for it. But he still couldn't understand him. Why did he want to do that to himself?

Author's note: These changes were just too obvious. They were all about creating a dramatic climax for the sake of it, rather than one which was in keeping with the characters. Altogether too much shouting. The scene made me cringe, so I was relieved when Willy hated the changes. A big NO! scribbled in the margin next to 'What the fuck do you want me to say?' and 'Have you found a better way?'. And when Joseph 'couldn't get rid of the old man's question', in the later chapter, Willy's note was 'I can' (i.e. cut it!).

The drama was missing from the first draft, the scene was all over before it had even begun, but it was too bald in the second, so over the next few drafts, I worked on pacing the aftermath more carefully, building the tension, and keeping it in the subtext. The dialogue should punctuate this tension, rather than be the place where the drama occurs. In the second version, Joseph concentrates on the paint pots, stirring them as a diversion, confused by David's unburdening, before he throws them around. I kept that and extended the scene, with emphasis on where the men are, physically, in the hallway, to increase the sense of claustrophobia before Joseph's outburst. I used David's eyes, watching Joseph, waiting, instead of words from the old man. The idea here was that the tension created is not diffused by dialogue, and should instead power Joseph's paint flinging. In the later chapter, Joseph returns to the feeling he had in the hallway, rather than the question: the scene therefore becomes about effect rather than exposition. And, I hope, there is a sense that David recognises what is going on inside the younger man. This is why he gets out of the hallway, and doesn't betray Joseph later on to his daughter and granddaughter.

The old man stayed where he was, but Joseph knew he'd finished. Pot of undercoat by his feet, he opened it and stirred the paint. Calm and deliberate, only that wasn't how he felt. There were two more pots over by the door, but he couldn't see the brushes from where he was sitting. Brought them in from the van this morning, must be still at the other end of the hall, where he'd started. He'd have to walk past the old man to get them, but then he'd be the first to move, disturb the quiet in the hallway, so he waited.

Minutes had gone by already. David was still sitting on the stairs, hands folded in his lap, shoulders curled around him. He looked small and old, and it made Joseph angry.

Is that you done now?

It came out cold, and the old man looked up at him.

Because I'll get on with my work if you are.

His pale eyes were hurt behind his glasses. Joseph hadn't come here to be cruel to him, but it was like he couldn't stop himself. It turned his stomach. He hadn't been shouting, but his voice was loud, and the old man was only a few feet away from him. David blinked, but he didn't say anything, just sat there watching him. Looking at Joseph, like he was thinking. He used to talk about it with his wife, that's what the old man had told him. Joseph pictured them both, sitting here in these rooms, years and years of talking and trying to work it out. Couldn't see what it amounted to.

You feel bad about what you've done. My heart bleeds. I believe you. So you can let me get on.

The brushes were in the porch, but Joseph couldn't move. Not with those eyes watching him like that. All upset and waiting, like they were expecting something from him.

After what felt like a long time, the old man stood up and walked past him: into the kitchen first and then out into his garden.

Joseph saw it happen, even before he'd started. Paint hurled across walls and banisters. Undercoat, heavy and stinking. Thick, oily mess of it under his shoes, slipping on the dustsheets. The floor turned slick and grey and he was already looking for the next tin to throw. Something else, anything to create more damage, and wherever he moved Joseph left marks: footprints, palms and fingers coated, paint oozing up his arms. Last pot he got through a window, smashed it. The top of the door, all spikes of glass. Dripping white, he couldn't see any of it now except the hole: above head height and showing autumn sky.

The old man must have heard it but he never came back. Joseph stood at the door with the shock of what he'd done. Cold, outside air filling the hallway. Paint flung across the floor and walls and the windows and seeping into the carpet.

Appendix Six

HEINEMANN BOOKS COVER COPY**PUB DATE:** 1/9/05 **FORMAT:** Demy**EXTENT:** c224pp (tba) **DATE:** 5/11/04**AUTHOR APPROVAL RECEIVED:** No**IMPRINT:** Heinemann**SBN:** 0 434 01186 X **PRICE:** £15.99**FRONT COVER COPY****author:** Rachel Seiffert**title:** *Afterwards***shoutline/subtitle/quote:** Book-prize shortlisted author of *The Dark Room***SPINE****author:** Rachel Seiffert**title:** *Afterwards***(Heinemann logo)**

FRONT FLAP COPY:

Serving in the British Army in Northern Ireland, Joseph has shot and killed a man in the course of duty. A subsequent inquiry has cleared him of any inappropriate behaviour, yet torn with guilt, he has ended up in a psychiatric hospital in London.

There he meets Sarah, a psychiatric nurse of his own age and – through her – her grandfather David, himself a veteran of the armed forces. In the '50s, David served in the RAF in Kenya, where unbeknown to his grand-daughter, he bombed Mau-Mau jungle hide-outs. In all probability – and all in the course of duty – he too has blood on his hands.

As the two men come to know each other, they reveal their stories and share their experiences – and their feelings of remorse. As soldier and pilot, both are innocent; as men, both – perhaps – are guilty. In a powerful exploration of guilt, war and the power of mankind's greatest – yet all too frequently broken – taboo, 'Thou shalt not kill', Rachel Seiffert delivers on the remarkable promise of *The Dark Room* and *Field Study*.

BACK COVER COPY

Praise for Rachel Seiffert:

Field Study

'Vast themes of war and kinship, grief and terror, love and trust. This is the short story at its best.' *Sunday Times*

'This book is so good that even a positive review seems inadequate; the fairest thing to say would be "read it"... Not even the achievement of *The Dark Room*, its maturity and courage, will quite prepare the reader for the subtle art at work throughout these stories.' *Irish Times*

'Seiffert is a writer of great delicacy and toughness... But there's nothing frail about *Field Study*, which is immensely strong and proves in itself the happiest of outcomes - good story begetting good story after good story.'
Guardian

'What might be the purpose of these studies? A desire to understand how we are, and endure, on the earth. Seiffert's calm and careful consideration of such questions yields much, both beautiful and true.' *Time Out*

'A magnificent collection: striking, moving, and deeply thought-provoking'
Financial Times

The Dark Room

'Astonishingly accomplished... A disturbing, original novel from a new writer of considerable power and talent' *Mail on Sunday*

'Seiffert's powerful book resonates with hope, humanity and understanding. It should be on everyone's reading lists.' *Sunday Times*

'Shatters our preconceptions... Seiffert shows us a nation stunned and grieving, unable to vocalise its grief... The novel's relativism is one of its greatest strengths... Yet this book is not without a redemptive quality. It shatters prejudices about 'evil', suggesting that it is harder to define and attribute than you might think and perhaps impossible to atone for.' *Observer*

'A startlingly powerful debut by a young writer who deserves praise and prizes in abundance for a remarkable achievement... so compelling and so sympathetically handled that I felt engaged, page after page... Not to be missed' *Daily Mail*

'This extraordinary novel is suffused with pain... An important book... a powerful commentary on the moral issues of the last century' *Sunday Express*

BACK FLAP COPY:

The daughter of an Australian father and a German mother, Rachel Seiffert was born in Oxford [sic] and lives in London. She is the author the Booker-shortlisted novel *The Dark Room* and an acclaimed collection of short stories, *Field Study*.

