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Brown, Janice Margaret (2011) *Hartsend: a novel and reflections on its writing*. PhD thesis.

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Hartsend:  
a novel and reflections on its writing

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of English Literature  
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June 2011

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## **Abstract**

This thesis consists of two parts: a creative work and a reflective essay.

The creative work is a novel entitled *Hartsend*. In a village in Central Scotland, the characters assemble at the funeral of Mrs Crossthwaite, a domineering woman whose middle aged daughter Lesley must now make her own choices. Four people in particular, teenagers Harriet and Ryan, and middle aged friends Duncan and Lesley attempt to cope with their private pain and the damage done to them in the past, in order to make sense of their lives. Is forgiveness necessary, or even possible? Meanwhile, out of everyone's sight, another kind of damage is taking place which will affect the entire village.

The reflective essay examines first the origins of the novel, those external events which over a number of years preoccupied me and the personal circumstances which intensified my concern. It then considers the factors involved in its writing. These include: the difficulties involved in becoming a writer, the depiction of a paedophile, an exploration of the key concept of 'Noticing', the use of the Enneagram in developing characters, the Mindmap as a tool for plotting the novel, the usefulness of experts and the place and purpose of writing in an aleatory world.

Examples from several writers including Nadine Gordimer, Carol Shields, Raymond Chandler, Margaret Atwood and William Trevor, whose words have contributed to my ideas about writing and whose work has modified my writing style, substantiate this analysis.

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## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Professor Michael Schmidt in the writing of this thesis. His wisdom was unfailing and his patience sorely tested.

Thanks also to those who would not let me give up, including Dr John Coyle, Peter Berry, and Paula Skene whose audio typing skills were invaluable at a difficult time. For their most helpful expert advice, I am indebted to Inspector Graeme Cuthbertson and Paul Brown. To my husband Ian, far more thanks than can be said.

### **Author's declaration**

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature

Janice Margaret Brown

Printed name

**Hartsend: a novel**

## **Preface**

Rain is falling on Hartsend, darkening the stone needle of the War Memorial and the tattered red wreaths left two months ago by the Boys' Brigade. It's clattering on the roof of the Prince and Princess of Wales Hospice shop in Main Street where Mary Flaherty will come tomorrow in mourning and the hope of finding a black blouse and skirt. It's falling on the Colonel's only son in his worn Barbour jacket as he picks up sodden scraps and crisp packets dropped by schoolchildren and windblown all the way up the hill into his garden. It's raining on the Robertson's goldfish pond, where the five surviving fish are barely moving, biding low in the dark water. It's raining on the new estate where, if you place your ear on any interior wall you can hear what the neighbours think of you, and every flush of their toilet. It's filling up the broken end of a Buckfast bottle at the edge of the children's swing park, drumming on the roofs of the travellers' caravans beside the river, falling on the football field and the deer nibbling ferns on the golf course, falling on isolated cottages and small holdings, on fields of wintry stubble and black plastic bales.

## The feather

When the rain showed signs of going off, Martine and Josie left the van, closing the door on her. *You're no'comin*, they said, making faces at her through the window, *you're too wee*. In the past she'd made faces back at them, but this time she didn't.

They were going to the golf course again to look for balls to sell. This was the best time of day, when everyone had gone home for tea. They had a torch and a long stick so that they could pick out the balls in the tangled bushes and the burn as the light faded. They didn't want her. She couldn't run fast enough if someone saw them and shouted.

As soon as they were out of sight behind the broken-down wall of bricks, she put on her rubber boots, shoving her arms into her jacket. The dogs paid no attention. With a careful look back to see that her mother, in Nan's van with the baby, wasn't watching, she followed the faint silvery dented tracks over the grass, the green frog faces on the fronts of her boots pushing ahead for her, so she could pretend she was three people, not one.

Away to the left, the cars on the dual carriageway were roaring quietly, their lights just visible, winking through the trees. She felt funny inside. She wasn't supposed to leave the field without telling. Mostly she was careful to be good, but this time she couldn't stop herself. The idea had got bigger and bigger. But it wasn't a naughty idea. All she wanted to do was watch them, and not tell them, not let them know she was watching.

It was hard to keep secrets from them. Anything she tried to hide in the van they found and messed with, but this was going to be a secret inside her head. They wouldn't be able to touch anything inside her head.

She pulled her hood over her head and kept her hands in her pockets to avoid scratches when she passed through the bramble bushes. There was nothing left now but rusty dying leaves and spikes. No warm berries. They'd picked them on sunny afternoons after school, eaten them with ice cream from the café. You had to look at them before you put them in your mouth, in case you swallowed a white worm. The worms would grow and grow in your stomach, Martine and Josie said, and eat all the way through to your bottom and come out in your poo. This had happened to one of her cousins. The twins had been in the van at the time and had seen the worms wriggling in the toilet pan.

At the edge of the golf course, a new wire fence kept people out, but she was small enough to go between the lowest strand of barbed wire and the ground, tucking

her skirt close against her legs so it didn't get dirty. Not that she was small. She would be five soon. And she was going to be beautiful, the beauty out of all the girls, Nan said, brushing her hair slowly each night, plaiting the long strands into one single plait while she ate toast in front of the TV. Nan had been a beauty herself. Don't mind those two, Nan told her, they're just jealous.

The twins were dark, like their father. He liked them because they took after his side of the family, Nan said. She was her Mum's girl. Her thoughts faltered. Mum was too tired to do things. She didn't seem to like any of them any more.

Head down, she didn't see it until she walked into it. She jumped back, flailing. It wasn't a ghost though, only a big bit of plastic, caught in the darkening bushes. A big, torn, dirty sheet, not a ghost, not something out to get her. She pulled at it, tried to tear it free but it was too strong for her, too caught and tugged, and the water ran off it, cold up her sleeves.

She rubbed her hands on her skirt, but it wasn't the right kind of cloth for drying hands properly. Should she go back? There was very little noise. The sound of the cars had faded, the birds had finished their early evening chattering. But she was nearly at the burn. She knew where she was. With small careful steps she went on, arms folded. A few moments later there was a glimpse of pink, just visible, not far ahead. She stretched on her toes. The twins, their pink jackets, just disappearing into the first of the birch trees... She crouched down, in case they might look back.

It was marshy here. She could hear the water, a few yards away, swooshing loud against the long grasses. In the summer it was a good place. But there wouldn't be any tadpoles now, and the tall plants with the purple flowers were brown and slimy, with a funny smell that made her nose itchy.

The ground under her boots had filled up with water. She'd made two pools. Back and forwards she rocked for a moment or two, letting her froggy toes have a drink.

From here to the other side of the plank bridge it would be slippery. Then it was short grass with nothing to hide behind. If Martine and Josie saw her they'd chase her and pull her hair. You couldn't get away from two. One held your arms and the other pulled. *Shh*, she told the frogs on her toes.

There was a long white feather caught in the grass where the plank was wedged into the ground. She reached down. It was all smooth and clean, even at the pointy end.

"Hello. What have you found?"

She put the hand with the feather behind her back as the man came closer.

"It's all right, you can show me. Is it a feather?"

She shook her head, not looking him in the face.

“I won’t take it from you. It’s yours. You found it, not me.”

Slowly she brought the feather round, and held it up, ready to pull away if he tried to snatch it from her.

“That’s a beauty,” he said. “That’s from a black headed gull, I think. They like to live beside the sea, usually. But we’re quite a long way from the sea, aren’t we?”

His voice was funny. He was carrying a big, black umbrella, closed up. He stuck the sharp end of it into the grass and began twisting it round and round, slowly, as if it was a stick.

“You wouldn’t take eggs though, would you? None of us should take eggs from a nest. You wouldn’t do that.”

She shook her head.

“Because the mother bird would get upset, wouldn’t she?”

He came closer, and squatted down, looking at the feather more closely.

“Can I touch it?” he said, “I promise not to hurt it.”

## Sharp shoes

Bing Crosby was singing in the hospice shop. Harriet, sixteen, only knew it was Bing Crosby because Mrs Robertson had told her. Mrs Robertson, who might be any age between fifty and seventy, as far as Harriet could tell, said he was much more handsome than that Robbie Williams and a better singer too. Not being much of a Robbie Williams fan, Harriet was quite happy to agree.

She was on her knees at the book and video shelves, arranging the new arrivals. It had been quiet all day, although they'd had the usual lonely hearts, the old biddies that came in all the time, the ones who liked to chat to June, the manager. Mrs Robertson was a volunteer, like her, and like Letty who had Down's but "worked like a wee beaver", according to June.

Mr Mackenzie had been in with a box of Cadbury's Heroes for them.

"He's getting frail," June murmured, when the door closed behind him. "Did you hear what he said? His son invited him out for Christmas dinner, only he told him he'd have to pay for himself? Imagine. And him only losing his wife a few months ago. If I met that boy I'd tell him the time of day all right. He said he wasn't going."

There was a sad little silence for a while, then June said she was going to do some ironing in the back shop. Letty followed. She was at her happiest when close to June. Mrs Robertson turned to Harriet, "Are you all organised for Christmas, dear? I suppose it'll be your father's busiest time."

Harriet nodded politely, still preoccupied with the injustice and sadness of Mr Mackenzie's life. Of life in general. And Letty, whose pale, flat hair was lovingly brushed each morning into a ponytail and tied with a pink ribbon. She was somewhere in her mid twenties; what would happen when her parents grew old?

She took up her pen and finished putting prices on the sticky labels for the new cards. The thoughtless cruelty of human beings continually troubled her. Sometimes Harriet felt she'd been born with thinner emotional skin than other people, with less protection against the things that hurt. She'd stopped eating breakfast in the kitchen because Dad insisted on hearing the news on Radio Four, which was always bad news or arguments and ruined the day before it began. She'd protested for a while. What was the point in knowing about every disaster, if you couldn't do anything?

But what could she have done for Mr Mackenzie?

Mrs Robertson was right. Her Dad was exhausted, and he even had a funeral on Christmas Eve on top of everything else. The tree was up and decorated, the duck was

waiting in the fridge, and school was finished for two whole weeks, but with Mum thousands of miles away, there was none of the usual fun in the midst of the chaos. Kerr was home, which was something. She looked at her watch. Three o'clock and getting dark already.

She could hear Letty and June singing along with the CD. June was tanned all year round, thanks to her home sun-bed. She was wearing earrings today in the shape of Christmas trees that twinkled red and green, on and off, which was really naff, but kind of endearing at the same time.

The same could be said of the shop. Harriet's Saturdays here had begun as part of her Social Action from school, but when June asked if she would keep going, alternate Saturdays, mornings and afternoons, she'd said yes. It made her feel virtuous and, besides, gave her a valid reason for being unavailable for the hockey team. June had put her in sole charge of books and videos. ("Harriet here can read a whole book in just a couple of days," she had once informed a customer, adding, "and her brother's at the Oxford University," as if those two facts somehow raised the status of the shop.) Mrs Robertson said she wished she had more time to read. Asked what her favourite book was, Harriet said *The Lord of the Rings*. Mrs Robertson had heard of it, but not read it. But surely she'd seen the film? No. It wasn't about real things, was it? She and Mr Robertson didn't like films unless they were about real things.

"Have you got anything else in black?"

It was their one customer, a stout plain-faced woman with straggling dark hair. Mrs Robertson said she would see if there was anything in the most recent donations in the back shop. "Though it might be needing cleaned, you know," she said.

Harriet watched the woman go to the door. She spoke to a man outside, who reluctantly came back in with her. She began showing him some shirts on the rail. He didn't seem interested. When he turned away, Harriet saw he was just a boy, not much older than herself. His hair was long and dark at the back but dyed blond at the front. A long black raincoat and sharp pointed shoes completed the look.

Disconcerted when he returned her stare, Harriet drew several x's with excessive neatness on the border of the label sheet. That done, she gathered the pile of cellophane-wrapped cards, tapped them into an authoritative stack, and went to the rack beside the door. He had moved to stand beside the till. June, Letty, (still singing) and Mrs Robertson were all in the back shop. His mother, if she was his mother, was examining the inside of a handbag.

He met her eye, gave her a slow smile, leaned over the counter and lifted one of the good brooches from the glass cabinet beneath. He slipped it into his coat pocket.

Just did it. Knowing that she saw.

## **The eulogy**

The house was a hundred years old, and much of the furniture in the back room was of the same vintage, having been installed by the deceased's mother and inherited from *her* family. The mourners spoke in whispers, or were silent, like visitors to a museum. All that was missing was a heavy scarlet rope to keep them from touching the objects. A cream, cordless phone on the sideboard looked out of place, as if a careless curator had left it by mistake.

Facing the stiff rows of chairs (the dining table had evidently been moved elsewhere) was a small gas fire and, above it, a Victorian oak mantel with multiple wreaths of plenty, shelves and small drawers. Somewhere else, given space, it might have been beautiful, but in this small room it was too large. Moreover it was stuffed with train and bus timetables, bills, bundles of recipes cut from magazines, oddments of wool, safety pins and spools of thread, and seemed ready to burst out on the room at any moment, scattering its contents over all those reflected in its mirrors.

Not wanting to be first, Walter and Ruby Robertson had watched from behind the curtains until they saw some others going in. At the door Ruby found herself hugging Lesley, only child of the deceased. Later she would wonder what had come over her. Walter said that Lesley was probably on Valium and wouldn't remember. They nodded to those people they recognised, and slid into the second front row, since they were only neighbours, not relations.

The Robertsons were incomers. They had lived in the street all their married life, but having moved here from the city, they would always be incomers. For almost thirty years they had lived next door to Lesley and her mother, thirty years without a voice raised or an unkind word spoken. Without many words spoken, if the truth be told, although perhaps the hedges were to blame. The high boundary of mixed beech, holly and privet provided sparrows with excellent nesting space but made casual human conversation rather difficult.

Behind them and ill at ease, never having been to a Protestant funeral before, sat Mrs Mary Flaherty. She felt she had to come, having cleaned and polished for Lesley and her mother for the past three years. She too had moved into the village, but only from a neighbouring village, and more importantly, her grandfather and some of her uncles had worked in the local pit before it closed, which made her almost a local. Beside her sat a pale, sullen young girl in a nurse's uniform and navy anorak, a representative from the Hospice. She spoke to no-one. Didn't know anyone. She'd

barely known the deceased. She remembered once cleaning her false teeth, but that was all.

The most important resident of the village had come; widow of the Colonel, a smart, sprightly woman, wonderful for her age. Her white-haired son and the bereaved daughter, (like him an only child) had been friends at primary school. Duncan was not near his mother today, he was standing at the back, but it was all right, her thumb stretched that far.

Precisely at one thirty, the eulogy began. The minister was a compassionate man. He had not known the deceased well, having been called to the parish less than a year before, but he spoke much of Baking Skills, and Visiting The Sick, of Intelligence and Strength Of Mind. He did not speak an unkind word, and at last, to everyone's relief it ended. Stiffly they rose from the hard dining chairs, and moved, the women murmuring, the men mostly in silence, to the door, out into the damp December afternoon. They gathered round the cars, watching the dirty yellow sky for rain, knowing the interment was still to be got through. And to their eternal credit, not one of them said, "Wasn't it just like the old bitch to time her death to ruin Christmas Eve?"

## The good daughter

It was very late but Lesley didn't feel ready to go to bed. The temperature had fallen, and the rain had turned to snow, small flakes lightly falling, floating, just visible in the light of the street lamps. If it kept on, the whole village would be a work of art by morning. Everything covered in white; pavements, buildings, the football field, the weeds round the recycling bins. It was all a lie. A white lie. The bad stuff was there underneath.