Appendix Seven

Author's Note: This is a section taken from the end of chapter 2 in the proof.

Keyword 'awkward':

Joseph hadn't said a great deal about his family yet. When he did, a few evenings later, Alice felt as though he were returning a compliment. He'd been at his sister's, and she lived not far from Alice, so he came round on his way home. Alice was in the bath when she heard the buzzer go under the noise of the taps. Martha was on her way out, and called down the hail that she would get it. Alice turned the water off and listened to the conversation in the hallway.

- Is she busy?

That was Joseph. Another first: an unannounced visit.

- I'll be out in a second.

Alice's voice was loud against the tiles. The talking continued in the hallway, and she looked around her for a towel, but didn't move to get it. She'd been out late two nights in a row, catching up with friends she'd not seen while gran was ill. Both were good nights, but Alice felt a little too full of wine and smoke and chat somehow. It was just after nine, but bath and bed had been her only evening plans. She listened again, could hear Martha in and out of the living room, her bedroom, looking for her keys or her bag. Alice couldn't hear Joseph, thought he must be in the kitchen or on the sofa, but then he put his head round the door.

- Just here on the off-chance. I can get lost again.

Alice hadn't realised it was ajar. She looked up at him: half in, half out of the room.

- Don't be silly.

- Don't get out then.

Alice heard Martha call goodbye and the front door falling shut, and then Joseph sat down. On the floor, his back against the radiator, forearms resting on his knees. Left alone, they smiled at each other across the rim of the bath. Alice shifted down a little in the water. He'd spent the afternoon with his family, she'd heard him telling Martha, and so she asked him about them, aware of the damp hair on the back of her neck and at her temples, her pale breasts above the water, and the sweat on the skin beneath them.

- Mum and Dad, Eve and Arthur, my sister and brother-in-law. Well, they're not married but you know. Their boy just turned three. Ben. We blew out some candles for him today.

Alice had opened the window earlier, it was the first warm evening of the year, and a few doors down someone had done the same, pushed their speakers round to face the street. She thought about standing up, the towel, getting out, but then Joseph said:

- Any room in there for me?

The water was loud as Alice sat up. Cooled on her back in the silence while Joseph undressed. She tried to remember the last thing he'd said, a thread to pick up, felt the warm bath rise around her hips as Joseph climbed in to sit behind her, legs on either side of hers. Water slopped down the overflow, outside there were summer noises: thudding bass and people talking, intermittent cars. It was her turn in the conversation, Alice was certain. Seconds passed and then she felt his hand resting between her shoulder blades, his fingertips checking. She leant back a little then, against his chest and Joseph rested his chin on the top of her head a moment before he started talking.

- My mum's a hairdresser. My dad's retired, he took redundancy a few years back.

He let her settle between his legs, told her that his parents still lived in the house he grew up in, bought it from the council with his dad's severance pay. Joseph carried a photo in his wallet. Alice had caught sight of it before, when he was paying for drinks or cabs, and she'd wondered about it, who it was of. His jeans were on the mat, in easy reach, and he folded his wallet open with wet hands to show her: a family of four, out in front of a red brick box.

- That was thirty years ago or something. Will be soon.

Author's Note: What follows is the same section, but from the hardback this time. Keyword 'shy':

Joseph hadn't said a great deal about his family yet. When he did, a few evenings later, Alice felt as though he were returning a compliment. He'd been at his sister's, and she lived not far from Alice, so he came round on his way home. Alice was in the bath when she heard the buzzer go under the noise of the taps. Martha was on her way out, and called down the hall that she would get it. Alice turned the water off and listened to the exchange in the hallway.

- Is she busy?

That was Joseph. Another first: an unannounced visit.

- I'll be out in a second.

Alice's voice was loud against the tiles. The talking continued in the hallway, and she looked around her for a towel, but didn't move to get it yet. She'd been out late two nights in a row, catching up with friends she'd not seen while gran was ill. Both were good nights, and they'd filled her up with wine and smoke and conversation. It wasn't long after nine, but bath and bed had been her only evening plans. She listened again, still lying in the warm water. Could hear Martha in and out of the living room, her bedroom,

looking for her keys or her bag. Alice couldn't hear Joseph, thought he must be in the kitchen or on the sofa, and she thought how much she'd like to spend the rest of the evening lying down there with him, but then he put his head round the door.

- Just here on the off-chance. I can get lost again.

Alice hadn't realised it was ajar. She looked up at him: half in, half out of the room.

- Don't be silly.

- Don't get out then.

Alice heard Martha call goodbye and the front door closing, and then Joseph sat down. On the floor, his back against the radiator, forearms resting on his knees. Left alone, they smiled at each other across the rim of the bath.

Alice had opened the window earlier, it was the first warm evening of the year, and a few doors down someone had done the same, pushed their speakers round to face the street. Joseph had spent the afternoon with his family, she'd heard him telling Martha, and she was curious about them, so she asked him who'd been there.

- Mum and Dad, Eve and Arthur, my sister and brother-in-law. Well, they're not married but you know.

- They've got a little boy, haven't they?

- Ben, yeah. He just turned three. We blew out some candles for him today.

She thought about standing up, the towel, getting out, but then Joseph said:

- Any room in there for me?

The water was loud as Alice sat up. Cooled on her back in the silence while Joseph undressed. Made her aware of the damp hair on the back of her neck and at her temples. Her pale breasts, hidden now by her knees, and the sweat on the skin beneath them. It was strange to feel so shy, and Alice tried to remember the last thing Joseph had said, a thread to pick up. Felt the warm bath rise around her thighs as he climbed in to sit behind her, legs on either side of hers. The overflow slopped and outside there were summer noises: thudding bass and people talking. It was her turn in the conversation, Alice was certain. Seconds passed and then she felt a palmful of water, poured between her shoulder blades, sliding down to her hips, joined by another, then another, and then his fingertips. It was gentle, and she stayed where she was, not wanting it to stop, until Joseph's fingers came to rest, and he rubbed his unshaven shin against her neck.