"This is my house. I am alone in it." She said the words aloud. She had anticipated this moment, touching it lightly now and then over the final months, like someone fingering a birthday gift through tissue paper, afraid to guess what it might be. But now, the funeral over, there wasn't much difference. No relief, no bitterness, no guilt, nothing as identifiable as any of those. Perhaps, she thought, perhaps it was too soon to feel anything.

*Did I wish her dead?*

She had wanted the waiting for death to end. Not the same thing.

*I am glad she's dead?*

How strange it was to watch the snow sift down from nowhere, and have no-one calling from the other room, *what are you doing, Lesley?* Just as strange as it had been at tea-time to find the fridge full. Gifts of soup and casseroles and cake had been brought by neighbours. She remembered the smell of the hospital food waiting in the stainless steel trolley in the corridor when visiting was over. A peculiar mix of something fried and something metallic. The nurses said goodnight to her by name, towards the end, grown used to her visits.

What to eat? Or indeed, whether to eat? All her life she'd accepted what was put in front of her when she came home: soup and main course and pudding. She was the shape and size she was because her mother was a good cook. No, she thought, playing with the words, because her mother cooked good food. Goodness as a moral quality was surely something different altogether. *You were a good daughter to her, Lesley.* More than one funeral guest had said it, but how could they possibly know?

*If I was a good person, I would feel something definite, something definable. Wouldn't I at least be frightened by this lack of feeling?*

She remembered something she'd read once in the *Reader's Digest* about people trapped in snow, how you had to decide which way was up before you began to dig. The way to do this was to spit. You gathered lots of saliva and spat. If the spit ran up

your nose, then you were upside down. She had smiled at the idea, but it struck her now that she was that lost individual.

Her descent into the crevasse had been slow, a gradual daily slide. Hard to tell when it began. At birth? Or on that day when she told her mother she wanted to move out, to share a flat with two of the other girls from the college?

*If you leave this house, you will never enter it again.*

When she was a child, she played the old game, would you rather freeze or boil to death? Of course the answer was, she didn't want to do either, but in the game she had to choose. The problem with freezing, she saw now, was that you didn't disappear. Had she become an embarrassment to those who were still warm? Her friends had all married or moved away, preoccupied with husbands and children. They still sent Christmas cards, but not so many, and some day, she supposed, even this would stop. Even this shivering hypothermia would stop.

*You'll be preserved, she told herself, like the Ice-man in the Alps, like the bodies on Everest, with the ink stain on your blouse, the shred of cold chicken between your back teeth. You'll stay here in this house until the planet falls into the sun.*

## Earthenware

When the evening news came on, Ruby went through to the kitchen and filled the Creda water heater with exactly the amount needed to make two mugs of tea. (The mugs were earthenware. The good bone-china cups were never used, merely washed on Wednesdays and replaced in the cabinet.) When the water bubbled, the machine would emit a piercing sound like a factory hooter.

The room felt cold tonight, and she shivered a little. If only they'd kept the Rayburn, she thought, not for the first time. Lifting a discreet corner of the curtain, she looked across the dyke to Lesley's kitchen window. No light on. She had probably gone to bed.

Maybe the weather would improve, despite the forecast. Still, the cupboards were well stocked, and the freezer was full of neatly labelled packages. Make one, freeze one was a good rule. Taking milk from the fridge, she smiled with satisfaction at the big pot of home-made lentil soup. She had learned early in their marriage that Walter needed something to eat the minute he arrived home, and soup had been the answer, summer or winter. She ate hers in the kitchen, putting the finishing touches to the main course.

As she waited for the water to boil, Ruby felt a little soreness starting at the back of her throat, and offered a prayer to no-one in particular that this would not be the start of anything serious. It had been bitter on Christmas Eve at the graveside. She'd felt the cold seeping through the seams of her coat. She had said so to Walter at the time, looking with envy at the Colonel's widow in her fur. Beaver, she thought it was.

"I'd love a fur coat," she whispered to Walter as they drank their tea at the function room in the Village Hall afterwards.

"When would you wear a fur coat?"

"Things like this. And weddings."

"Who do we know that's getting married?" he said.

"Do you think she'll sell the house?" she asked a moment later.

"What?"

"Lesley next door. Do you think she'll move?"

Walter considered the salmon sandwich he had bitten into, as if it might hold the answer.

"Nothing much we can do about it." He lifted one edge of the bread and looked at the filling before carefully extracting a thin slice of cucumber and putting it on his plate.

“I wouldn’t like new neighbours, not at our age,” she said.

“We might move ourselves. Once I retire.”

Ruby stared at her husband of thirty four years. He pulled a handkerchief out of his trouser pocket and wiped his nose.

“I’ve always fancied living near a sea loch. I could fish off a boat.”

“But you don’t fish, Walter.”

“I could learn,” he said, putting the rest of the sandwich into his mouth.

The hooter began to sound, and quickly Ruby flicked the switch. Her throat was really quite sore. Perhaps she ought to gargle with salt before bed. She poured some boiling water into a mug so that it would be cool by the time supper was over.

She’d always hated interments. The crematorium was so much nicer, as long as you knew when not to look. She filled the teapot, mopped up a few drips of water on the sink and draining board, added two custard creams to the tray, and took it through to Walter in the sitting room just as the news ended. This ritual, performed every night of their life together, ensured that there was no knowledge of the outside world in her head that had not been there when she left home.

## Mary

Mary Flaherty waited in the chemist's for her prescription to be filled. Feeling hot and cold by turns, she wondered if she'd caught this cold standing at the graveside. A miserable day that had been, and no mistake. She'd felt peculiar the whole time: all those folk there she didn't know, on the chairs she'd polished herself, and her sitting next to them afterwards eating sandwiches so small they had only two bites in them.

Would she be needed now the old woman was dead? The house was full of clutter, but it wasn't hard to clean, because no-one wanted her to move the clutter. She was fond of the old fashioned ornaments. She liked polishing the brass, and waxing the old furniture, and ironing the old lady's linen pillowcases. In the last few months polycotton sheets had replaced the linen ones, for reasons, Lesley said, of hygiene (meaning that they needed frequent changing) but the pillowcases were kept in use. They stayed cool, she learned from Lesley, and were more pleasant against your face. She felt guilty now, remembering how in the last few weeks she'd enjoyed having the house to herself, dusting, hoovering and polishing without the old witch hovering over her. That bath still annoyed her though. She didn't know how they could bear the rusty stain under the cold tap. If it had been up to her, she would have had it out and a nice new white one put in.

Of course Lesley might decide the house was too big and move.

Outside, the coloured Christmas lights were still up, strung between the lamp-posts, Santa and his reindeer swaying in the wind. Had it been a Happy Christmas? Better than some. Her son-in-law had taken Wee Chrissie and the new bicycle out, so there had been an hour of peace. She'd only had to do the one course, roast ham, since no-one liked turkey. Too much food, of course. She saw her shape reflected in the glass and wished again that there had been a dark coat in her size. It was a good coat, and a bargain; she knew what it would have cost new.

The cards of hair ornaments on the wall were all pink or purple, too sparkly, all too young for her now. She had plenty of hair but it was fine and flat. She should have worn it up, but she kept losing the clasps, or else they broke. She sighed. She was silly to think about being attractive now, at her age. That was long gone.

Remembering that she'd given Ryan money the night before, she checked to see what was left in her purse. Ryan was her only boy, the only one still at home. He was eighteen, but still she waited up till she heard him come home. She couldn't help it.

"Who was that?" she would ask when another girl phoned to speak to him.

“Nobody.”

His mobile was always set to the answer machine, and if they called the house phone when he was still in bed, or doing something he wanted to keep doing, he refused to come to the phone and she had to take messages for him.

She missed her daughters. They would blether on and tell her all the latest gossip, although maybe not all that they’d been up to themselves. Better not to know, she’d told herself. And they’d had their share of screaming matches, of course, them being teenagers and sharing a bedroom, but at least there had been conversation in the house. This one might as well not have learned to talk.

She worried about him, more than she ever had about the girls. All the junk he ate instead of food, all those chips from Big Sam’s, eaten between the bus stop and the house. He’d been such a good eater when he was a wee boy, now he never touched a vegetable. One time when her back was playing her up she’d had a notion for home-made soup, and, both girls being at work, had tried to get him to go down to the Co-op. Her Nan had made proper soup, soup that was good for you, with butter beans and peas, and long strips of boiled beef and big lumps of potato and wee lumps of yellow turnip. Tear up a slice of bread to float in it, and you had a whole family meal for pennies. Her mouth watered at the thought of it.

“And a leek. Make sure it’s a good big one.”

“What?”

“With lots of white on it. A good sized one.”

“I don’t know what they look like,” he’d said.

Tonight’s tea was sausage and egg, the butcher’s own square sausage, he would likely eat that. Or if not, there was fish fingers and baked beans.

## **Bird seed**

“Duncan, didn’t you say you were going into the village to get some bird seed, dear?”

Duncan’s pen halted on the Radio Times. The bird seed was simply a valid reason to go out. Mail order was far cheaper than the village pet shop.

“I was waiting till the rain stopped,” he said, not looking round at his mother.

“Well, I would like to get these thank-you letters off, dear, but of course it doesn’t have to be today, if you’re busy.”

“I’ll go out before twelve,” he said. Twelve o’clock being collection time.

She put a small stack of letters down on the desk and tiptoed out of the room.

Duncan stared out at the garden, drawing tiny circles on his cavalry-twilled knee with the capped end of the ballpoint. The previous day’s brief snow had been washed away. The climbing hydrangea next to the window was thoroughly sodden, heavy drips gathered along its naked branches. Had it rained so much last December? It had been dry at New Year, certainly, as some of their visitors had walked up the hill rather than coming by car. He wondered if Lesley would come this year, now that she was on her own.

He circled some more radio programmes for the week ahead. He might or might not listen to all of them. He circled the Vivaldi recital. The Scottish Chamber Orchestra were generally acceptable, though in the last year or so he had come to prefer the authenticity of early music specialists. He had, in fact, been in Venice during the night, walking ahead of his mother and several of the Christmas Eve mourners down narrow streets where all the turns were at right angles, making it impossible to know if they led anywhere at all until the turning point was reached. The responsibility of leading the group was heavy on his shoulders. Why was he in charge? They assumed too much, these people. He did his best to read names and numbers on walls and doors but the words on the ceramic tiles were printed in tiny cramped letters, too small to read. Abruptly they had come upon a stretch of water. The waves were rough and the line of gondolas, deserted, made irregular slapping sounds against the water. When he turned, Lesley was watching him. She was holding out her hands. Did she want help, or was she offering it? As he moved towards her, a man of about his own age appeared, catching him by the sleeve. “I believe I am your long lost brother,” the man began, and Duncan knew at once that it was true. With that he’d woken, his first, immediate thought being how on earth he was going to ask his mother about the other child. It

took him a few moments to remember that he was the only one.

If he told Mrs Fleming about the dream, she'd most likely enquire how many cups of coffee he'd had the night before. Mrs Fleming was the most recent addition to the staff at the Library. Half his age, with a face covered in freckles, and a small bald baby that her husband brought with him when he came to collect her on late nights, Mrs Fleming was very concerned about his coffee consumption and kept trying to wean him onto something she believed to be healthier. She brought in various fruit teas. He'd tried peppermint to please her. It tasted like hot mouthwash.

“And what are you doing at Christmas, Duncan?” she'd asked.

“Oh, just the usual. Just the two of us. We like a quiet Christmas. We have people in at New Year.”

It occurred to him that she might be about to invite him to the party he knew they were having. She had talked about it a lot, a Murder Mystery Evening, with the guests coming in costume. Not something he'd greatly enjoy, he thought, but he pictured himself in his father's old army uniform, preserved untarnished in its dust covering in one of the spare bedrooms. Duncan considered that he had been very kind to Mrs Fleming, changing shifts to suit her, listening with a smile to her chatter about the baby, generally helping her to find her footing. The husband didn't appeal to him particularly, with his leather jacket and untidy hair, but still, he thought now, he might have gone, if invited.

## Fine art

Ryan Flaherty jumped down from the bus, welcoming the cold air after his long journey from the city. Barely half four and it was already dark. He glanced into the café as he passed. There they all were, the usual punters, buying ice cream. Raspberry ripple, chocolate mint, peach, and toffee shortbread. It never ceased to amuse him that people would eat ice-cream on the coldest days. *Don't let the doctor put the wee stick in your mouth till you find out who ate the ice cream.* One of Papa Flaherty's jokes. *How old are you, papa? As old as my tongue and a bit older than my teeth.* He hadn't understood that either, his five year old mind just annoyed at not getting a straight answer. A sense of confusion and the strange sweetish smell of pipe tobacco was about all he remembered of the old man.

That would be some job though, being a doctor, putting things into other people's mouths, sticking things up their bums. Having to look at old people's naked parts. He'd seen his mother's breasts once by accident. She'd been up out of bed, making a cup of tea in the middle of the night, her nightie unbuttoned. He'd just come in. He became one with the coats on the back of the door as she walked through the hall. She'd not noticed him, thank god.

*Let me die before I get old...*

At the video shop he pushed open the heavy glass door and scanned the bright interior. No familiar faces, except for Michelle behind the counter. She wasn't a friend, but she'd gone with one of his sisters' ex-boyfriends for a while, so he knew things about her, and she knew, so she'd be nice to him. She'd been a couple of years above him at school. 'Jail bait' was his mother's term for Michelle, but now she was older, it hardly applied.

He scanned the shelves for something new. He'd found the books he needed for the next essay, it had been worth going to the library, but his head was tired. Nothing he read tonight would stick.

Video shops were doomed now, with all the channels you could get on the TV. What an easy way to make money though. Provided you had cash up front. The rich got richer and the poor got nothing. Some of the guys in his class came from his kind of background, but some were unbelievable. The cost of materials was nothing to them, it was like they were buying crisps. Some had even bought the books instead of using the library. It irritated him that he couldn't just despise them. There was one quiet guy who, when he did speak, was so posh you felt like he needed something thrown over

him, but his work was brilliant and mad crazy.

He'd not anticipated stuff like this. Ok, he'd assumed that Art School would be hard work, he'd been told that, he was up for that. He knew he had everything to learn. One of the lecturers had even complimented him on that. *That's what I like about you, Mr Flaherty. You know the extent of your ignorance.* Life itself, he'd thought, would be better; the guys around him would all be interested in what he was interested in, unlike school. And it was better, his mind insisted. But not simpler. Better did not equal simpler. So he was envious, but not sure of his envy. Were his thoughts getting deeper, or more shallow?

Sometimes, it seemed, you only had to fool enough of the right people enough of the time to be successful. Anyone could end up winning the Turner Prize, given the chance. He himself had a cracker of an idea, which he'd been careful not to mention to anyone. Rows of soiled handfuls of toilet paper, sandwiched between upright slabs of Perspex. Kind of like the Viet Nam war memorial in America, but more visceral. He liked the word *visceral*. He wasn't sure what it meant exactly, but he'd heard someone say it in a review of a Tarantino film, and the one time he'd used it in an essay, he got a massive pencil tick beside it from the tutor. So, right, toilet paper, plain white, no fancy colours. *Production*, he'd call it, with the appropriate year in brackets after the title. He was fairly sure it had never been done. It would be scent free, being encased. *Visually stimulating, thought provoking, symbolic of both the waste of natural resources and the futility of human life...*The reviews would be something along those lines except they'd put it better. Originally he'd thought about collecting his nephew Chrissie's disposable nappies, *A resounding call to abandon landfill sites and halt damage to the environment*, but his sister would want to know why he was taking them away and there was the problem of storage. Which there would be with the toilet paper too...