- What do you want to know then?

He was smiling. About her curiosity, maybe: how obvious it was. Or about how shy she was being.

- I don't know.

Alice leant back a little, against his chest.

- You could tell me a bit about your mum and dad. Are they still working?

Joseph folded his arms around her.

- My mum's a hairdresser. My dad's retired, he took redundancy a few years back.

He let her settle between his legs, told her that his parents still lived in the house he grew up in, bought it from the council with his dad's severance pay. Joseph carried a photo in his wallet. Alice had caught sight of it before, when he was paying for drinks or cabs, and she'd wondered about it, who it was of. His jeans were on the mat, in easy reach, and he folded his wallet open with wet hands to show her: a family of four, out in front of a red brick box.

- That was thirty years ago or something. Will be soon.

[...]

Appendix Eight

Literary Review, February 2007

page 53

Reviewer: Ophelia Field

Headline: Guilt and Culpability

As if to answer those who failed to see the preoccupations of her Booker Prize-nominated first novel, *The Dark Room*, as universal, rather than specifically German, Rachel Seiffert has returned to the same themes - culpability, guilt and accountability - in a second novel, set largely in modern Britain.

The novel tells the love story of an ordinary young couple, Alice and Joseph, who discover parallels between themselves and Alice's late grandmother and recently widowed grandfather, David. Joseph is traumatised by his experiences as a soldier in Northern Ireland during the final years of the Troubles, while David remains haunted by his part in the Emergency in colonial Kenya during the 1950s. As a result, the women who love these two men must tread the perimeters of conversational territory with caution, in case a buried memory turns out to be a landmine.

Seiffert's novel is structurally brilliant. The slow-moving first half forces the reader into the position of a wife or girlfriend waiting and gradually guessing at the thoughts and feelings of men returned home from wars. The last chapters are therefore powered by stored energy. Yet both Joseph's and David's 'secrets' are laid out for us at the beginning, which demonstrates that what we as readers really crave, like the heroine Alice, are not the facts so much as emotionally satisfying scenes of confession and catharsis ('Cry long enough and loud enough and you'll be a better person for it?' Joseph

wonders). Together with Alice, the reader shares and then loses a simple, feminine faith that talking will solve everything.

Seiffert never suggests that the horrors of British imperialism are equivalent to Nazi horrors, but her novels point out certain similarities: the impossibility of atonement, the legacies passed down generations, and the deceptive distances between the places where horror happens and the places where others live in ignorantly blissful safety. *Afterwards* may not have quite the dramatic scale and pain of *The Dark Room*, but it is just as accurate at describing how a nation can know and yet not know its own history - in this case the more ambivalent matter of twentieth century British colonial and Irish history.

This is not, however, a historical novel; its contemporary relevance to the soldiers returning home psychologically scarred from Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere is implicit throughout. Even David's memories of being a pilot in Kenya suggest something about the inescapability of personal responsibility in the context of modern, technological warfare. Anti-war, civilian views of the army as an institution are shown as condescending, though not fundamentally incorrect. What is revealed as incorrect, or at least naive, is thinking that the only big question for every individual involved in a political conflict is which side they once stood or now stand on. As Joseph's sister puts it: 'He was in the army. Chances are, he's done something or seen something done. What kind of a person comes away from that with peace of mind?'

Once again, Seiffert has performed the remarkable feat of writing about the suffering of perpetrators in such a way as to take nothing away from their victims' greater suffering. It is achieved by prose that, at its best, can be as

precise and searing as JM Coetzee's. Perhaps the price to be paid for such a tough, unsentimental style is that some of the novel's characters fail to come fully to life or to remain alive in one's imagination. This might be expected from the two central male characters - indeed one admires Seiffert's bravery in putting such chronic reticence and coldness at the heart of her novel - but somehow the details and subplots surrounding the other, mostly female characters seem both superfluous and inadequate. Alice's nervous relationship with her absent father may explain her behaviour, but does little beyond that. These are minor criticisms, however, of a novel that is a wonderfully different yet consistent 'afterwards' to *The Dark Room*, and which confirms Rachel Seiffert as one of the most intelligent and ethical writers of her generation.

The Economist

February 3, 2007

SECTION: BOOKS & ART

RACHEL SEIFFERT'S first novel, "The Dark Room", which was shortlisted for the Man Booker prize in 2001, told the stories of three ordinary Germans and how the second world war impinged upon their lives. In the same intelligent, understated way, her new book, "Afterwards" reaches parts that are equally if not more morally complex: the soldier's re-entry into civilian life and the toll upon the human spirit of guilt, fear, anger and silence at the shedding of blood.

Alice and Joseph are two young, hopeful Londoners. She is a nurse, he a painter and decorator. Both carry a backpack of emotional baggage. Alice's absent father casts a shadow over her life, while the grandmother who helped raise her has recently died.

Joseph seems as serious as she is about their new relationship. Yet there is something withheld about him that shows itself in long silences and the occasional going AWOL. Joseph clams up when questioned about his army experiences in Northern Ireland. Whether he is unwilling or unable to speak about what happened there is unclear, but it makes Alice feel shut out. When Alice's widowed grandfather begins to open up about the months during the 1950s that he spent bombing Mau Mau insurgents hiding in Kenya's Aberdare mountains, Joseph's pent-up emotion boils over.

To use painting and decorating—stripping off wallpaper, cutting out damp skirting—as a symbol of cleansing the soul is risky. In the hands of any but the subtlest writer, this is so obvious a metaphor as to be unworkable. But Ms Seiffert has the lightest of touches. And she is as good at finding the words men use to anaesthetise themselves in the brute callousness of war as she is at navigating the tentativeness of new lovers undressing for the first time.

Readers who wonder why writers as talented as Martin Amis and the 2006 Man Booker prize-winner, Kiran Desai, seem to flinch from writing about their own times should study Ms Seiffert. There is nothing easy or obvious about this work; she has lessons for us all.

The Scotsman

February 10, 2007, Saturday

Critique Edition p15

Review by ALLAN MASSIE

RACHEL SEIFFERT'S NEW NOVEL IS, fashionably, about war-guilt and post-traumatic stress. She makes this clear in an early chapter, which shows us the troubled memories of two of her principal characters. I'm uncertain whether this opening is well-judged. On the one hand it robs the novel of mystery; on the other it casts a dark shadow on the otherwise agreeably ordinary events in the first half of the book. We know there is something nasty lurking in the background. This knowledge is desirable, but I wonder if it mightn't have been imparted more subtly.