There was nothing new on the shelves, so he picked out *Kill Bill 2*. It was bloody ancient but always worth another viewing. Michelle, only just contained in her low-cut pink sweater, gave him a big smile. She was very tanned. Her skin was orange all the way down her cleavage, thanks to free sessions in the tanning booths. Was this the only village with tanning booths in its video shop? For the first few days they had seemed out of place, but now they struck him as having a deeper meaning. They were making some kind of statement about society, he wasn't sure what yet, but it would come to him. There were also two fruit machines glittering in the corner. They were easier to analyse.

"Lookin' good, Michelle," he said.

She gave him a big smile.

“Does anyone ever win money out of them?” he asked, nodding at the machines.

She shrugged her shoulders. There was a smell of something sour but not altogether unpleasant. Vinegar, he guessed. She must have chips under the counter.

“Want one?” she asked, as if reading his mind. She had immaculate fingernails, pale pink with square white tips.

“I’m going for a fish supper,” he said. She was aware of him these days, he knew it. He was a lot taller than he’d been in school, his growth had come late. He wondered what she’d say if he asked her to pose naked. To help his Life Drawing. He wasn’t interested in her, she wouldn’t know something was visceral if it hit her between the eyes, but he couldn’t help wondering just how far the tan went.

“So what are you up to these days?” she said, licking her fingers.

“I got into Art School,” he said. “Fine Art.”

He was sure she didn’t know what he meant. Explaining would have lessened it. He’d tried with his mother’s pals; even his sisters thought he was skiving. *That’s our taxes keeping you.* His brother-in-law, a plasterer in and out of work, had put it less politely. *You’re up your own arse pal.*

The phone rang and Michelle picked it up. He turned back to the shelves and pulled out a title at random. Were they right? It was one thing to fool about in the front of his head about Perspex and used nappies, and to join in the bantering, cynical chatter between classes – he was learning how to do that as cleverly as anyone. But what was he trying to prove? And why? And who to? It could be the whole world was up its own arse.

He’d had a vivid dream once of a stretch of sand, like the one in *The Beach*. Everything was perfect – the sun, the waves slipping over the sand, their stranded bubbles vanishing with a faint “pkkk” sound, the breeze caressing the coconut palms. He was the only one allowed here. Even when he was in the dream he was aware of how clichéd it all was, but it didn’t matter, because it really was his island. He took off his trainers and walked for a while. The sand was firm at first, its colour like the tablet his Nan had made when he was small. Then it got softer and his feet slipped about. He stopped walking. He was scared to look ahead, scared to look back.

## Preparing for the party

As he stood waiting for the bus, which was more than a few minutes late, Duncan fingered the folded paper in his raincoat pocket. He glanced somewhat sternly at the very masculine-looking woman with razor-short hair who was standing beside him in the shelter and whose child was alternately sniffing loudly and coughing without a hand over his mouth. This, Duncan had long since concluded, was a circumstance absolutely to be expected. Although he had a car, it was hardly used. Far more responsible to travel by bus, which was good for the environment, but not quite so good for one's own health. He had solved the problem of keeping his clothes clean by wearing his old navy Barbour, but the thoughtlessness of most individuals, combined with limited ventilation, inevitably resulted in a soup of seasonal viruses which all passengers were compelled to sup, whether they would or no.

It angered him deeply, but there was nothing one could do. If *he* had a bad cold, and here he stared ineffectively at the woman again, he would travel by car. Had any medical research been done on the effect of bus travel on public health? He made a mental note to run a search when he was back at the library.

His destination was the delicatessen in the next village. Many of the ingredients for his mother's New Year gathering had been mail-ordered as they were every year; the salmon pinwheels and smoked duck mousse from an Aberdeenshire smokehouse had already arrived, along with oatcakes and small biscuits for cheese, while the various cheeses themselves had come from Ayrshire. Tesco would deliver basic items, but still there were some small things that only a delicatessen could provide. For these specialities, one had to go from Hartsend to the neighbouring township, which was more middle class and provided more for middle class needs. It had more or less the same number of shops as Hartsend, but they differed significantly in nature. There was no betting shop and the florist sold only flowers, not fruit and vegetables as well. There was an optician's and an independent shoe shop. There was also a small but very exciting second-hand bookshop, where Duncan had sometimes found poetry first editions at remarkable prices. It troubled his conscience that the owner seemed unaware of the value of his stock, so he always put something in the RSPCA tin on the counter, which seemed to him rather a noble deed since he was not over fond of cats or dogs.

Deep in pleasurable if somewhat anxious anticipation - for the shop might be shut, the owner was erratic as well as unenlightened - Duncan didn't at first realize that his name was being called. The speaker, inside a small black car, tried again.

Stooping, peering in, he recognised the parish minister, disguised in a shabby

blue sweater and denim jeans. There was a young girl in the passenger seat.

“I’m only going to Carbennie,” Duncan said, adding several thankyou’s and smiling in case his refusal might seem ungracious.

“That’s on my way, jump in,” said the minister.

“I’ll go in the back, Dad,” the girl said, getting out quickly, before Duncan could speak.

His hand thus forced, and constitutionally unable to be rude, he got into the front passenger seat. He felt that his disliking the man was irrational. In theory, they had a great deal in common. They were possibly the only two in the village who could read both Greek and Latin. More importantly, they were both on the side of decency, both hopeful of improving themselves and the world. But perhaps this was where the problem lay. He himself firmly believed in doing good by stealth. Not letting the left hand know what the right was doing, as it were. To make a living out of this, as ministers of religion did, was, in Duncan’s eyes, to make the whole business rather more public and presumptuous than it ought to be. Moreover he had been told that this particular clergyman was happy to quote, in his sermons, from newspapers predominantly left of centre. Today’s denim trousers served only to confirm his doubts. The man was, after all, only a few years younger than himself.

“Still on holiday, Duncan?” the man began as they drove off.

When had they reached first name terms? Feeling something under his feet, he bent down, hoping he hadn’t trodden on anything valuable, but it was a brown paper bag, with the words “Burger King” on it. That would account for the rather odd smell then. He left it where it was.

“The college closes for the whole two weeks, but I have some extra days,” he replied. He wanted to ask if they might drive a little more slowly, the lane being narrow and the hedges high, but politeness forbade.

“And how’s your mother keeping?”

“She’s very well, thank you,” he gripped the side of the seat as inconspicuously as he could. Was this the right answer? Perhaps if she was “very well” she might be expected to come to church? She had not forgiven the previous minister for remaining on holiday when the Colonel died, meaning that the man from the next parish, a stripling in his twenties, had had to conduct the service. She still gave money regularly, of course and she had not transferred her lines, but she didn’t attend. He himself went faithfully to Communion three times a year, and to Remembrance Sunday.

The girl in the back seat was just visible in the side mirror. She was exceptionally pretty, and fair-haired like her father, but her face was spoiled by something Duncan

could only describe as a disdainful expression. Not an easy child, he decided.

“And your friend, Miss Crosthwaite. I tried to call in the other day, but there was no reply. She hasn’t gone away, has she?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Duncan felt a pang of guilt. He should have called in himself. Or at least dropped in a card. His mother had sent one, but he should have done something himself.

He hated visiting the sick. It was more than twenty years since his father died, but he still remembered vividly the hospital foyer where they’d sat day by day in that final week, waiting for visiting hour to begin: olive green fake-leather benches, a sludge-coloured carpet, potted artificial plants on either side. In the excessive warmth, he’d felt he was suffocating, drowning at the bottom of some murky pond, surrounded by underwater weeds.

He’d been shocked to see how drawn and pale Lesley was at the funeral. Black didn’t suit her at all. He’d fully intended to speak to her but she was constantly with someone or other, and when he caught her eye, she seemed not to recognise him. Besides, he was afraid of saying the wrong thing. It was so easy to say the wrong thing in such situations where conversations jumped and jittered around so.

The minister was talking about his son, home from university apparently, and how they couldn’t get him up in the mornings. Duncan felt for the sheet of paper in his pocket. There were very specific items on the list. Puréed lemon grass. Pastry shells. Rösti potato mix and raclette cheese. Those very small Belgian chocolates in the shape of Christmas puddings.

Days of servants were of course long, long gone, but Mrs Flaherty would attend the day before the party to help clean and set things out, and on the day after she would come to clear, load the dishwasher with all that was dishwasher proof, and carefully hand rinse the good china. She would be generously reimbursed, and would take leftovers home with her.

Poor Mrs Flaherty. The wild thought had occurred to Duncan more than once in recent years, as some of their guests became too aged or infirm to come, that Mrs Flaherty might be invited to come to the gathering, might sit quietly in a corner with a plate of Tesco’s finest lemon cheesecake and enliven the atmosphere by her idiosyncratic use of the English language. (She had once assured him that the “module” under her arm had turned out to be harmless.) Her unintentionally droll commentaries on village life deserved a wider audience, he thought, but he had never mentioned this to his mother.

“Lesley and her mother usually come to us at New Year,” he said, becoming

aware of a silence. “We have a few people over. Not a late night.”

Why did he say this? Was he afraid the minister would think they might be having a rowdy binge-drinking session into the wee small hours?

“That’s good. It’s such a difficult time to be on your own. I’ve been worrying about her.”

Duncan glanced at the man. What right had *he* to be worrying about Lesley? Lesley wouldn’t appreciate such concern. She wasn’t particularly religious. Furthermore, she was very capable. She had always been capable.

At school, in the double desk beside him, Lesley had worn navy ribbons to match her cardigan tied at exactly the same place on each braid, and her white knee socks had remained firmly in place over her stout little calves. Her jotters were covered in smart brown paper. The ordinary village children generally used wallpaper scraps or left-over Christmas wrapping.

“She’s a very capable person,” he said, more loudly than he meant to. “Before the car park would be fine for me, if you can. At Kelseys,” he added.

“The delicatessen? Right. Of course, I don’t mean to say she’s not capable. But she’s not had... Ah, well, *de mortuis* etc... It would do her good to get more involved in different things now.”

Was this directed at him too, at his failure to get “involved” in things? “Thank you for the lift,” he said politely.

“My pleasure. Hope your party goes well.”

The smile ambushed him.

“Perhaps you and your wife would like to join us,” Duncan heard himself say. To his relief he found his offer declined. The minister and his family were already committed elsewhere.

“Big family thing. The men do the cooking so it’s a bit of a mess, but you know what they say, if a thing’s worth doing, it’s worth doing badly.”

The car drove off. Unfolding his A5 sheet, Duncan entered the delicatessen.

## Vitrolite

It was still pitch black outside when Lesley woke. She filled the kettle to make tea and turned on the radio. She had grown up with this kitchen, had hated it for as long as she could recall; the egg-yolk yellow vitrolite tiles on the walls, bordered with black, the everlasting brown linoleum, the pulley overhead. The wood and metal were original, the ropes had been replaced twice in her memory. Everything perfectly serviceable and perfectly hideous. No tile would ever break unless someone swung a saucepan at it. At least she had scored a small victory there. Aluminium had been replaced with stainless steel, thanks to an article in the health pages of the *Herald*, which had convinced Mother that aluminium was dangerous.

She disposed of the leftovers and the surplus food donated by her neighbours, some into the dustbin and some by flushing it down the toilet, in measured amounts, so as not to block the system. Now she had to try to remember which plates and bowls came from whom.

The white stoneware casserole was from the Robertsons next door. She would scour it carefully, and leave it on their doorstep, rather than ring the doorbell. Ruby exhausted her. She sucked up information like a vacuum cleaner sucking up dust. She peeked through her net curtains all the time, and chided the postman if he didn't close the gate after him. She picked up litter from her front garden and threw it back into the street each time she went out. Her husband was always Mr Robertson, never Walter. And the eyebrows! They took the proverbial biscuit. Completely plucked out then painted in blue, they gave her a perpetual look of superiority and astonishment.

The cornflakes had gone stale, but Lesley ate her way through half the bowl before thinking *Why am I doing this? I don't have to eat these. I can eat, or not eat. No-one is going to ask.* The idea rocked her, despite its smallness. She stared at a dribble of milk on the chequered oilcloth.

Careful, she told herself. This might be all freedom amounted to. Until the lawyer dealt with everything, she didn't know whether there was money or not. Too soon yet to throw saucepans at walls, or install a shower, or abandon her job and move from perpetual rain to somewhere warm and beautiful. And where would she go? And what would she do, a woman her age, alone? It wouldn't happen. She would go back at work, to the bickering of the other admin staff, and harried teachers' demands, and pupils requesting the toilet key, and the same old post-Christmas conversations. ...*love them but it's wonderful when they leave honestly I think I've seen that film five times at*

*least if I never eat a mince pie again it'll be too soon you're so lucky Lesley going home to a quiet house and your meal made for you, instead of a husband and children mumphing and complaining...*

No such luck now, if luck it had ever been.

She took her tea though to the front sitting room to begin clearing out the desk. It seemed as good a place as any.

## The party

“I’m so glad you decided to come, Lesley. Oh, thank you, you shouldn’t have.”

What Lesley “shouldn’t have” was a box of Arran Aromatics soaps wrapped in flowered paper. She hadn’t in fact bought this - it was one of several she’d found in her mother’s wardrobe, but there was still a recognisable scent of lavender when she sniffed the box. *Waste not, want not*, she told herself. Duncan, festive in his Crawford tartan waistcoat and matching bow tie, was hovering behind his mother, waiting to take her coat and hat.

“And how are you, my dear?” Mrs Crawford was wearing cashmere as always. The shade this year was grey, neck and hem edged with a paler silver grey that toned exactly with her pearls.

But all was not as always. This was a new thing, being here alone. And the questioning that began in her head, this was brand new. Was this woman really “glad”? Was she interested in Lesley’s wellbeing?

*Thank you for asking. Let’s sit down for an hour and I will tell you how I am, or rather I will explore how I feel, because I’m not in the least sure. My heart feels as if it wants to burst. Do you think that’s possible?*

Perhaps Mrs Crawford was glad because if people didn’t come she would know she had lost her importance as the prize inhabitant of the village. Perhaps her doubts were already growing. So many new people, so many new houses on all sides encroaching on the old village. Perhaps she was already forgotten. The malice of this thought was so sharp and so satisfying that Lesley felt momentarily dizzy.

“I’m quite well, thank you,” she said.

Why had she come? She pulled off her boots, (placing them on the newspapers which had been spread on a tray beside the umbrella stand, in advance, as always) and slipped on her good black patent shoes. They were old but immaculate, rather like Duncan’s bow tie. He only ever wore it at New Year. Was this why she had come, out of cowardice, out of habit?

Or was being here an act of courage? How much easier it would have been to send a note. *I am still too distressed by Mother’s death. I know you will understand.* There was distress, true, but it wasn’t her mother’s death that was distressing her.

It had been hard and weary work at first, going through her mother’s correspondence but without warning it had suddenly become less weary, because, there were, inexplicably, several letters addressed to Miss Lesley Crosthwaite which she had never received or read. A letter from Jennifer, one of her friends at college. A wedding

invitation, dated twenty years previously from someone whose name now rang no bell. And a postcard from Canada, from Hector...

“Ready? Do come and meet everyone.”

The hall through which she followed Mrs Crawford was just as she remembered; the nearly black sandalwood chest brought back from the Colonel’s war years in Burma, the gross and politically incorrect cast-iron money banks sitting on it, “Dinah” and “The Jolly Nigger”, waiting to raise pennies to their red-lipped mouths. The elaborately framed still life painted by Mrs Crawford’s Victorian mother on glass. The lilies on the glass topped table, pouring out their too-lush scent.

Duncan had disappeared upstairs with the coat. His mother placed a tentative three fingers beneath her elbow to usher her forward into the conservatory, with its tall plants and white statuary.

“Sherry? Or something soft? Do help yourself. I think you know most people, dear,” her hostess added, hastily, for the doorbell was tinkling.