Seiffert is very good on the ordinary, very good indeed. Some of the early chapters are comparable to the fiction of Stanley Middleton or Alan Sillitoe, high praise indeed. Alice is a nurse, Joseph works as a plasterer and decorator. They meet through common friends, and soon embark on a love affair in which tenderness and affection are displayed, but in which perfect communication is made impossible by emotional reticence. Both have painful memories, dark passages in their past. Joseph is haunted by memories of his army service in Northern Ireland, especially by the incident related in the opening chapter. He can't speak of this to Alice.

She never knew her father; her unmarried mother brought her up with the help of her own parents. Alice's much-loved grandmother has recently died.

She pays dutiful visits to her grandfather, who loves her but finds expressions of affection difficult. She is still close to her mother, now married to a headmaster, Alan, and living in Yorkshire (most of the novel is set in London suburbia and the south of England). The grandfather, David, served in the RAF in Kenya during the Mau-Mau emergency. He won't talk about this, and resents questions about his past. David and Alan dislike each other.

The rhythms of everyday life and conversation are excellently captured. For at least half the book you may suppose that Alice is right in thinking that everything will turn out well if people can only bring themselves to talk honestly about their experiences. This is very much in tune with the times: let it all hang out, counselling and confession can solve anything.

But it isn't like that. Joseph and David both believe that what they have done can't be understood by anyone who hasn't had the same sort of experiences. David especially resents the idea that he will be judged by people who enjoy the luxury of innocence, which is really a sort of ignorance. Joseph suffers more obviously. For him reticence such as David displays isn't enough; the temptation to drop out is at times irresistible.

Seiffert is sympathetic to the guilt of those who have been put by authority in the position of committing what in a civilian context are very clearly crimes and may even be judged as such in a military one. As Joseph's sensible sister says, "He was in the army. Chances are, he's done something or seen something done. What kind of person comes away from that with peace of

mind?"

Seiffert understands that it's possible to do so. An ex-army mate to whom Joseph turns has an easy conscience. You've nothing to worry about, he says, you were doing your duty, just as I was. This is the common-sense view, and it's shared of course by millions who survived the great wars of the 20th century.

But, as I say, this is in a sense a fashionable novel. The underlying assumption is that soldiers returning from active service - as in Iraq and Afghanistan - must be psychologically scarred. Like the fictional Joseph and David, some are; but the ability to accept the past as past and put it behind one is actually more common. Think of those young Germans who endured the horrors of the Eastern Front and went on to be successful middle-managers for the likes of BMW and Bosch. Here, I found it easier to believe in Joseph's distress than in David's troubled mind. Also, the extent of civilian suspicion of the army as an institution seems exaggerated. But of course a novelist is entitled to write of characters who are less representative than is pretended.

So: certain reservations about what I take to be the novel's central idea. Reservations also about the relevance of Alice's search for her lost father, a search which in the context is neither very interesting nor indeed important. Nevertheless this is a very good book. Seiffert writes in an admirably precise and unsentimental style. She is very good indeed at evoking the feeling of life being led, and her dialogue is nicely judged. Almost all the minor scenes

ring beautifully true, and the novel is consistently absorbing and enjoyable. She has tackled a big theme, and done so boldly - and if I question some of her assumptions, many readers will share them, and find the novel completely satisfying. Her first novel, *The Dark Room*, saw her hailed as one of the best of her generation; this one will confirm that judgment.

The Guardian

Saturday February 24, 2007

review by Alfred Hickling

<http://books.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,329725106-110738,00.html>

date of access 27/02/07

Is there a recognised condition which signifies an overdeveloped fondness for one's grandparents? If not, perhaps it should be known as Seiffert's Syndrome. Seiffert's debut, *The Dark Room*, featured a young German teacher who is devastated by the discovery that his much-loved grandfather served as an SS officer in the war. Her second novel (which follows a story collection, *Field Study*) tells the story of Alice, a London-based nurse who is similarly preoccupied with her grandpa's military career.

Alice's grandfather, David, flew missions for the RAF in Kenya during the 1950s, but has never spoken openly about the experience. Alice dutifully calls in every fortnight to share the crossword and engage in "nothing conversations", though since the death of his wife the old man has become

increasingly taciturn and withdrawn. Yet he takes an unexpected interest in Alice's new boyfriend, Joe, a painter and decorator who also had a spell in uniform, taking a tour of duty in Northern Ireland in the 1980s that he also prefers not to talk about.

Seiffert writes in a spare, unflamboyant style well suited to the evasive nature of her characters. A former screen editor, she is adept at the art of taking things out and generally works this parsimonious approach to good advantage. Practically all the clues we need about Alice's character and appearance are contained within the brief but telling observations that she has a cyclist's oil stains round her ankles, can rewire a faulty light fitting by herself, and is typically seen "picking bits of glue off the ends of her fingers".

Yet if the rest of Alice's personality is slightly enigmatic, the two men in her life are positively opaque. Seiffert dwells on David's introspection, yet reveals little else about his persona, while the most we can infer about Joe is that he shaves irregularly, is prone to long silences, and inflicts his cropped haircut on himself. Yet it requires only a couple of sentences for Seiffert to convey an overwhelming sense of the danger and tedium endured while serving in Northern Ireland: "Punishment beating, legs twisted under, lying among the dog shit and clumps of grass. Sometimes the whole place felt like that, all quiet and cruelty."

These experiences have left Joe deeply scarred, though he characteristically chooses to downplay the effect: "mostly it was no drama, nothing that obvious". And it is the lack of obvious drama which is both the strength and

weakness of the book. With most of the significant action buried in the past, the plot is pretty much static until Joe offers to do some decorating for David, and the old man, recognising a kindred spirit, begins to open up about his military past.

In their awkward, tentative conversations, Seiffert begins to elaborate on the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. Joe is prone to incapacitating panic and sudden disappearances which can be triggered in a variety of ways: "Too much noise, too much talking, a car driven too fast past him, wrong words said on a bad day and that would be it." David's trauma becomes manifest in an Ancient Marinerish compulsion to unburden his sins - more than the younger man can bear.