And of course Lesley did know most of them. Her own GP, the almost completely bald Dr MacKinnon, and his nervous wife, whose fair hair had thinned over the years as if in sympathy. The new young doctor whose name she’d heard, but could not now remember. There was no wife beside him, perhaps there wasn’t one yet, he looked so young, no more than sixteen. Here was Miss Calvert, the energetic headmistress of the primary school, looking incomplete without her bicycle. Standing apart from these, Duncan’s cousins, a couple she recognized but had never spoken to, and the tall bearded man who was something terribly important in the High Court, with his terribly slim wife. The grown-up daughter, not quite so slim, had a man with her this year.

“Glad to see you, Lesley,” Dr MacKinnon said.

Since he wasn’t a man famed in the village for his bedside manner, his gladness, Lesley thought, was possibly more sincere than Mrs Crawford’s. He was an intelligent man, and thorough, which was what counted. With Lesley anyway.

She accepted his firm handshake, though even here questions were forming in her mind, because this man had been their family doctor for years and years. *Did you know what she was doing? Did you guess? My heart feels as if it would like to burst.*

“You won’t know Dr Gordon,” he nodded at the teenager beside him. “Just joined us. English, but it’s getting harder to find a man these days, so we took him in.”

The young man laughed, but his manner suggested the joke had been told many times. His hair was dark and curly, his skin as smooth and flawless as a baby’s. Surely he wasn’t old enough to command birth and death and the stretch in between?

“And what do you do?” the young man asked.

“I’m a secretary in the High School.”

Instantly Lesley knew that she had been boxed and labelled. Spinster. Overweight. Not very bright. She stared fixedly at the wine glasses on the glaring white linen.

“So you get all these lovely long holidays.”

“No,” she told him, and turning away, took the nearest glass. What was she doing? As a rule when this question was asked, she chattered obligingly about how good that would be, and what a pity the office staff didn’t get the holidays, but it wasn’t so terrible, because the school was quiet without the children etc etc., aligning herself with the other speaker, positioning herself alongside like a friendly little dingy sidling up to a bigger vessel.

“You do know that’s champagne,” a voice said.

She looked at the glass in her hand, then at Duncan. Dear Duncan. Unchanging as the war memorial. Predictable as winter weather. He was playing with his top waistcoat button. From childhood she had envied those fingers so unlike her little stubby ones. His handwriting had won the class prize year after year. As always, he had written the New Year invitations in immaculate copperplate. Fountain pen, royal blue ink on cream card. And written, no doubt, with his mother at his elbow checking the guest list.

“Not that there’s any reason...” he began, flushing slightly.

She ought to have helped him, but in her new perverse mood she found herself hesitating.

“Duncan, dear, can I have a word?” his mother said, ushering forward a new arrival, whom Lesley recognised with slight surprise, for neither Duncan nor his mother were regular church goers. She watched Duncan introduce the minister to his cousin. She didn’t want to speak to the minister, didn’t want to speak to anyone. She turned away, walking to the window alcove as if to admire the flower arrangement. This was the difference, she saw now. This was what it meant, this being here by herself. She was expected to speak. It was no longer possible to stand beside Mother and smile and make murmuring sounds. How incredibly stupid not to have thought of it before. Her usual stupidity, of course: the failure to think ahead, to remember that she was always seasick until she was on board and it was too late, or to recall that coconut in a cake or a sweet made her gag till the slice or spoonful was irretrievably in her mouth.

There was no-one here she wanted to be with, not her hostess, not the relations, and certainly not robust Miss Calvert, the only other single woman present, who had calf muscles like a man and was always eager to pour forth at length on her latest

adventure storming the Alps or the Andes.

“I expect you know everyone here.” The young doctor had followed her.

If she said nothing he would surely move away. She sipped at her drink.

How strangely the minister was dressed. Not at all like the man she remembered from the funeral. He wore a checked shirt, with no tie, a brown leather waistcoat, and dark corduroy trousers. He looked like a cowboy. She imagined a horse, tied up to the rhododendrons in the front garden. Duncan had vanished. She assumed he'd taken the man's coat away.

The young doctor was still beside her, waiting for an answer. What question had he asked? She took a large mouthful of the champagne, and felt it trickling down inside her chest, bright and cold but somehow warming at the same time.

“Doctor Gordon, have you found somewhere to live yet?”

They both turned. Mrs MacKinnon was blinking at them from under her long, sparse fringe. Her dress was a pale lemon colour, with a pattern of daisies and leaves which looked as if they were wilting, as if the material had been made up the wrong way round.

“Early days, I suppose, but has anything turned up for you?”

“I've been looking at the new builds,” he said, “Over at the site of the old brickworks, is that right?”

Mrs MacKinnon frowned. “But they're all so squashed together. You could lean out of one window and hand something to your neighbour. And they're so close to the tinkers' site...”

*Travellers*, Lesley told her silently. She knew two of the children from the school; identical twins, round-faced, with small eyes and long un-brushed hair. They attended intermittently but caused no trouble.

“Yes, well at least you know the price,” the young doctor said, “I tried for a couple on the far side of the river, but the asking price bears no resemblance to what they go for. It's very different from what I'm used to.”

There was a younger child, too young for school, a blond sweet-faced girl, with huge dark brown eyes who had stared back at her from their ramshackle van outside the post office, almost as if trying to read her mind.

Suddenly everyone seemed determined to crowd her into the corner. She tried to move back but there was nowhere to go except into the curtains.

“I believe our Scottish system is better, in fact, but everything's gone crazy these days,” Dr MacKinnon rested a large hand on his wife's shoulder. “We were lucky, bought our first house at the beginning of the seventies, six thousand it cost us. Four

years later we sold it for eleven. Price of oil went up, you see. I dare say we're sitting on half a million now. ”

“Oh, more than that I think,” one of the Crawford relations commented. “Property in the right place is always going to ....”

Dr McKinnon interrupted, “Ah, good, smells like the curry's been brought through. Hope you like a good strong curry, Gordon.”

But Mrs McKinnon was troubled. “I just think it's all so fast. The village isn't what it used to be. There are all sorts of people here now. I came over to the butcher's shop last week to collect our turkey and chipolatas, and the place was full, and when I looked round, I didn't know a single soul. I was the only one served by name, actually. You understand what I mean, don't you, Lesley? There are so many incomers now.”

“Well, I hope you don't disapprove of all the incomers, Mrs McKinnon,” the young doctor said. There was a pause, then everyone laughed. Lesley smiled with the rest, wishing she had the courage to point out that Mrs MacKinnon and her husband didn't in fact live in the village but in its much more salubrious neighbour, and that having come originally from an entirely different city on the other side of the country, they were incomers twice over.

A bell rang. There was a chorus of appreciative murmurs from those guests who recognised what this signified, and the tight little press of bodies around Lesley began to loosen. She knew exactly what would be on the table: a large pale salmon with its parsley and lemon slices, tiny pastry shells filled with paté and sunblush tomatoes, honey garlic chicken on bamboo skewers, the famous curry (the Colonel's secret recipe), with basmati rice, rösti potatoes in the Delft bowl for those who didn't like rice.

None of which she wanted. There was a metallic taste in her mouth. Had she been grinding her teeth in the night? She looked at her drink. It was a pretty colour, but tasted no better to her than lemonade, an insipid lemonade at that. Why was such a fuss made over it? There was no alcohol in their own house, a legacy of her grandfather's steadfast adherence to the principles of the Rechabites. My house, she corrected herself. My house, where all that has been hidden will be laid bare. Was that the bible or Shakespeare?

*All will be laid bare.*

All? She drank some more, and more again.

“Miss Crosthwaite?”

It was the minister, gesturing at her, inviting her to come to the table. He really did look like a cowboy without a horse.

*Greetings from Calgary*, Hector's postcard had said on the front in bright yellow letters, with a mounted policeman holding a long lance with a pennant. On the reverse he'd written, *Hope you're not working too hard. Will write again when I'm settled. Best wishes your friend Hector.*

She had tried to think of some explanation, but in the end there was only one. Mother had ruled out forever the mounted policeman, the impossible shininess of his boots, the assured curve of his legs around the horse, the pure and perfect scarlet of his uniform.

She put down her empty glass, picked up a full one, and went in to the dining room.

## Hunger

Ryan was hungry and the smell of Michelle's chips made it worse. The door opened. Looking round, he recognised the girl at once. She recognised him, too. She looked away so quickly he was certain of it. The first thing that interested him was that she definitely was not wearing any makeup apart from lip gloss. And her fair hair looked natural too. When she came to the counter with a DVD he didn't move away, just studied the list of titles that were 'coming soon'.

"This is two days late," Michelle said.

She doesn't have enough to pay for the DVD. Her face reddens. "I'm really sorry," she says. Her voice has no sharp edges, only curves, like the outline of pink tulip petals beginning to open.

"Here," Ryan drops a five pound note on the desk.

Michelle raises her eyebrows but takes the money.

He feels the girl looking at him, stunned by his generous gesture. He holds out a hand, but instead she comes close. She leans against him, murmuring her thanks...

"Excuse me."

He turned his head.

"I don't know you."

"So?"

"I can't take your money. You can't do that."

"I just did."

She stared at him. He felt as if he was made of sand, and it was sliding, as if a hole inside him was widening like some special effect in a movie. He wasn't worthy. Nobody round here said excuse me, or had flawless skin. And it was true, he wasn't worthy, because she didn't reply, just turned away, stiffly walking towards the door, her head proud on her neck, chin up above the cream scarf.

He followed her out, watched her half walk, half run along the street, the way girls always ran, knees together. She got into a car. He kept walking, glanced in. The driver was male, his own age, ok maybe a bit older, with the well-fed, well-groomed, easy on himself middle-class look he now knew so well. He could practically smell the soap.

## **The waistcoat and the prawn**

“Did you know this was champagne?” Lesley asked the minister.

He nodded.

She moved, and stumbled a little.

“I’m fine, thank you,” she said, shrugging off his hand, which for some reason seemed to be attempting to dust her sleeve.

“Why don’t you sit here, and let me fill a plate for you.”

She sank down into a chair. Above and around her head, people were talking with their mouths full, exclaiming over the food, moving in and out. The minister didn’t come back. So much for good manners. Dark suits and bright dresses blurred and the noise level rose, though no-one bothered to talk to her. She might as well have been a cushion. Finding her glass empty, she placed it very carefully on the arm of the chair, then, feeling that might be too precarious, she picked it up again. Very slowly she leaned forward and managed to place it on the floor where, she realized a moment later, it was just as likely to be knocked over. Really, this was all very difficult. They should have put tables near the chairs.

Duncan’s mother was coming towards her across the room, a plate in one hand.

Lesley said, “Thank you so much. I’m so sorry. I was having such a problem knowing where to put this beautiful glass. Crystal glass. It’s very kind of you. Kind of you.” She burped, but only a very small burp, which she managed to turn into a discreet cough.

Duncan’s mother didn’t answer. She hovered for a moment then for no apparent reason turned away without handing over the plate of food. Puzzled, Lesley watched the immaculate white chignon and its owner disappear into the corridor that led to the kitchen, and the pantry. She knew that pantry. At one of Duncan’s parties, playing hide and seek, she and another little girl had hidden there in the dark, and when found, had panicked, bringing down the roller towel and its fittings.

“I was so frightened. I thought we had broken it, ruined it for ever,” she said.

The important cousin’s skinny wife looked down at her, eyebrows raised.

“Nobody told me it wasn’t, you see,” Lesley explained. “We just ran back to the others. So nobody knew it was me, except that other girl. And now you.”

The woman didn’t smile back. No sense of humour. Her loss.

“I was never good at hiding. Or seeking, come to that. My mother was. Did you know that? She hid Hector’s postcard from me. God knows what else she hid. And not a thing I can do about it now.”

The words reverberated, but whether inside or outside her head she wasn't sure. She sat back. So much noise. Where was it coming from? Where was John Wayne with the promised food? Duncan was in front of her now, and yes, he had brought food, but when she reached up to take it from his hands, the plate unbalanced. Most of the contents flew onto his waistcoat.

She repressed a giggle and tried to get up to rescue a large prawn from his silver buttons. The other way round, she corrected herself. The prawn was dead, there was nothing to be done for the prawn, it was the button she needed to help...

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Duncan. Your poor, lovely waistcoat. Cheer up. Here, have a ..." she stared at the object on her palm, "cherry tomato."

Being helped onto her feet was quite fun, and being half carried into the corridor and into the kitchen was rather like a waltz. It was all different from what she remembered. Lots of white, lots of lovely shiny steel. Where was the pantry? Dr MacKinnon's big, red face blocked her view. His breath was very garlicky. She let him hold her wrist but it was hard to hear what he was saying.

"I believe I would like to go home now," she said.

## **Jenny's chickenpox**

"But I told you I didn't have any cash, Harriet. If you needed more, I could have got some out of the machine."

"I didn't *know* I would need more. *You* didn't tell me it was overdue."

He shrugged.

"Are we going to sit here all night?" she demanded.

"Where would the young lady like to go?"

"New Zealand."

"Aabody would."

She closed her eyes. Sometimes he slipped into the Doric just to annoy her.

He started the engine. "I take it you just want to go home, then?"

Back in the days when Dad had a real job, there would have been money enough for them all to go and visit. This morning's e-mail had a picture of the latest beach picnic attached: Aunt Rhona and Uncle Malcolm, and the cousins, and Grampa next to Mum looking very brown and happy.

"Don't you hate this place, Kerr? After being in Aberdeen? I hate it so much."

They'd had this talk before. He sided with their parents. This was where their father had been called, he said, so that was that. Blah blah blah. A place was the people in it, he said, not the buildings, and people were much the same the world over. Which was so not true.

"So fitya dee'in tonight? Coming with me?"

The evening had unexpectedly become a blank sheet because of their cousin Jenny's chickenpox. No family gathering. Behind their father's back Kerr had punched the air, with a gleeful, *yes*, and made a couple of phone calls to see which of his friends from the church were around, and where the best party was happening. Her father had decided to take up an invitation from one of his parishioners.

She made a face. "I won't know anyone."

"You know all of them."

"They're your friends Kerr, not mine."

"They all like you."

Right, she thought, as in *I really like children, but I couldn't eat a whole one*. She'd been at gatherings with Kerr's friends before. Never again.

## **Terrible things**

“Miss Crosthwaite!”

“I am perfectly alright, Dr Gordon,” she called, continuing to walk down the driveway away from him.

“Yes, I know, but my car is at the gate and Dr McKinnon doesn’t want you walking home by yourself, not at this hour.” He was perfectly sober, having stayed with fresh orange juice all evening. She had refused coffee, so McKinnon, satisfied that she was not going to faint, instructed him to drive the lady home, blaming the combination of champagne and temazepam. Their hostess had become indignant: if she had known Lesley was on medication... The elderly bachelor son was worse than useless, flapping about in the background like a demented stork. What a crew.

She stopped abruptly.

“My boots,” she said. “I left my boots.”

“I’ll fetch them for you.”

“No. No, leave them.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “You can recover them another time.”

Now, finally, she accepted the offer of his arm, even leaning against him. She was wearing perfume, something old fashioned he recognised but couldn’t name, something he thought his mother had worn.

“You’ll have to give me directions,” he said. “Remember, I’m one of the pesky newcomers.”

“You must think...”

“I must think what?”

But she didn’t finish her sentence.

He got her into the car with no further difficulty. He’d dismissed her initially: one more menopausal spinster. Then he’d seen her face change at the use of the word “tinker”: he wondered if there was more to her. She’d seemed profoundly unhappy, despite the fixed smile. Only when they slowed to a stop outside her gate, and he looked up at the house did he remember being told that she had lost her mother recently.