Afterwards is a quietly ambitious book which demonstrates Seiffert's determination to probe at the raw wounds of history. But though one admires the simplicity and precision of the writing, the extreme economy of language can leave you feeling short-changed. There are sentences which fail to make complete sense: "Both talking like this was normal made it feel that way too." Seiffert has stated that she is wary of superfluous adjectives and adverbs: you wonder if she may have begun to distrust conjunctions as well. Seiffert has won acclaim for a style dependent on what she withholds as much as what she chooses to reveal. But it is an increasingly fine balance, and there are passages where the spare, enigmatic and austere tone could conversely be described as cryptic, unforthcoming and dull. It's a means of writing which permits little scope for warmth or humour. Perhaps a certain emotional detachment should be diagnosed as part of Seiffert's Syndrome as well.

Financial Times

Ftmagazine February 17/18 2007

page 32

Review by Rosie Blau

Novels tends to idealise memory: nostalgia, the past, the secret history of a character are all common devices for mapping the quirks and motivations of an individual and propel a story forwards.

For Rachel Seiffert, the past is something that we change as it changes us, and fiction is a chance to explore how we survive our own lives. Throughout Seiffert's writing she resists the urge to explain or justify history. She asks not whether we can erase the past - she is sure we cannot - but whether we can live with it.

The Dark Room, Seiffert's Booker-shortlisted debut, traced the legacy of Nazi guilt in Germany through three interwoven narratives of "ordinary" Germans; many stories in her collection *Field Study* probed similar themes.

Afterwards, Seiffert's superb new novel, is her most integrated and accomplished work yet. Again she considers how we live with the past - the "afterwards" of the title - but this time the action is set in 20th-century Britain.

This is the story of Alice and Joseph. She is a nurse, he a former soldier, now a painter and decorator. We watch the pair in the early days of their relationship, "When you don't know yet, whether you are in love. If you want to be, if he does." The bond between them builds, but with closeness comes new questions: how well can you ever know someone? How well is it

necessary to know them?

And from these two questions arises a third: what facts must you have in order to know yourself? Alice has never met her father, has questions about her grandfather's actions in the airforce in 1950s Kenya, and is still grieving for her grandmother, who died recently. For her, history is about answers, about who she may be.

Joseph's mission is the reverse: to forget his past. In his teens he joined the army to escape the inevitability of his future. Going to Northern Ireland felt "like something real". But on patrol one day he shoots a man in front of his wife and child. It's this "something real" that haunts him - and this novel.

Seiffert's skill is to conjure the ordinariness of those who do wrong, the way in which innocent actions - joining the army, meeting a man in a pub - escalate into crises. She evokes the realness of how memory works: the triggers, the bullet points of a narrative, the sense rather than the whole story. This is one of those books that reminds you how perverse it is that we, as readers, demand that something we know to be fiction seem both real and plausible.

There is an aura of calm about this novel, but the drama is balanced and the tension sustained. Alice and Joseph's relationship unfolds carefully, watchfully, delicately. The dialogue, with its lack of quotation marks, keeps the personalities at a distance from each other - and from us. Yet the characters seem real, they do real things - but they are not so ordinary as to become boring.

The details of a person are told in lean prose, and Seiffert is masterful at showing a scene rather than telling it to us. We see Alice by the bedside of

her dying grandmother, "Watching her grandmother's half-closed eyes, her thin fingers dance and tug along the edges of the sheet." In another, particularly assured, piece of writing, Alice reveals to Joseph her brief exchange of letters with her unknown father. The entire sequence unfolds while she fixes her bike; the dialogue constructed around the mechanics of mending an inner tube.

We wait for the secret, the moment of undoing. Instead - and in a manner more true to life - the information drips out. As we hasten towards the great revelation, we realise that the point of the book is not the dramatic climax, not what we find out, but how experience and memory has already cast its lot. The legacy of memory is not what we do to others, but what we do to ourselves.

The Spectator

February 10, 2007

Pg. 37

Review by Charlotte Moore

Alice, the result of a teenage mistake, was brought up largely by her grandparents. She's a nurse, earnest, affectionate, keen to do the right thing by everyone. Her grandmother has died, and Alice is shocked by how difficult it is to communicate with her grandfather now that this warm female conduit has gone. She tries asking about his past; he was in the RAF in Kenya in the Fifties at the time of the Mau Mau insurrection. He witnessed things there

that he's never talked about. What horrors will be unleashed when he breaks his silence?

Joseph is a decorator, good at his job, but strangely unsettled for a man of 30. He meets Alice in a pub; she likes his smile. His flat's almost unfurnished; he drifts in and out of his sister's house. Soon he drifts into Alice's. He's nice; she tells him things and he listens, but she doesn't get much information in return. There are gaps, absences, withdrawals. His sister seems to keep an anxious eye on him. Like Alice's grandfather, Joseph has an undisclosed past.

Alice knows that Joseph was in the army, in Northern Ireland. What she does not know is that he shot a man dead at a checkpoint, in front of his wife and children. Joseph evades her questions; she's getting too close. So's her grandfather. Joseph's redecorating his house for him, and the old man chooses him as a confidant. It's a disastrous mistake.

Rachel Seiffert's prose is pared down, almost colourless. There's no authorial voice. She moves her characters carefully and unobtrusively towards the climax. We watch apparently ordinary people making small moves in and out of each other's lives, but we sense the tension underneath.

This is an intelligent, responsible novel about repression and failures of communication. The portrayal of Joseph, a potentially good man who has failed to defeat his demons, is especially convincing. The trouble is that large sections of it are quite dull. Seiffert reproduces the minutiae of quotidian

plans and decisions so faithfully that reading the novel is like sitting in a train and finding yourself the involuntary confidant of your garrulous fellow traveller.

September came and Alice was allowed to take some time off again: she'd used up most of her last year's holiday looking after her gran and hadn't been away in ages. Joseph planned a week in Scotland with her for the end of the month, and Alice booked a train up to Yorkshire first, to see her mum, spend a bit of time with her out on the Dales, at her step-dad's place. Joseph was due to finish off a job for Stan, so he wouldn't be able to join them this time. He had some free days, but they were in the middle of the week, and he thought he'd spend them working at David's.

That sort of narrative is acceptable only from one's nearest and dearest, when one really does care about which days off they've got, but Seiffert doesn't manage to turn dutiful Alice into the reader's honorary nearest and dearest. About three quarters of the book is like that. The rest mainly the army bits are taut and dramatically effective, but overall this is a novel one respects rather than loves.

The Sunday Telegraph

Review by Chris Cleave

18/02/2007

In wartime a soldier must be keyed-up to kill. In its aftermath he is supposed

to become someone who talks things through, temperate and constant, capable of loving and being loved in return. It is a paradox of the veteran's rehabilitation that love requires emotional intimacy, which in turn demands he reveal aspects of himself that he - and indeed the civilian society to which he returns - may quietly be trying to forget. Such is the unforgiving interior landscape that Rachel Seiffert takes us to the heart of in *Afterwards*.