In his best bedside voice he said, “This is a very hard time for you. I think everyone understands that.”

“I don’t care if they understand or not.”

“Good for you.”

She twisted round to face him. “Why did you come here?”

Her face was jaundiced in the yellow light from the street lamps.

“I was asked to see you safely home.”

“No, here. This village.”

It was the first time anyone had asked him. “I needed the job,” he told her. “I’ve been a locum for a long time. It was a case of...”

“This is a terrible place. Terrible things happen here. Terrible things have happened to me.”

“How can you be a doctor?” she said looking up at him, “You’re so young.”

“Thirty two. Not so very young.” He held out a hand, but she made no move.

“I never thought I would be fifty. I have no idea how it happened. One day I was seventeen and now look at me. I might as well be dead.”

“Come now, don’t talk like that. Let’s get you safely home.” She let him help her out.

“You’ll feel better in the morning, once you’ve had a good...”

“Oh, go to Hell,” she said loudly, slamming the car door. She pushed open her gate and closed it behind her with unnecessary force.

He watched her progress up the path. It occurred to him that there might be stacks of prescription medications in the house after the mother’s long illness. It would be irresponsible not to check. He dialled Dr MacKinnon’s mobile number.

### **e-numbers**

“There’s a little custard left,” Ruby called through the hatch into the dining room.  
“No thank you, dear. That was just fine.”

Why was there always just a little custard left? Because Ruby still cooked enough of everything for Walter Junior who had left home three years before. He was always offered the little custard, or the little stew or whatever, and always said no, in the hope that someday, some happy day, Ruby might accept that Walter Junior was not coming back, not even for special days like New Year.

“Tea? And a biscuit?”

“Just tea, dear. That would be lovely.”

“I’ll bring it through then.”

He studied the fish tank for several minutes, looking at each of the residents to make sure they were swimming correctly, that their eyes were clear, that each fin was erect. He loved his fish. Their effortless meandering from frond to frond with no contact or conflict seemed to him a way of life little short of perfection. No-one was allowed to touch the tank or do anything to it and its occupants. He had had a bad scare some years back, when Ruby decided to clean the outdoor pond. Happily tonight all seemed to be well with each little Platy and Angel Fish. He dabbed his lips with the napkin, and made his way through to the sitting room. Tonight’s pudding had been tinned pears in fruit juice. He wasn’t over fond of pears, particularly in juice. Sometimes they had a sharpness that annoyed the tongue, but he wasn’t allowed the ones in syrup any more

Healthy eating was Ruby’s latest thing. The weekly shop was taking a lot longer, now that she had to read for e-numbers and saturated fat. He missed a few of the old favourites. A little of what you fancy, they used to say, even though there was less to fancy back then. You had your carrots, onions and peas, your potatoes mashed or chipped. The young ones had laughed at him one day at work, when he said he remembered where and when he’d first tasted sweetcorn. Ruby was on at him to grow their own vegetables come Spring. The back garden was big enough, but he wasn’t persuaded. Her enthusiasms tended to diminish if ignored for long enough.

He switched on the TV, turned the sound right down, and rested his head back on the settee, closing his eyes. His uncle, also named Walter, had been a great gardener. There was a greenhouse in the garden in Peebles, not a particularly large one, but inside it Uncle Walter had a vine that produced luscious black grapes year after year, apparently unharmed and untainted by the smoke from Uncle Walter’s pipe.

“Piddle,” Uncle Walter announced solemnly, one early summer afternoon, when they were standing together, looking up at the small green fruits, the man puffing on his pipe, the small boy passively inhaling. “That’s the secret, laddie. Plenty of piddle. Great for the parsley too.”

He remembered still the feeling, half terror, half joy that thrilled through his eight year old body. Was he going to be asked to contribute? Would he be able to pee on demand? But the invitation didn’t come. He knew now that Uncle Walter would have used a jug or a bowl when he went to the bathroom, the greenhouse being in full view of the neighbours, but for years the image of his uncle spraying cheerfully in the greenhouse and over the parsley bed cheered him when school or life in general became dull or difficult.

What would Ruby make of that one, he wondered. Where’s your e-numbers now?

“Here you are, dear,” she set his cup and plate down and returned to the dishes in the kitchen. It was always tea now. She wouldn’t let him drink coffee in the evening. “We’re not as young as we were,” she said. He knew he was meant to say something flattering about her when she said this kind of thing. Sometimes he did and sometimes he didn’t. What life really boiled down to, he mused, biting into his organic digestive, was knowing when to play dumb. *Kid on you’re daft and you’ll get a hurl on the barra.* Playing dumb took a certain amount of finesse, all the same. He bought a large Dairy Milk every morning when he stopped for his paper, but he never brought any of it home, not even a couple of pieces for a sly nibble. Ruby would have smelt it when she turned out the trouser pockets for the wash. He stared at the silent screen. For the first time it occurred to him that retirement might involve difficulties he had not so far considered.

“Walter,” she sat down beside him with her latest copy of Puzzle Monthly, and her rubber-tipped pencil. “I’ve been wondering.”

“Have you?”

Behind the glasses, her eyes were large and earnest. “I’ve been wondering if we should ask Lesley next door to come in for tea now and then. She’ll be lonely. I don’t like to think of her on her own.”

He said nothing.

Much later, when the TV had been switched off, and Ruby had already gone upstairs, he was checking that the front door was locked when he heard a bang. Car door, he told himself, not loud enough for fireworks. These had been going off through most of the evening. No doubt there would be more at midnight.

“Did you hear that?” Ruby called from upstairs.

“Hear what?”

“There’s a car at our gate.”

“I don’t think so, not at this hour.” And if there was, it wouldn’t be Walter Junior, that was for sure. When he went into the bedroom, she was standing with her nose through the curtains.

“Oh my,” she said. Closing them carefully, she darted to the side for a better view.

He sat on the bed, pushed each slipper off with the other foot, and began unbuttoning his trousers.

“Oh. Oh my goodness.”

“Why are we whispering?”

“Lesley’s sitting on the path.”

“Hers or ours?”

With a sigh he rebuttoned himself and joined her. Sure enough, there was Lesley, sitting on her own path beside the doorstep, facing the street.

“Do something, Walter.”

He scratched the back of his head. It was all very well to say do something, when you didn’t have to do the doing. He was still trying to think of an answer, when a male figure opened Lesley’s gate and began walking up the path. The man helped her to her feet, and then, Walter surmised, there was an exchange of words. He gently detached Ruby from the window, letting the curtain fall, deaf to her whispered protests.

“It’s none of our business,” he said.

Ruby smoothed a little Nivea over her face and lay on her back for a while to let the cream penetrate before her skin touched the pillowslip. She had put ear-plugs in, to counteract the bangs which would continue into the wee small hours, and she lay as still as possible, so as not to disturb Walter. Her mind meanwhile was anything but still.

## Love

*The ruined factory with its gaping window frames and rusty pipes smelled exactly like the abandoned buildings of his childhood where he had stripped and closed his eyes. When he moved the brick and shone his torch into the space, the bar of chocolate was gone. From his coat pocket he took its replacement, a chocolate egg this time, plastic wrap over the bright coloured foil to protect it from dirt and damp. He put it into the hole, repositioning the brick. He imagined her delight when she found it.*

*He switched off the torch and started back to the track. He had never hurt a child, and he never would. Everything was under control. He couldn't harm a child. All he wanted to do was show them love.*

*He was drawn to lonely children, those who were troubled as he had been troubled. Often the loveliest children were the most troubled. What a lovely child, people said, out loud, wanting the child to hear, but their saying it changed nothing. It did not make the child feel lovely, did not make the child feel loved.*

*When he was older he had taken his bike for long rides, choosing villages where he wasn't known. Winter was better than summer, with darkness coming early. From a back garden he watched till a child was put to bed. He would wait in the darkness, then flash a torch into the bedroom window so that the child would get up and look out.*

*No-one had been harmed. He wouldn't harm a child. No-one saw him, and he was careful never to return to the same place.*

## **Child's play**

Being an only child, Lesley had learned to play on her own. When she was a toddler, her father made a sandpit for her in the back garden against the stone wall at the end, next to the coal shed. She spent a lot of time there in summer and on dry winter days, building little mounds that were houses, and gardens with stones for walls. Doorways were made by inserting a thumb and moving it from side to side. Gardens came alive with fallen rose petals. Water from the rain butt and daisies and buttercups from the drying green were also allowed. She knew that fairies weren't real, just as Santa wasn't real, so she had no foolish thoughts about little people coming to live in the mounds overnight. Mother could see her from the back room window, and knew she was safe.

Had she ever come out to watch or give suggestions? Or praise? No. She had played alone, completely contented, hands muddy, the scent of the summer roses all around her. She began to see what she hadn't seen then, what a child couldn't know. It was as simple as sunlight. It was the freedom to make something without help that she'd liked, the freedom to choose, and the fact that the concept of making it "better" didn't exist.

She would be fifty on her next birthday. Far too old to have children. Some of the staff her age were bringing in photographs of their grandchildren. They all looked exactly the same. If Hector was still alive he would be fifty three. It must be almost thirty years since she had tried to invite him home for tea. She hadn't made a fuss when Mother said no, since he was only a friend, not a boyfriend. She'd assumed, at twenty, that there would be, if not plenty of young men, at least some to choose from. And all the time, there was Mother, keeping her safe, letting her make her mud-pie houses, watching from the window.

## Ryan's night

Ryan's night began well. He met with everyone down Dimity Lane, happy in his new limited edition trainers, a joint present from his sisters, and happier still when a pint of beer was passed to him by someone he didn't know. The street was heaving with people, the queues for the bars were mad. No neds anywhere; the street was closed except for ticket holders, but one of the class had got tickets, his Dad had contacts, so that was good, and everyone was allowed to drink outside, which was brilliant, because the rain was off and now and then you could see stars overhead when the clouds cleared, and there was a great mix of people, and just a few policemen watching with impassive faces. Along with a couple of his pals, he cracked himself up playing "spot the media type" for at least half an hour. The guy would have square thick glasses, the woman with him would be in trendy clothes that were too young for her. It was a doddle, it was like they had a lifestyle catalogue of their own they had all bought from.

He wished he'd a scarf, some dull colour like grey in cashmere would have been perfect, or maybe white silk, he'd seen a photo of Sting wearing white silk, but otherwise he felt he was looking just about right. There were loads of students, some of them from wealthy backgrounds, going by their voices, but hey, it was the West End, so everyone had made a lot of effort to look as if they hadn't made an effort. Really all he'd done was take a short cut. Fine Art students like himself were always more scruffy than the rest anyway. You could spot the Design types a mile off. The t-shirts had to have cool graphics, the necklace would be some surfer type thing.

The girls were amazing. He got talking to one, almost as tall as himself, who said her name was Scarlett, which he doubted, but so what, she was seriously amazing, the whole front of her hair cut in a fringe, slanting sideways across her eyes to the level of her ear, but after a few minutes, it was obvious she'd done a few cheeky lines already, and he moved on. He couldn't stand the nonsense.

After a while, they all moved on via the Underground to the city centre for the fireworks display. Not so good. The crowd was more aggressive, a lot of fast drinking going on, a lot of joints being smoked, and other stuff, which was fine if you were the one doing them, but he'd promised his school art teacher, the one decent guy on the staff, that he wouldn't and so far he hadn't. That was one guy who knew what it was all about.

He kept a smile on his face, avoided eye contact, stuck close to those he knew. To his relief, soon after all the bangs were finished, someone said it was time to go if they wanted to get to the party while there was still transport. He was tired now, the earlier

glow was wearing off, leaving him almost sober, and almost inclined to go home, but hey, it was New Year.

Good Decision. The party - he didn't know whose house it was - was well stocked, at the start anyway, and not too many people, though it was definitely a weird mix. Some were old for this sort of thing, and some of the girls, even made up and in the low lighting looked way too young to him. He hung out in the kitchen when it got busier, avoiding the casualties, and the daft hyper girls with their breasts falling out of their tops talking nonsense in the middle of the living room. The music was better than it had been all night. The bass was deep and satisfying. The guy on the decks had good taste. Going to the toilet, however, was a fucking pain, having to defend his manhood in the queue of girls. Then suddenly it was time to go home. He'd been stressing about it for a while. He'd totally drunk himself sober.

For the first couple of miles he had company, an older guy and his girlfriend, but after that he was on his own. It had occurred to him earlier that he might phone his married sister, but he'd been sick once in their car. A loving father would have been handy.

There were no photographs of his father in the house at all. Both of his sisters remembered him, but neither they nor his mother ever mentioned him or why he'd gone, months after Ryan's birth. It was pathetic, not knowing what your own father had looked like. Not his hair colour, or his eyes, not whether you looked anything like him, nothing.

He turned into a doorway for a moment, to let a couple of mental-looking guys go past. The wind seemed colder now. Everyone on the street felt like a potential hazard. Kids in groups hailed him; he called back. Cars passed, there were lit windows, and now and then bursts of music. He wasn't exactly alone. No, he was always alone, that was the truth of it. This is how I am, he thought sadly, this is my life. This is my grim journey, fighting the wind, in the dark. He felt almost heroic for a few yards, until reality thudded back. Being alone was nothing to be proud of. It was a simple fact.

On the far side of the road, inside a bus shelter, an older couple were fighting one another, mostly shouting but with raised fists. The woman had weight on her side, and a bag with a useful silver chain. On his side another small group of neds was coming closer.

### **Everything as usual**

When Duncan came down a little after nine, Mrs Flaherty's coat was already hanging on the rack beside the back door. His mother was still asleep, and would not descend for some time, but Mrs Flaherty had let herself in very quietly with her own backdoor key.

He looked into the front porch, irritated to see no post there. He found himself disliking this disruption of normality more each year. Once he was back at work, there would be plenty to do: e-mails and letters that hadn't been replied to, photocopying needing done urgently by disorganised lecturers, and all those troublesome requests with not enough information that were put to one side by less diligent members of staff to be dealt with "when there's more time."

Not that the day would be empty. He would have to drive Mother into town. He had two book tokens and a gift voucher, but the streets and shops would be even more crowded than usual, and with browsing time strictly limited he would probably end up choosing things he didn't need or want. Once he'd bought a book he already owned, caught out by a change in jacket design. He made a mental note to put deodorant on the shopping list as he had almost run out. He'd once believed that deodorant was unmanly, but had recently begun using it after hearing the female staff discuss the man who looked after the photocopier.

"Good morning, Mrs Flaherty," he called, giving plenty of warning as he approached the kitchen. She was a woman who responded badly to the unexpected. Not a nervous woman, exactly, but one who was happier with order. She seemed to experience profound delight when scrubbing surfaces, and although he approved of this perfectionism, it concerned him that she went through so much bleach and anti-bacterial cleanser. "Think of the oceans, Mrs Flaherty," he had said, trying to introduce her to the idea of eco-friendliness, but the oceans were nothing to her, compared to the satisfaction of a gleaming sink.

She straightened up from loading the dishwasher. "Oh, thank you for the picture frame, Mr Crawford." Her red face beamed. "It was very kind of you and Mrs Crawford. I've put my grandson in it."

He imagined that sturdily built infant with his head stuck in the frame after the manner of the traditional child in the park railings, but merely nodded as he moved towards the coffee machine, repressing as one so frequently had to with Mrs Flaherty the urge to say something which would only confuse her.

“And did your night go well, Mr Crawford?”

“Yes, thank you, everything went as usual.”

This was a lie. He switched on the machine and reached into the cupboard for a fresh packet of beans.

“And yourself?” he asked. The sealant strip seemed to resist him deliberately, breaking half way round.

“Oh, just a quiet night. That wild boy of mine was out with his pals, of course. Only came in when I was getting up....”