Seiffert's new novel furthers her theme of the individual caught up in conflict which she first explored in her Booker-shortlisted *The Dark Room* (2001), a triptych of unsettling perspectives on the Second World War. *Afterwards* sees Seiffert wrap her masterful, delightfully controlled prose around conflicts more recent and morally more ambiguous. We observe the dawning love between Joseph, a former squaddie who found Northern Ireland's Troubles becoming his own, and Alice, a likeable young woman whose own closest male confidant, her grandfather, is himself haunted by his years spent in the RAF flying heavy bombers against Mau Mau tribesmen. As Seiffert investigates her characters, peeling back the layers of their experience to establish cause-of-life with forensic zeal, the reader begins to hope - perhaps very much - that love will prove equal to their ghosts of memory.

At a time when British troops are once again engaged in a controversial war, and amid growing awareness of the psychological issues they face on their return, Seiffert's compassionate exposition could hardly be more timely. And yet her novel is strikingly old-fashioned. Shunning politics and hyperbole, rejecting jargon in favour of effortful narration (we are never subjected to shorthands such as "post-traumatic stress" and "flashback"), Seiffert patiently builds lives the reader can believe in and care about. And when she

does shift gear - segueing brutally from the domestic register of her opening to the bawdy, bloody life of a unit operating on the Irish border - the effect, thanks to the slow build, is devastating.

Peacetime and war have different dramas, different languages even, and it is a measure of Seiffert's skill that she brings them together into brilliantly persuasive lives that are tender, self-sacrificing, and admirable even in despair. This highly engaging novel continues to reveal itself long after it is read. It is a book, like its protagonists, that gives up its secrets slowly.

The Telegraph

Helen Brown, 17/02/2007

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.ihtml?xml=/arts/2007/02/18/bosei10.xml>

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Last week our newspapers reported the court case of 41-year-old David Bradley, the Gulf and Bosnian war veteran who walked into a police station and confessed to killing four family members with the calmness of a man "admitting the theft of a bar of chocolate". He shot his aunt, uncle and two cousins with a silenced, pump-action shotgun while "possessed by some other entity". The court heard from two psychologists, one of whom believed that he was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder after serving in Northern Ireland.

It's a tragic story, but a familiar one. Lots of men and women can't and don't cope with the fall-out from military service. Their damage often defies

the "talking cure" that friends and relatives crave (not entirely selflessly) for them. We want them to tell us about it, get it out. They don't.

This is the dilemma at the heart of Rachel Seiffert's new novel, *Afterwards*. It's a drama made all the more intense by the stark ordinariness, the "bar of chocolateness", of the characters. Alice is a nurse. She meets Joseph, a plasterer, down the pub. He works for her friend's husband. Seiffert does not stray from the Roman road of her narrative to give its subjects hobbies, or views on work or God or anything else. We get their thoughts on each other. At the beginning, Alice "was enjoying it all. The sex and the uncertainty, the finding out about someone and liking him, the phone messages on the fridge when she got home in the evening".

This is not the sort of book for those who want to know what that fridge looks like, or the kitchen in which it hums. In fact, the interior spaces of *Afterwards* are all transient in atmosphere, places being moved through, uncomfortably visited or renovated. Nothing feels settled and the only room-features regularly mentioned are windows, with curtains closed against the day, glass shockingly shattered or gazed out of. Then there are the military rooms Joseph remembers, claustrophobic from their lack of target windows.

No surprise that Seiffert is keeping close control on the amount of light she lets into the lives of her characters. She is, after all, the author of 2001's Booker-shortlisted *The Dark Room* which also dealt with the

aftermath of war, via a schoolteacher's obsession with his grandparents' Nazi past.

Grandparents also surface in *Afterwards*. Alice's grandfather fought against the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya. He won't discuss it with his young relative.

But finding her new boyfriend to be an ex-serviceman, he begins to talk, and his memories ignite Joseph's own unstable keg of guilt and confusion about his actions one winter at a checkpoint in Armagh.

You can tell Seiffert has done her research. Joseph's history and his state of mind are clear and convincing. "If it's not going to help," he thinks.

"If you're never going to change it. Why touch the sore part any more than you have to?" But Alice has shown him her sore places, her complicated family history and her bereavement. She has poured out the secrets of her heart to a man who - although ruggedly capable, calmly efficient on the outside - is in no interior state to reciprocate. Seiffert's treatment of her characters is tender but clinical.

As the tension builds, the pace of *Afterwards* punches on like a pump-action steady stream of bullets, while Joseph struggles to stay silent. It's bleakly compelling and, like *The Dark Room*, it ends sadly and without resolution, on a bright day of cold concrete. It leaves you wondering how many more Josephs the war in Iraq is creating. And how many more David Bradleys.

The Sunday Times

Review by Lucy Hughes-Hallett

11/02/2007

When a story contains a secret, there's an implied suggestion that once that secret has been disclosed the characters' problems will be solved and the readers satisfied. Discovery of the truth enables the allocation of rewards and punishments and then we're all set for the happy ending. That's how it is in romantic fiction, anyway, and in the realms of pop psychology, where the confrontation of buried trauma is supposed to clear the way for "closure".

But in Rachel Seiffert's carefully unsentimental fiction love isn't

necessarily strong enough to survive unwelcome knowledge, remorse may be

something one has to live with indefinitely and there are some actions from which it is impossible, and from which it would anyway be morally reprehensible, to "move on".

Seiffert has written about Germans troubled by their historical guilt. In this new novel she composes a British variation on the theme. Alice, a nurse in her early thirties, is the offspring of a teenage fling. She has never met her father, and - well-adjusted and competent though she is - she yearns for him. Alice would like to fill a gap in her past history: two people close to her are trying to blank out parts of theirs. Her grandfather was in Kenya with the RAF during the Mau Mau uprising, flying bombing missions over Kikuyu settlements. A taciturn man, he holds back from his family, but to a

relative stranger he reveals how he is haunted by the vision of smoke rising from the forest canopy beneath him, and by awareness of the pain and death for which he has been responsible. Her new lover Joseph, a painter and decorator, has been a soldier, and in Northern Ireland (as we know from the first page but as he can never bring himself to tell Alice) he killed a man.