In the past he had made the mistake of showing interest in this Ryan, and particularly in his success in getting into Art School. Mrs Flaherty now assumed that he wanted to be kept up to date. Fortunately she seemed happy with short comments on his part, and the occasional prompt kept her going for a while.

“...and to tell the truth, Mr Crawford, I’m glad when it’s all over. It’s getting worse every year. It all starts too early....”

He nodded again, assuming a listening expression while the foam formed on his cappuccino. Then he reproached himself. She was right. In fact, despite being Mrs Flaherty she was often right. It was simply unfortunate that the flat nasal tone made her statements ludicrous when they were perfectly reasonable, and that her lack of mental subtlety made irony a country forever unknown.

He dipped his tongue into the thick warm foam. He ought to be more kind. She was hard working, honest, self-effacing and possibly the least vain woman he had ever met. A crueller man might say she had little to be vain about. If only she would wear clothes that fitted her. He glanced at the troublesome upper arms, which bulged from the short sleeves of her pink nylon overalls. Was he unkind? He didn’t mean to be.

At the door he paused. “You’ll make yourself a parcel, as usual, Mrs Flaherty, won’t you?”

“If you’re sure...”

“Oh, of course. No sense in waste. Mother left out the containers for you.”

He took his cup through to the study, closing the door so he wouldn’t hear the clearing of the previous night’s debris. Not that she was noisy. The dishwasher would be stacked and set but not switched on, nor would she approach the vacuum cleaner until Mother was up.

There was a patch of blue sky beyond the church spire on the opposite side of the village. The day might yet improve. He stood by the window, sipping his drink, relishing the contrast of the milk against the heat of the coffee below, the slight bitterness of the cocoa against the full strength. In the branches of the rowan tree, a

patch of reddish brown caught his eye. *Erithacus rubecula*. He was fond of his robin, and glad to see it reappear each winter. He said Hardy's first verse aloud. There were no other birds feeding this morning, but the level of seed had gone down since yesterday, so presumably they had come and gone, and all in the garden was as it should be.

His own feathers were still ruffled. If anything he felt more aggrieved.

"Why is that man here?" his mother had asked, *sotto voce*, thrusting the Reverend's red anorak into his arms. At first he'd only half heard, troubled by the sight of Lesley drinking champagne. And not sipping either, but taking great swallows of it.

"I invited him. Mother, have you noticed that..."

"I assumed *that*, Duncan, since as far as I know we have not placed an advertisement in the Post Office window. I'm asking you why?"

"I..."

"I cannot believe you would do this, Duncan. Without even having the grace to mention it to me?"

He worried for the pearls, so tight was her stranglehold on them.

"Well, what's done is done. We'll just have to keep a close eye on things. But for heaven's sake, don't let him get near Eunice Calvert. She can't abide the man. I am very upset, Duncan."

He took the scarlet jacket to the downstairs cloak room and hung it beside those of the other guests. How could he have known the man would come? The invitation had been lightly given and immediately declined. It wasn't his fault if the fellow didn't have the good manners to let them know he'd changed his mind.

He turned from the window and switched on Radio Three, but after a moment switched it off. It was a string quartet, something he could not abide. There seemed to be an unending supply of them at this time of year. Scraping the last of the foam with the teaspoon, he stared at the bookshelves. His eye lighted on a dear friend, Jonsson's *Birds of Europe*. He eased the volume off the shelf and sat down.

## **A consultation**

Miss Crosthwaite was tense, Dr Gordon thought, and perhaps a little thinner since their last meeting. How much of that night did she remember? He had tried to calm her down, assuring her of his sympathy. It must be terrible, he said, to care for someone for so long, to lose someone you loved so much.

“I’m not entirely sure I loved my mother,” she’d told him, enunciating the words with great care.

Her face looked so tragic he had to fight the desire to laugh.

“I see. Well, at the risk of being slick and trite, I would suggest that...”

“...that I forgive her? I can’t. She ruined my life.”

The words slipped round his cynicism.

“Then don’t let her bloody well ruin the rest of it,” he said.

To his astonishment she leaned forward, lifted his hand and kissed it.

He began as he always did. “So how are things?”

“I’m getting there, thank you.”

He had never been sure what that meant. It reminded him of another tired lie, the one about Time being a Healer. So much depended on how much Time you were talking about. A year, a lifetime?

“And what can I do for you today?” he asked.

No make-up of any kind brightened her complexion. The beige raincoat with its overlarge collar and tie belt did nothing for her.

“I’m not sure I’m ready to go back to work. I’m getting a lot of headaches.”

Headaches. Every doctor’s favourite symptom. Start with the usual culprits and work down the list forever.

“Fair enough. Can you think of anything that might be causing them?”

Without moving his head he glanced at his watch. He still had a couple of phone calls to make. Mrs Turner, thirty eight weeks pregnant, needed starting on iron, her haemoglobin being far too low, and the Respiratory Physician who’d called about an abnormal x-ray would be on his own way home if he didn’t ring back before six thirty. He took a deep breath and relaxed back into the chair, signalling his readiness to listen to anything, no matter how esoteric or banal.

“I don’t know where to start,” she said. She was sitting very straight, her feet tucked under the chair, well away from his size nines.

“That’s all right. Start in the middle somewhere and we’ll muddle along together.”

Dear God, how often had he used this line? It wasn't his being a doctor - whether they knew his occupation or not people unburdened themselves to him constantly, as if a luminous message, "Tell me your life story", came and went across his forehead like a film title pulsing around a cinema frontage.

"I found some letters addressed to me in my mother's bureau. I don't know what to do about them."

*Neither do I*, he said inside his head, *though as always, I am flattered when my patients assume I am the source of all wisdom.*

"Yes?"

"She was keeping them from me."

"I see."

Where was this going? Her life, he recalled, had apparently been ruined by the mother. He hadn't known the woman. She'd been McKinnon's patient.

"I see," he said again. "And you feel you ought to?...to do something?"

She was shaking. He leaned over, taking hold of her left hand. It was clammy and cold.

"Deep breaths," he said, feeling for her pulse. "Deep breaths. That's it."

"I'm all right."

"I know. But just take a minute."

He pushed the box of handkerchiefs closer to her, in case tears came. After a while, he let the wrist go, and sat back. The heart was strong and had steadied reasonably quickly. He made his voice quiet but firm. He had a good voice. Reassuring. Patients had often told him so.

"There's no hurry. We can talk if you want to, and stop whenever you feel like stopping. You know I'm here to listen, and help if I can. Let's just take a look at your blood pressure, anyway."

It was perfectly normal, and he told her so. He expected her to look relieved, but there was nothing. "These letters," he said. "Were they...unpleasant... anonymous?"

Or perhaps imaginary? There was no reference to any psychiatric problems in her scanty notes, but she was at an age when odd things often began to occur. When it became obvious that she was not going to say more, he reached for his pen. He would speak to McKinnon before he did anything much.

"I don't feel you need any medication at the moment. I think you're tired out, that's all. If the headaches continue, use paracetamol, not more than the stated dose of course."

He looked over her notes again, and suggested she make an appointment with the

practice nurse, to have her blood and urine checked.

“Are you feeding yourself properly?”

She nodded.

“And sleeping?”

Another nod.

He decided not to ask whether she was still menstruating, but made a note on her page to do so at the next visit.

“Let’s make it two more weeks off, shall we? Come and see me before then. Especially if the headaches get worse. And don’t feel guilty. That’s the last thing we need. I want you to be kind to yourself.”

Her unhappiness lingered in the room after she left it. Why had she begun if she didn’t want to talk? If she didn’t trust him, why hadn’t she asked for one of the others? He stared at what was visible of the world through the vertical window blinds. Once upon a time he had imagined that helping others would be a way of helping himself.

Would they ever get round to redecorating this room for him? The previous occupant had clearly fallen for the theory that pink walls helped patients to relax. The curtains, beige on brown, were particularly hideous, possibly left over from the seventies. His table was a mess. He checked his watch against the round chrome and white desk clock, Viagra, in blue, stamped arrogantly across its face. A pill for every bloody ill.

And what might he have offered poor Miss Crosthwaite, to whom “terrible things” had happened. Counselling? HRT? The simple answer was, nothing. Not until she was ready to be helped. All these middle-aged women conforming in silence, feeling guilty at the least suggestion that they might have any right to happiness. What century were they living in, for God’s sake? Would she even make a return appointment? He gathered up the urine samples to take down to Reception for the morning van.

“Everything all right, Miss Kennedy?” He paused at the secretary’s door. He ought to go in for the usual few minutes chat, but he was tired of being nice.

“I left a message for Mrs Turner to phone us tomorrow. Did you remember to phone Radiology?” she said.

“Damn. It’ll have to wait till the morning. Can I give you a lift?”

“Oh no, Doctor. Robert’s coming for me.”

Every week on her late night he offered her a lift and she refused. It wasn’t correct for Doctors to drive secretaries home in this part of the world.

It still surprised him how early darkness came this far north. He keyed the car. The lights flashed obediently. He flung his case onto the back seat.

### **I want you to be kind to yourself.**

His words stayed with her. It would have helped more if he'd given some examples of what being kind might mean. She had no idea where to begin. Should she spend money? For there was plenty of money. Despite her mother's hints over the years about this charity and that, everything had been left to her. "Very straightforward," according to her mother's lawyer. He had been very kind.

The nurses too had been kind to her in the last days, taking care of her, telling her to go down to the WRVS tearoom, saying they didn't expect anything sudden. They would call her if anything changed.

She was noting how her mother's breasts had shrunk away to nothing, actually watching the rise and fall of the nightgown, when things changed. All movement ceased. She called for the nurse. The nurse came, checked her patient and took off the wedding ring, giving it to Lesley in a brown envelope. In the taxi coming home a strange anxiety gripped her. She couldn't remember whether Mother had breathed in and not out, or breathed out, and not in again. It seemed terribly important that she should remember.

The day of the funeral was a blur in her mind, although she remembered being surprised that the room was full, having assumed that Mother had outlived all her friends. One detail only of the interment remained with her. A bird paused on the green mat beside the coffin. It flew onto the lid, then flew away, and there was a communal sound, not quite a sigh, from those around her.

*We're so sorry.* When certain people said this she wanted to ask why? Why did they feel sorry? They hadn't shown their faces in the last long weeks when her mother's mind had deteriorated. Was that what they were apologizing for?

*You were so good to her.* This too was said by more than a few.

Had she been good? She had done no more than she had to. Knowing what she knew now, would she have behaved differently?

When the doorbell rang, she went to the front room, adjusting the curtain to see who it was. With some reluctance she went to the door. The outside air was icy, with a north wind.

"Mrs Flaherty?" she said.

"Not to disturb you, Lesley, but I was passing and..."

"Come in out of the wind, Mrs Flaherty."

"Oh no, I'm fine. I was just wondering if you..."

"But all the heat's going out. Come in for a moment."

She led the way into the back room, switching on the light, for the morning was dull. Mrs Flaherty took off her black woollen cap and shook out her hair.

“I was just wondering if you would still be wanting me,” she said at last. She seemed very uncomfortable, fidgeting with the large toggle buttons on her coat.

With a start Lesley realised what was meant. She was about to say no, having more or less determined even before the funeral that a cleaning lady was no longer a necessity, but with Mrs Flaherty in front of her she hesitated. It occurred to her that Mrs Flaherty needed the money. She had had three weeks without. Need alone had brought her here despite the embarrassment entailed.

“Oh, yes. That would be fine,” she said.

“Just the same hours?”

“I’ll have to get you a key,” she said, thinking aloud. “A back door key. Would that be all right?”

Mrs Flaherty nodded.

“Well, that’s settled then.”

What was she waiting for? Was she owed money?

“Am I owing you, Mrs Flaherty?”

“Oh no, not at all.” Her face reddened.

The Christmas present. Lesley couldn’t remember what it was, but there was a present laid aside. Bought in September, wrapped, and labelled. She drew aside the curtain that hid the walk-in recess, and after some searching found the brightly wrapped object. Dutch Speciality Chocolate Chip Cookies, she recalled, feeling the shape of the tin through the paper.

“I’m so sorry, Mrs Flaherty. What with everything. This was for you. I won’t say Happy Christmas, of course. Oh, Mrs Flaherty, please, it’s just a token...” she added, taken aback by the tears that suddenly were welling up.

“I’m sorry, Lesley. I shouldn’t be...”

“No, it’s all right. Sit down for a moment.”

The woman avoided the nearest armchair, Mother’s chair, and chose instead one of the hard chairs next to the table. As she sat down her grey trousers rose up by a couple of inches, revealing mottled skin above white ankle socks.

“You don’t knit, do you, Mrs Flaherty?” Lesley said hurriedly. “All these knitting patterns. It seems a pity to throw them out. Maybe you know someone who would like them?”

More tears. Lesley wondered tentatively about leaning over to pat an arm. This must stop soon, surely? Should she offer a glass of water?

Mrs Flaherty wiped the tears from below both eyes, using her fingers.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said.

“About what?”

Mrs Flaherty’s pale eyes were on her, bewildered, fearful.

“You can tell me, if it helps, Mrs Flaherty. I am not one to gossip.”

There was a longish interval, when nothing violated the silence except the heavy, slow tick of the onyx mantel clock, and the muted sound of a plane overhead.

“He phoned this morning. I knew it was him. I should’ve put the phone down.”

“Who phoned?”

“Johnny. Mr Flaherty that was. Nearly sixteen years it’s been. What am I going to do?”

The doorbell shrilled. As if one they sat, motionless, waiting. It rang again. Mrs Flaherty began to rise, but Lesley stayed her with a lifted hand.

“No,” she said. “They’ll go away.”

## Shopping

“Mother, let me take them for you,” Duncan offered, pulling the car gently to a stop. “I think the rain’s coming on.”

“I’m not an invalid yet, Duncan. You’ve parked rather close to the hedge, dear,” his mother added, inspecting the ground below the opened door. It was hard to tell what might lie beneath the brown mush of dead leaves and twigs. “You’d better go up to the end and turn round before I come back.”

Lesley had not been picking up her phone. Mrs Crawford did not believe in leaving messages on answering machines. She did not intend to go inside the house, merely to hand in the boots. It would be sufficient to mention the words “city”, “motorway”, “traffic” and “parking” to excuse the brevity of the visit.

The pebbled path to Lesley’s stout oak door was indeed long, and uneven, but the parcel of boots was not heavy, and it suited Mrs Crawford to return them herself, because she was not altogether certain that Duncan would come immediately back to the car. He had been in something of a mood since Christmas. Holidays, she felt, did not agree with him. When idle, he was inclined to mope, and to cast about for inappropriate affairs in which to busy himself. She was sorry for Lesley’s loss too, of course, but people had to have privacy and take their own time to re-establish themselves. It had been unwise, if well-intentioned on his part, to invite Lesley, so soon after the funeral, especially when, as Dr MacKinnon explained confidentially after the distressing scene, she had been neglecting her own health during her mother’s last weeks.

Both of the heavy outer doors were shut. Mrs Crawford pressed the doorbell firmly. No response. She peered into the sitting room. Seeing no-one, she went to the side gate. Unfortunately, this was locked.

“Are you looking for Lesley?”

She turned. The speaker, coming up the path in the neighbouring garden, was an odd-looking woman with blue-pencilled eyebrows, and a scarf that resembled a piece of orange fishing-net. The plastic bags in her hands suggested she had been shopping at the village Co-operative store.

“I beg your pardon?”

“If you’re looking for Lesley, I think she’s at home.”

“And you are...?”

“Mrs Robertson. Her neighbour.”

Mrs Crawford pressed the doorbell again, and looked up at the gathering clouds.

“I think she might have a visitor.”