There was nothing improper about what Joseph did. The man was armed. The authorities have absolved him of all blame, but he can't absolve himself. Some years after his discharge, years in which he has acquired a bad name for running out on jobs and relationships, he visits a former comrade-in-arms, a man who has stayed on and made a military career for himself, only to meet with edgy defensiveness. "You going to get all Brits Out on me?...You always were a specimen. Odds on for a choker." It's typical of Seiffert's resolutely undramatic take on her subject matter that Joseph's trauma doesn't arise from anything exceptional – a newsworthy atrocity or a criminal aberration – but from an event that is generally considered normal, the kind of thing with which ordinary people routinely have to deal.

Seiffert's prose is remarkable for its plainness. She is writing about violence, love and frenzy but, even when characters are enduring heartbreak or trashing a house, she keeps her voice steady and her language simply colloquial. Her prose isn't conventional exactly (surprisingly few of her sentences have main verbs in them) but it's modest. And just as she denies herself flashy literary effects, so she avoids narrative patterns that would impose consoling order on the mess of experience. Alice and Joseph are well-matched, but the fact that they'd like to be together isn't going to

soothe Joseph's rage or fill the gaps in Alice's emotional make-up. Her grandfather may have found someone he can talk to, but that confidant brings him not relief, but further trouble.

This is a quiet novel, one in which characters spend as much time talking about tomorrow's job of work as about past mayhem, and in which we are given, not the grandeur and symmetry of literary imaginings, but the complicated substance of unadorned lives.

Sydney Morning Herald

Section: Spectrum

Page: 32

Reviewed by Andrew Riemer.

03/03/2007

RACHEL SEIFFERT WAS born in Oxford, England, in 1971 to Australian and German parents. The German side of her background underscored her first book, *The Dark Room*, three novellas dealing with the black days of the Third Reich and their aftermath, which brought her critical and popular esteem when it was released in 2001. *Field Study*, a collection of short stories, followed in 2004. Now comes her first novel in the strict sense of the term, a splendid work that will surely enhance her already considerable reputation.

The setting is contemporary London. One night Alice, a nurse, meets

Joseph, a plasterer and builder's mate. They start a relationship of sorts, sleeping together now and then, visiting friends and relatives, camping in the countryside. Alice likes Joseph and he seems attracted to her, too. Yet Alice comes to feel more and more strongly that something is not right. She is puzzled by Joseph's silences, his remoteness, a reticence that cuts in whenever their relationship seems to her to be going somewhere.

At the beginning of the book, Seiffert drops a hint or two about the possible cause of Joseph's unwillingness to let Alice, or anyone else for that matter, get close to him.

We see him, years earlier, facing an army inquiry into a bloody roadside incident in Northern Ireland. Towards the end of her novel, Seiffert reveals the connection between that incident and Joseph's reticence, as well as the reason for the repressed fury that seems to lurk behind it.

We come to learn, too, that in the past Joseph's anger and frustration had spilled over into violence - though Seiffert's manner of disclosing this is admirably restrained. It wells up again during an apparently good-natured conversation between Joseph and Alice's grandfather, David. The old man, recently widowed and even more bottled-up in Alice's opinion, had just finished telling Joseph about his time in Kenya when he was serving in the air force during the Mau Mau insurgency.

Alice is appalled when she finds out what Joseph had done to her grandfather's house. She is surprised, too, and not a little hurt by David's refusal to resent Joseph's destructiveness, his brutal though short-lived outburst of vandalism.

At length she comes to understand the affinity between the two men. Both

have been scarred by their experiences: Joseph in Northern Ireland and David in Kenya, when each of them had to face the moral and psychological consequences of attempts to suppress insurgencies and civil wars.

Put like this, there is, I realise, something rather contrived about the way Seiffert links those challenges to British rule in Africa and Ireland and their impact on those who were caught up in them.

However, she is so skilled and tactful a writer that her novel transcends these and other patches of contrivance: Alice's grandmother divorced her first husband at a time when divorce was considered shameful; Alice herself was born out of wedlock, as it used to be called. Nowhere, not even in the first few pages, where we are given brief, largely unexplained glimpses of Joseph in Northern Ireland and David (decades earlier) in Kenya, is there a sense of strain, of Seiffert's sacrificing her characters' individuality for the sake of thematic consistency.

I would not want to underestimate the ethical and even perhaps political commitment of this fine novel. As she did in *The Dark Room*, Seiffert addresses some of the great conundrums of our time. What should an individual do when ordered to carry out acts that go against the grain of morality and decency? How legitimate is it for a soldier (or an airman) to claim that he was acting under orders from his superiors? Where do the limits of loyalty and patriotism lie? And, above all, can we put the past behind us, can we - or should we - try to forget what we have done or were forced to do?

Afterwards addresses these issues with integrity and subtlety, without the least hint of hectoring or grandstanding. Nevertheless, this would not have

evolved into such a powerful and memorable novel if Seiffert had not brought to it another, equally admirable accomplishment.

Most of the book is taken up with vivid evocations of ordinary, even boring, everyday life in the London suburbs. Here is a keenly observed world of snooker clubs, poky flats in dreary housing estates, fuggy pubs, chips with vinegar, bacon sandwiches, pork pies cut into quarters, takeaway vindaloo, endless cups of tea, a few brawls, petty crime, stuffy propriety rubbing shoulders with boisterous vulgarity.

One image in particular will stay with me: a marvellous description of a group of women, "slapping thighs, all wobbling chins and arses", as they start up an impromptu line dance at a boozy wedding reception.

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Postscript

I was asked by the examiners to provide the following additional material, arising from our discussion in the viva.

Why war and not another source of guilt? This question arose from my comment in the essay 'that guilt can work on an individual in a similar way to trauma, and so the latter could usefully stand as a metaphor for guilt in the narrative I was creating.' The question was also linked to the issue of experience: I have no experience of warfare or soldiering, so what made me choose this subject, as opposed to a civilian's guilt arising from, say, a fatality caused by drink-driving (of which, incidentally, I also have no experience)?

A soldier's guilt is particularly interesting to me, because killing is sanctioned in conflict, but not in civilian life. A soldier's life will inevitably encompass both military and civilian worlds, so how do they square that circle? The drink-driving fatality only becomes interesting in this sense if the accident was not of the drink-driver's making, or would have been unavoidable even if the driver were sober, otherwise it's all circle with no squaring needed.