Mrs Crawford turned.

“A man came to the door when I was... She seems to have quite a lot of gentlemen calling. At all hours.” A little nervous laugh. “Not that she shouldn’t. It’s quite right that friends should rally round. She’s on her own now, you see. She lost her mother recently, and as I said to Walter, those of us who...”

This was becoming ridiculous. But there was the problem of the boots.

“Perhaps you would give her these, when you see her next,” Mrs Crawford extended the brown paper parcel. Not the most satisfactory of solutions, but what else could be done?

“Who will I say...?” The voice followed her down the path.

She lifted a gloved hand without looking back, a hand that contrived to be dismissive but courteous at the same time.

“How is she?” Duncan asked, switching on the wipers as large spots of rain began to hit the windscreen.

“She wasn’t at home. I left them with her neighbour. I must say, the garden looks very neglected and sad. Perhaps her new gentleman friend will do something about it.”

She watched him out of the corner of her eye for several seconds, but there was no sign that he had heard. He had the same annoying habit as his late father of not hearing unless a sentence was prefaced with his name.

Every year the pattern was the same. Mother would visit Marks and Spencers to choose toiletries and some item of clothing, while he went with his Christmas token to the nearby bookshop. She would come for him, then they would cross the street and have lunch.

The restaurant had changed hands more than once, but the furniture remained the same. The chairs and tables were a faded pink, Lloyd Loom originals. The square tables with their protective glass tops had cross struts below that made stretching one’s legs out impossible.

Members of the library staff had recommended other places, which Duncan would have been happy to try, but this was the one his mother insisted was his favourite. She liked a window seat on the upper floor, and was prepared to wait for one so that they could look down on the shoppers in the street below.

He placed the plastic bag with his purchase carefully on the carpet at his feet. *The Poetry of Birds*. He had read the reviews some weeks earlier. According to the *Telegraph* the poems were “set in acres of space which makes the reading experience pleasurable.” The reviewer had also praised the “striking red endpapers.” He had read

the contents page already, and the thought of the evening ahead when he could settle into the recliner with it was wonderful. He had decided to limit himself to one poem per evening.

What would he like today? He looked quickly at the menu. Last year he had tried the Turkey Toastie with Cranberry Sauce. It had proved to be dry. He ordered the macaroni cheese. He'd liked it since his boarding school days. Did Lesley eat macaroni cheese? Did she know how to make it? He hoped she was looking after herself properly.

A rivulet of cold water fell on his neck. He turned to protest. But the woman holding the umbrella was elderly. He contained his annoyance, took out his handkerchief and patted himself dry.

Mother was absorbed by the scurrying bodies below. Now she turned to take a spoonful of broth and a small piece of unbuttered roll.

"I ought to have got you a new cardigan in Marks. You're terribly hard on elbows, Duncan. I've given up looking for darning wool. Marjory says nobody darns any more. If I could find leather patches..."

Lesley would probably have darning wool. Her mother had never thrown anything out. The drawers of that dreadful mantelpiece were probably stiff with darning wool. There was an unmistakable odour of feet. Not his. He looked over at the nearby tables. Had one of the husbands taken his shoes off?

"...such a mercy they deliver groceries now. Of course it pays them, because one buys more, naturally. I do feel much happier when the freezer's full at this time of the year. One doesn't mind paying a little more for quality food. And the lemon sole alone is worth the trip..."

He hated fish. He loathed the small bones that stuck between one's front teeth and had to be flossed carefully out. He longed for a total moratorium on fishing to be introduced by the governments of the world. How did she know there was a gentleman friend? If she was waiting for him to ask, she was going to be disappointed.

"Are we all right for time, dear?"

He nodded. One hour and fourteen minutes left on the meter. Lesley didn't drive. She would come into the city by bus, if she needed something. Of course, she could walk to work, the High School being less than half an hour away. He often caught sight of her when he was coming or going on the bus.

There hadn't been a car at her front door today. Of course, a gentleman friend might not have a car...

"Would you like to see the sweet menu?"

He looked up at the waitress, recognising her from previous years. She wasn't young, though her hair was completely black. It was pulled back so severely from her face, he felt it must hurt. Mother asked for white coffee but he shook his head. It would taste terrible whatever way they made it. He watched the woman pass between the tables towards the kitchen. Did she like her job? Were people generous with tips? Was she happy?

## **Moving on**

*He checked his hairline in the bathroom mirror. Nothing new seemed to be happening. It looked as if he hadn't inherited his father's genes in that particular area after all.*

*He and his father had never spent enough time together to talk about such things. Money, yes. There was always time to talk about money. And if he could have talked politics or pretended an interest in Test Match scores, they might have been closer. Instead he had slipped, or been dropped, whatever the correct word was, into the role of mother's little companion. He had at first accepted her loneliness and frustration as a normal state, with no idea that things should or could have been different. When he grew old enough to play at other boys' houses, he met mothers who smiled a lot and even played games in the garden. He began first to dislike, then to hate bed time conversations where she lamented her husband's shortcomings, hugs that were too close and lasted too long, so that he came away smelling of her scent, and praise lavished too publicly on his intelligence and successes at school.*

*Long before he became an adult, he recognised that all was not as it should be. He made allowances, adjusted his attitude to her and, he thought, moved on. He'd used the very words in conversation with someone at school who asked if he still enjoyed bike rides. "Oh, I've moved on", he'd said.*

### **Bringing back the shoes**

“Hello. Can I help you?” Not recognising the bald boy in the dripping anorak, Harriet smiled generously, as she always did with strangers on the manse doorstep.

“Can I help you?” she said again, more slowly. His mouth had opened and closed. He might be hard of hearing, or an asylum seeker with poor English.

“Yes, that’s my Dad,” she said, looking at the slightly damp card he held out, her voice softer, for people who accepted one of her Dad’s cards were generally people with troubles.

“I’ll just get him for you.”

“No,” he said. “I’ve brought these.” He took a pair of men’s trainers out of a Primark bag.

She hated doing this to people. But you couldn’t buy things that were most likely stolen. He didn’t look exactly like a down and out, though. His eyes weren’t bloodshot, and he didn’t smell.

“I brought them back, ok? He lent them to me.”

“Wait a minute,” she said, as he began to back away. “I’ll get him. He’s not busy.”

“Dad, there’s a hairless boy in the porch with a pair of Nike trainers,” she announced, going into the sitting room, “which he says you lent him.”

“Hairless?” her father said.

Kerr raised himself on both elbows.

“Well, his head is. But since when did you have trainers?”

“Now there’s a thing,” Kerr said. “I thought they were gone for good.” He got up from the couch and went out.

“What did you say?” her father asked, not turning from the TV.

“A boy at the door. Kerr’s gone to speak to him.” She stared at the letters on the Scrabble board before her. She had a q, but no u to go with it. Then suddenly she saw it, a stray r, just begging to be used at the end of “fever.” She put letters on the board, and began to add up her score.

“Your turn,” she announced.

Her father glanced over, “Nope. There’s a u in that as well.”

“No, there isn’t.”

He had turned back to the screen.

“It’s a kind of tunnel, Dad. I’ve used it before.”

With a humph of annoyance Harriet stood up, knowing that unless she brought

down the Shorter Oxford and showed him the actual page, he wouldn't accept her word. And even so, he'd probably object that it was a foreign one.

At the foot of the stairs she paused. That voice. Where had she heard it? With a frisson she remembered. She went into the kitchen.

"Ah, there you are," Kerr said. "This is Ryan. He borrowed my shoes the other night. Ryan, this is my sister, Harriet, who's going to make us some coffee."

"Am I?" she said.

The boy said, "I'd better get on."

Kerr made a face at her. "I can boil a kettle. Wait till the rain goes off a bit."

"You're busy."

"Watching *The Great Escape*. Again. Tea or coffee? Or a coke?"

Trust Kerr, champion of waifs and strays, embracing all comers with the friendliness of a lolling Labrador puppy. She opened the oven door, looked at the potatoes and shut it hard, hoping Kerr might get the message. The Ryan person's answer was lost in the thud of the room door as she closed it behind her.

"Don't mind Harriet," the brother said, pouring Coca Cola into two glasses. "She's in a bad mood because nobody would drive her into town this afternoon."

Ryan didn't think that was the reason. She hadn't recognised him at the door, welcoming him with a smile that turned his knees into silly putty and wiped everything out of his head. By the time she came into the room again she'd remembered exactly who he was. She had the same look on her face as she'd had that very first time, just waiting to see what bad thing he'd do. Sod you, he'd thought, taking the brooch to see what she'd do next. When he'd put down the money for the video, trying to be nice, that had somehow turned into a crime as well.

He'd brought the shoes back. Time now to make some excuse and get out. He cleared his throat. The brother, Kerr, was rummaging in the freezer. Straight hair, not so fair as hers, the face broader, the chin receding slightly. A beard would improve it. His navy woollen jumper was unravelling at the shoulder seam.

"Lemons," Kerr explained, pulling out a small plastic bag. "You slice them up and freeze them. Works with limes too. Dad," he called, "d'you want something to drink?"

A voice shouted no.

The iced lemon fizzed in the dark liquid. He'd never been in a house where people kept slices of lime or lemon in the freezer. What else was in there? Caviar? Steaks and oysters? Something good was cooking in the oven.

"So you made it home ok."

“Yeah.”

“Did you report it? The shoes.”

“To the police? No point,” Ryan shook his head. “They’re not interested.”

“I suppose. It could’ve been worse. At least you weren’t hurt.”

The guy was right. They’d taken his phone, his cash, his shoes and socks, and drawn very rude words in black permanent marker on his bum, but yes, it could’ve been much worse. So, hah hah, good natured theft and humorous assault. Happy New Year.

“Thanks for stopping. I should’ve said that first.”

“You thanked me at the time. How many of them were there?”

Somewhere in the house a phone rang and was picked up.

He couldn’t remember. “A crowd. Full of the gear.”

“Nightmare. Not a lot you could have done. So, are you working? Or at college?”

Ryan explained. He sipped at the coke, watching the shut door, only half listening when the other spoke. They talked about music. He was surprised and cheered to find that they both liked the same bands, because Kerr didn’t sound or look like the type who would. Then the door opened, but it wasn’t her.

“Dad, this is Ryan.”

“Hello, glad to meet you,” the man in the priest’s collar grasped his hand. “We’ll have to talk again, I’m sorry. Sudden emergency. Don’t finish the chicken, Kerr. I’m not fussed about the veg.”

“Potatoes?”

“Just a couple.”

Grabbing a red jacket from the coat-rack on wall, he was gone.

Ryan found his voice. “Is he a priest?”

“What? Oh right. Because of the collar. No, it’s just a clerical collar. He says it’s more comfortable, plus you can wear it with an ordinary shirt. And we’re doing our own ironing while Mum’s away, so that’s a big thing. Are you Catholic?”

“Depends. Not really.”

“Are you vegetarian?”

Had he heard right?

“I’m starving. But if you were vegetarian, I wouldn’t eat it in front of you, so we’d have to wait till you left. But there’s plenty. Harriet kind of overdoes it when it’s her turn.”

Kerr stretched out backwards, and opened the oven door. The smell that poured forth made Ryan’s mouth water. But the girl would be furious if he stayed.

“Well, I’m no’ a vegetarian,” he said slowly.

“Good. Knives and forks in the top drawer.”

The kitchen was totally middle class: white units, plants on the window ledge, blue and white curtains with tie backs, blue mugs matching them on a white mug stand. Ryan hung his coat on the back of the door where the father’s jacket had been, and began taking out cutlery.

Upstairs in her father’s study Harriet had taken volume M to Z from the bookcase. The phone rang. She ignored it, and the ringing stopped as someone downstairs answered. Flicking over the pages, she found the confirmation she needed. ‘Qanat. A gently sloping underground water tunnel.’

She waited where she was, ears straining to hear the sounds of their visitor leaving. She needed to eat. The rich smell of Chicken Forestière and roast potatoes had penetrated the entire house. The parsnips were probably overdone by now, but she wasn’t going down till she was sure he was gone.

Why had Kerr given him shoes? Where had they met? A thud from below told her the front door had been opened and shut. Thank goodness for that. Her head was beginning to hurt with waiting. She shrugged off a miniscule feeling of guilt. She hadn’t actually said anything nasty. And she’d been nice at the door. More than he deserved, really.

## Chocolate

Walter was taken aback to find Lesley on his front door step offering him an empty Pyrex dish.

“Ruby’s having a bath,” he said.

“I just wanted to hand this back. It was very kind of you, thank you.”

She looked cold, despite being wrapped up sensibly.

“Please tell Mrs Robertson it was very good.”

“Oh, she does a good beef stew,” he said. It occurred to him that perhaps he ought to ask Lesley in, this being the season of goodwill. *In or out of the bath, Ruby won’t like it* warned a voice in his head. Neither Lesley nor her late mother had ever crossed the door. Moreover he was aware that Ruby’s attitude to their neighbour had undergone a subtle shift at New Year. He could hear the faint sound of the radio upstairs in the bathroom.

None of our business, he told himself again.

“Come in for a minute,” he said.

“No, I don’t want to keep you back.”

“Oh, you’re not keeping anyone back. Just for five minutes.”

He put the dish on the hall table, then led her into the front room, where he switched off the television. The silence seemed louder than the newsreader’s voice had been. He sat down in the opposite armchair, only then noticing a red stain on the cuff of his fawn pullover. Bolognese sauce from teatime. “Would you...” he stopped. He wasn’t sure whether to offer her alcohol or not, but it was such a long time since he’d made his own tea or coffee that he doubted his competence.

“Nothing for me, please,” Lesley said. She had unwrapped her scarf, folding it into a neat square, but her coat remained buttoned, and she sat forward on the edge of the chair, as if ready for flight.

“A chocolate then?” There was a large tin of Cadbury’s Roses on the coffee table. One of the reps had brought it into the office. He wrestled the lid off and slid it over to her. “Take more than one. Take some for later. Ruby’s only letting me have one a day. They’ll last till Easter.” He chose an orange cream for himself, and slipped a toffee into his pocket.

Her quick smile was like a young girl’s, not a middle-aged woman’s. He wondered what age she actually was. She looked younger, close up. The old mother had been eighty two, according to the funeral eulogy, but Lesley was the only child, so she might have been a late surprise.

She was looking at their wedding photograph. Thirty four years next year, he thought.

“I like what you’ve done with the fireplace, Mr Robertson.”

“Walter, please. Yes, I’m happy enough with it. Took me longer than I thought it would though.”

“You did it yourself?”

The admiration in her voice was nice to hear. “Oh, there’s nothing much to it,” he stretched his arms and folded them, turning the stained cuff over. “When you’re in one trade, you have a fair grasp of the rest.” He unwrapped his chocolate, making two bites of it. In his boyhood days he had played with chocolate creams, tonguing the soft centres out until the shells were left. “But you’ve got the originals, Lesley. This is all reproduction,” he gestured at the Art Nouveau tiles and pale pink marble. “Whoever had this place before us should’ve been prosecuted. You shouldn’t modernise these houses, you have to go with the plaster and all that. And you’ve got those beautiful stained glass windows.”

“Mother didn’t care for change. But they’re very draughty.”

“I’d keep them myself. You could put in secondary glazing. Or fit the stained glass into double glazing panels. Cut out all the draughts. I know a good glazing firm.”

“It sounds rather expensive,” she said.

He saw he’d overstepped himself. He cleared his throat.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be telling you your own business...”

“No, I’m sure you’re right. The bills would be smaller, I suppose. It’s just that there’s so much...”

“Yes. Takes a lot of getting used to. Just you take your own time, pet, and don’t let other people try to run your life. It’s early days.”