It is often only upon return to civilian life that soldiers will experience the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). There are many reasons for this: they are no longer in the daily company of men who have also experienced conflict and its stresses, and so no longer have the comfort of this (often unspoken) camaraderie; the black humour which provides a

safety valve is also missing, as are the routines and duties which offer structure and distraction. The patients I interviewed at the Rivers' Centre emphasised repeatedly how different the codes of civilian life are, and it was after these interviews that I first began working on the scene with Jarvis, where the question of whether Joseph should feel guilty or not is addressed. While he has a flashback on the rifle range, Joseph only really begins to feel the burden of guilt gradually, after he leaves the army, and it is during the conversation with Jarvis that he realises he has made the transition to civilian again. The scene between Alice and Eve also pertains to the particular nature of a soldier's guilt: both women assume Joseph's behaviour stems from a sense of culpability, and both find a cold comfort in this, as it makes him a thinking, feeling being. Soldiers are not required to feel guilt (it's far more convenient if they don't), but civilians are. If they don't, it marks them out as psychotic or somehow less than human: disturbing in any case.

When a soldier kills in the line of duty, his personal responsibility is lifted, the idea being that the state takes it on. While this conceit is probably never seamless, where a conflict is largely seen as just (the Second World War, for example), the deaths of combatants and even civilians (of the 'other side' in any case), while regrettable, are largely taken as par for the course, and not only within the military. Kenya and Northern Ireland were both controversial conflicts, bringing into question the justification for deaths both of combatants and civilians, and this increases the sense of unease around David and Joseph's silence. If Joseph had been a drunk-driver, even if the accident had not been of his making, then Alice would not have been as implicated by it as she is by Joseph having been a soldier (unless she is a

habitual drunk-driver herself, and comes from a family of habitual drunk drivers, and so on). Joseph fought in a conflict of which Alice knows very little, but which nevertheless formed part of the background of her life.

Isobel, as an expat, was also implicated in colonial rule in Kenya in a way that she (and her daughter) later found profoundly uncomfortable.

We discussed the question of experience during the viva: I have no direct experience of war, either as a soldier or a civilian, so am I best placed to create fiction on this subject? I countered this with another obvious question: while soldiers have seen war at first hand, does it necessarily follow that they will be able to create good and interesting fiction out of their experiences? While I think I am a good writer, I know I cannot write on any subject. I do not think I am limited to writing what I know, but perhaps I am limited to writing what I feel. The research has to be thorough, of course, but it also needs to be inspiring. I have researched subjects - German social democrats in exile in Britain, for example - which interested me a great deal, but did not in the end inspire me to write. Northern Ireland and Kenya were different, and while I did often doubt my ability to make good novel out of my research, my imagination was sufficiently fired to keep trying. Joseph is a character of which I am proud, one of my best, I like to think. He is the product of many hours of interviews and reading, cogitation and experimentation, and is a convincing human being with convincing experience of soldiering in Northern Ireland. I had readers with first hand experience in mind when writing the scenes in Ireland and Kenya, which is why I checked through Joseph's scenes with DW, for example, a serving Captain in the British Army. His advice was particularly crucial in refining the

checkpoint incident, and one of my most satisfying experiences as a writer came after DW read the 'ballcocks and bodyparts' incident and commented, 'This is exactly right.'

This issue of whether Joseph is required to speak of his experiences ties in here too, and allows me to address the connection between ethics and aesthetics raised in the viva. In the conversations at the Rivers Centre, we rarely touched upon the source of the patients' trauma, the details of their experiences (although I was given a brief outline in advance by Dr Fyvie). This was due in part to trauma having complex causes, rather than the single, defining event so convenient to fiction, but mainly it was due to the patients' reluctance to cover that territory. This was frustrating at first: having no first-hand experience of soldiering, I was hoping for some insights from the interviews. However, this reluctance to speak was also compelling, and I was quickly persuaded of their right to keep their counsel. Indeed, I thought this might make for interesting fiction. I was already forming a strong sense of Joseph's reluctance to speak, in my abortive attempts to write conversations between him and the staff on the psychiatric ward. Hence the idea that I should make *Afterwards* about the right to silence, and how difficult this silence can be for those who wish to understand it. The novel, in contrast to the first draft submitted as this PhD thesis, is structured around the withholding of information: the first chapter indicates the source of unease for both David and Joseph, but the reader, like Alice, must wait a long time before any more is revealed, and when revelation comes, rather than explaining and healing, it opens more wounds. I also put Joseph's

other memories of soldiering and Ireland before the main event of the shooting at the checkpoint (which remains fragmentary in any case) because one of the patients I interviewed insisted that the trauma he suffered was cumulative. He had been an RUC officer, and said that the day-in, day-out stress of policing the Troubles was as much a cause of his illness as any one incident, and I thought the reader needed this sense of context. The right to silence was the most crucial thing I took from these interviews, however: that this silence is not about denial but survival, and can too easily be mistaken for a refusal to engage.

A touchstone work of fiction during the writing of *Afterwards* was Adam Thorpe's *1921*. It took me some time to settle on the right language for *Afterwards*. In the very early stages, I kept swapping between tenses, for example. I had previously written largely in the present tense, and I was still attracted to the sense of immediacy that this lends, the intimacy created as the readers experience events alongside the characters. However, the dynamic of *Afterwards* resides in the ramifications of past events. The 'action' is all in the past, the present is where the effects are felt. Not a great deal happens, as such, but space is required for the characters to reflect, and writing in the present tense did not allow for this.

In his attempts to create fiction about the Great War, Thorpe's Joseph Morrow is forced to constantly re-evaluate what he is writing, casting and recasting his character's actions as heroic, contemptuous or futile. I am not often a fan of fiction about writing, but *1921* proved to be an exception. It is, of course, by no means the only

gripping book written in the past tense, but it is very good, and I also read it at exactly the right time, during my struggles with tense, and it convinced me that writing in the past, even repeating events (I thought this might happen with my Joseph's memories), could be immediate and dynamic.

Thorpe was also interesting to read by way of contrast as well as example. He is very precise with his descriptions and also repeats words, often adjectives, within the same paragraph or sentence (something drummed out of most of us in composition exercises at school). 1921 questions the ability of writers, of words, to represent war, and does so very effectively, in part through this highlighting of the language being used. Thorpe's vocabulary, and his precision with it, was enormously attractive. I underlined the following paragraph (one of many), while reading:

'Silence. It felt derisive: he could not come up to her level, he knew this. He wished he could, but there was nothing to say. The dead lay all about, demure and without needs or desires. He was almost envious.'²⁹

It was exactly how my Joseph might feel when challenged by Alice or David, but unlike Morrow, my Joseph would never use the words 'derisive', 'demure' or 'envious'. So, although I was not writing in the first person, and wonderful as they are, I knew I could not use them either. Although I was determined that Joseph would not be inarticulate, this became a rule of thumb.

²⁹ Adam Thorpe, 1921 (London, Vintage