He’d seen tradesmen take advantage of single women. Silly prices and shoddy work, and charm. Not in his firm, he made sure of that, but he’d seen it happen. He wondered if she’d be all right with no-one else in the house. His mother had kept his father’s police hat and raincoat on the pegs in the hall for years, so that no caller would think she lived alone. He and his brother Archie had cleared the garage and sold the car. She wouldn’t let them clear out cupboards, wouldn’t let them do more than paint the anaglypta downstairs.

Lesley got up from her chair, “I’d better get back,” she said.

He followed her into the hall and she opened the door herself, before he could do it for her.

He switched on the outdoor light. Within seconds she was halfway down the long

path.

Just as he closed the door, he heard Ruby coming cautiously down the stairs. She was in her dressing gown, the pink plastic bath cap still on her head.

“Who was that?”

“Lesley next door. She brought your dish back.”

“How long was she in?”

“Long enough to give me the dish back.”

“Did you give her the boots?”

“What boots?”

“The boots that woman left for her.”

“I forgot. I’ll run after her,” he said.

“No, it’s all right,” she said. “I’ll take them round myself tomorrow. What were you talking about?”

“Fireplaces,” he told her.

## **The place to be**

Walking home with a strong wind at his back, his head freezing cold, and too many thoughts jiggling inside it, Ryan tried to make sense of his evening. Light from the street lamps shimmered in the puddles. Every house with its curtains open looked like a treasure cave. A woman walking a big black dog smiled at him when they passed, and he smiled back, though he'd never seen her before. Man, had he eaten some weird things. Parsnips, sweet and mushy. Long thin green beans, French beans they were called, OK but not great. Roast potatoes he'd had a lot of times, but not like theirs. There were small round objects in the sauce, which turned out to be mushrooms, and squarish bits that he recognised as bacon.

The girl had avoided looking at him, which left him free to look at her. The set of her ears entranced him. Where in his skull he'd found that word he didn't know, but it was perfect. She had her hair caught back in grips, so that the ears showed, and every time she turned her head, like when she talked to Kerr, he traced the curves. The way they leaned away from her head at the top made him think of elves. She wasn't wearing earrings, and the lobes weren't pierced. He supplied a pair – gold because of her hair, with pale blue stones to match the sweater. After a minute he took the stones away. Plain gold was better.

He'd taken some of all he was offered, eating slowly in case he gagged. Kerr did most of the talking, but after a while, politeness seemed to get the better of her, and she asked about the trainers. Then she wanted to know the whole story, and she actually looked quite upset. Kerr didn't say anything about the fact that he'd been too pissed to protect himself.

“We don't get presents worth stealing any more,” she said.

“That scarf thing of yours wasn't cheap,” Kerr protested. “What you have to understand, Ryan, is that this child,” he gestured towards her with his fork, “is very greedy. She misses the good old days when she and her buddies went round every shop in Aberdeen every Saturday. She has the biggest wardrobe in the house. She could start her own clothes shop.”

Ryan's sisters were the same, but wise for once, he accepted more gravy without saying anything. With them it was shoes. Mostly shoes that didn't even fit. He remembered them throwing gravel at his bedroom window to get him to open the back door in their late night dancing days. They'd hobbled in, heels and toes raw and bleeding. He didn't think they went to the same shops as Harriet though.

He had to wait for several cars to pass before he could cross Main Street, but

there weren't that many people on foot at this end of the village, away from the shops. An older couple with another dog, this one straining on its chain as if it wasn't walking fast enough. One cyclist. Not anyone he knew.

He crossed the footbridge. The river was noisy, high from all the rain. He pulled the hood of his anorak tighter, wishing he'd had the sense to wear a hat. On his right the houses had sandbags stacked beside their low walls and hedges; there had been flooding a few years back, he couldn't remember exactly when. They hadn't been in any danger themselves, being higher up the hill. Big private houses were being built much higher up, on a new road, well away from the river, on land that would have been too difficult or too expensive to build on in the past. "The Place that's Going to be the Place to Be," according to the hoardings.

Different planets. With each stride he felt himself resenting what he was going towards. Their house was as clean as the one he'd just left - his mother cleaned as if that was what kept the planet turning, but that was all you could say. Nothing matched. Every window ledge had some stupid, cheap ornament on it. Two furry kittens in a basket adorned the bathroom cistern. He'd tried and failed to find some kind of symbolic significance in that. On the kitchen wall hung a calendar with red print and green exotic birds, a freebie from the local Chinese takeaway. Why she kept it, he didn't know, since there was nothing written in any of the spaces. In the living room on top of the fireplace sat his all-time favourite, a glass vase decorated with a hand-painted teddy bear in a tartan scarf, and the words *A Present from Ullapool* in gold script. Ullapool had probably been glad to see the back of it.

He vaulted over the front gate. The catch was stiff, and there was a metal bit that could catch the delicate skin between your thumb and first finger if you didn't do it right. Just one more shitty detail in his life. Up till now he'd managed to convince himself that money and class and all that crap didn't matter because his day was coming, the day when everyone would see that he, Ryan Flaherty, was right up there. Inside he was a genius, inside he was different from everything and everybody round about him. God, it was easy to despise the bourgeoisie when you hadn't tasted their parsnips.

"Is that you, Ryan?"

"No, Mum," he muttered, "it's Pierce Brosnan come to take you dancing."

Loud canned laughter burst from the TV in the living room as if the studio audience got the joke.

"Your tea's in the oven, son."

"Ah'm no' hungry," he called back.

He kicked off his shoes, hung his coat over the post at the foot of the stairs and was halfway to the upper landing when the phone began to ring. Usually it was for her - one of his sisters complaining or passing on some piece of trivia. But it might be for him. He'd told them his name. Kerr had written down the address and phone number.

"Dinna answer it!"

His mother came rushing from the living room. Her face was flushed.

"Whit?"

"Pit that doon!"

He did as he was told.

She turned away, bumping into the doorframe before finding her way back into the room.

"Whit's happened? Wha's deid noo?" He shouted after her.

He stood where he was for a few moments. She'd been up at the chapel again, he guessed. Every time she went she came back with news of some fatal illness or sudden death. That and a fresh sense of shame because her son never showed his face at Mass.

She was staring at the screen and didn't turn her head.

"Talk to me." He moved between her and the set. "What's the matter? Am I in trouble again?"

She pressed her hands against her eyes. "You're in the road. Awaw an' have your dinner. It's waited for you long enough."

Behind him the studio audience ooh'd and aah'd.

"D'you want a cup of tea or somethin'?"

She shook her head, her hands still up against her face.

In the oven he found a foil-covered plate of boiled potatoes, with three slices of fried bacon and some baked beans. He wrapped most of it in the foil, binned it, and put the dirty plate next to the sink. He could have washed it, but she'd only wash it again.

Up in his own bedroom he closed the door and locked it. His most recent sketch lay on the desk. He lifted it by the two top corners, but after a few seconds laid it down. Why take your anger out on a decent drawing, an innocent sketch of wind-blown branches?

There was a pencil lying on the carpet beside the bed. This he picked up, and holding it in both hands, forced it until it shattered, startling him, so that one of the broken ends stabbed the soft cushion of flesh below his right thumb. He watched the bright blood well up, then smeared it over his jeans. If she asked, he'd say it was a nose bleed.

He switched the light back off and went to the window. The radiator was hot

against his legs, the window glass chilled his upper body. He couldn't see Harriet's house for trees, but he knew where it was now, knew she was inside it, putting plates back in the white cupboards, watching TV with her brother, or reading some fancy book, just generally being a nice girl. He lay down on the bed and pulled the quilt over himself.

This room had been his for three years, since Kelly moved in with her boyfriend. He'd painted the walls dark red, put up some posters, and binned the pink curtains.

"Ah'm no' buyin' new ones," his mother told him. "There was nothing wrong wi' those. An' they were lined."

"Ah'm no needin' curtains anyway."

"You'll feel it come winter."

She was right. The heat didn't extend more than two feet into the room. Some day he would have his own place, with more than one room to himself. Two or three rooms. One just to paint in, loads of space with a wall of glass and nothing outside but the ocean. There would be one room to sleep in, with a double bed, so he could turn over without fear of falling out, and a ceiling painted dark blue, with small lights in it like stars. There'd be a jacuzzi bath at the far end, behind a wall of glass bricks, and a fitted fridge and bar in an alcove, really tasteful and discreet, and a few bits of antique sculpture under subtle spotlights, and the wall that faced the sea would have sliding glass panels so that on hot nights the whole thing could be opened up. And maybe above this, he'd have another room for music, with perfect acoustics, and the best Bang and Olufsen system money could buy.

*She walks out of the ocean like that actress in the old Bond film. He pretends not to see her walking up the beach towards where he sits on the veranda, keeps his head down, keeps going with the sketching. All day it's been hot. Now it's late afternoon. Maybe there's going to be thunder and a quick rain. Her shadow falls across him. She says hello. He grunts, as if he's too busy to notice her. He's so famous for his art now, he doesn't like visitors.*

*Maybe they met somewhere else the day before, she was buying mangoes and the bag burst and he helped her pick them up, and she offered him one as a reward, and that was it, and once he left, she asked the stall holder who he was, and now she's tracked him down. Leaving tiny grains of sand from her soles, she goes around the room. It's on two levels, with a high ceiling. She loves everything she sees; the paintings, all originals (but not his own, these he'll show her later), the subtle colours, the sound system, every piece of furniture. He keeps quiet about the fact that these are exclusive pieces he's designed himself. He's won awards for design, big international*

*prizes.*

*She wants to see what he's working on, but he says, no, it's not ready. Now she says she's hot and thirsty, so he puts down his pencil, makes her something with ice, some drink she's never heard of. She tastes it and says it's wonderful. He acknowledges this with a modest nod of the head. She's wearing a one piece swimsuit in the same creamy colour as the dress she'd had on the day before. A butterfly darts in through the open wall, and settles on her shoulder, attracted by her perfume. He reassures her, tells her what kind of butterfly it is, because he knows that sort of thing. He asks if she'd like him to put on some music. He can smell her hair when she kneels down beside him to look at all his CD's. She undoes her sandals, or maybe she doesn't have sandals on, since she was swimming. Or maybe they're in her canvas bag with her towel and sun-cream. She lies back in one of the recliners, running her fingers along the butterscotch Italian leather...*

The ring of the phone woke him. The heating was off and the air in the room was freezing. He looked at the bedside clock. Half one. The phone rang until it rang out. Seconds later the whole thing repeated itself. He lay for a while waiting. Silence.

Wide awake, he went down to the kitchen and heated some milk. There were strange-looking pastry things in the fridge, and small cooked potatoes with bits of green stuff on them, but luckily there was still some bread in the box. He made himself a sandwich with red jam. His hand hurt a bit, so he ran cold water over it for a time.

Sandwich in one hand, hot milk in the other, he stared at the phone in the hall. He put the mug down on the ledge and dialled 1471. It wasn't a number he recognised. He pressed three.

"Hullo."

A male voice.

"Hullo? Who's that?" it repeated.

He put the phone down without answering.

### Going like a fair

When Duncan returned to work the Library was depressingly quiet, with only a few students around, and none of them needing assistance. More importantly, little Mrs Fleming who brightened his mornings and chatted with him while she ate her packed lunch was missing, afflicted by a viral infection, which was a great pity, as he had rehearsed a conversation in which he would ask about her Murder Mystery evening, and she would learn about the new bird book, which he had brought with him. Mrs Fleming was quite interested in birds, and quite interested in poetry, so he felt she would be very interested in a book where the two were combined.

So far he had been surprised and pleased by how accurate the poems were in their choice of detail. Hardy's robin poem was the only one he had encountered before, (There was another poem in the collection, "The Darkling Thrush," but he was keeping his rule, and hadn't reached it yet.) and though he liked the first three verses, he disliked the last one, not merely because Hardy allowed his robin to die of starvation, but because in Duncan's experience, birds fluffed up when sick and did not resemble balls when dead. Besides, although he had never been able to discuss this with a poetry expert, he was unsure about the bird knowing how it felt to be dead. Since he was very fond of Hardy's poems, it was easier to leave the last verse unread.

However, this new book was proving more than satisfactory. He *had* allowed himself to glance at the afterword, written by one of the editors, and it seemed to him to be as poetic and accurate as the chosen poems. He was, in fact, beginning to feel rather excited, like someone discovering a new continent, like the chap who stood on a mount in Lebanon, or wherever it was. Perhaps Mrs Fleming would be back soon.

His bus journey home was uneventful until they came within two miles of the village, where the nearside lane was cordoned off and a queue had formed. Eventually they reached two police cars with lights flashing. A uniformed officer signalled to the driver to open his doors, spoke to him and went away.

The bus driver swivelled round and shouted, "Right, everybody. We've got a wee problem up ahead. Big Sam's chippie's on fire at the moment." He talked on over the buzz of voices. "So we're no' goin' through the village. We're goin' off by the old farm road and back on at the other side at Bogend. So if any of youse want to walk the last bit, you'd better get off now."

Duncan stepped down out of the warmth of the bus, grasped his umbrella firmly, and pulled his scarf a little higher. The smell of smoke was apparent even this far away. With his long stride, he was soon ahead of the others. He had never been inside Big

Sam's establishment and was unable to feel a great sense of loss. Besides, he was forever lifting greasy cartons and paper from where they had been stuffed into the back hedge. It seemed that a portion of fish and chips could be consumed in the time it took the average teenager to walk from the shop to that part of their hedge bordering the shortcut through the golf course. He had never visited the Tandoori Takeaway, or Ming's Oriental Restaurant either but sometimes they too made their presence felt. On a summer evening with the French doors open, the breeze would now and then blow from the north, wafting the smells of fried pork, papadums and curry all the way from the centre of the village.

None of these establishments had existed when their house was built. None of the roads were tarred. The doctor of the day had owned the first motor car, the District Nurse used a bicycle. In summer the children went shoeless. Year round, each Friday, they watched the big plough horses being shod where Mr Ming's restaurant now stood. When the school bell rang, they hurtled across the old bridge. Being late mattered in those days. The blacksmith's shop had still been there in his own childhood, though the horses had gone.

People were milling about on the traffic-free High Street, everyone cheerful and excited as if some festival had been announced. The side street itself was cordoned off, and blocked half way along by two large fire engines. There was plenty of smoke, but no flames that he could see. An ambulance and a couple of police cars were parked beyond the fire engines. Someone had put up a step ladder on the pavement, and there was a man with a camera on it, others were holding mobile phones high to take photographs. Going like a fair, Duncan thought. Bustle and jostling and shrieking children and yelping dogs twisting on leads to get at one another. The village sergeant and constable were trying to soothe a group of irate-looking bystanders. He recognised one of the local councillors, who on seeing him, waved, as if to say, Come over here, Mr Crawford, I'll tell you all you need to know. Duncan nodded in a non-committal manner, slowly turned himself around, and began to walk away. The man had a habit of pausing for breath in the middle of sentences, so that you could never interrupt without talking over him, besides which, having lived in Hartsend all his days he took it for granted that the village was the centre of the world. His conversation moved inevitably into detailed news about people he assumed Duncan knew and cared about, or worse, news about people *those* people knew, who might be dead, missing, or living in Patagonia for all Duncan knew or cared.

He felt a gentle tap on his arm.

"Lesley? Shouldn't you be at work?"

What a silly thing to say. It sounded like criticism. "My bus was diverted. I've had to get off at Peathill," he said quickly.

Should he ask how she was or not? His mind tossed up suggestion after suggestion and the slight wind was enough to blow them away.

"Did you get your boots?" he said finally. They were walking side by side, and he had to bend a little to hear her over the noise around them. He had forgotten how short she was.

"My boots?"

"Mother gave them to your neighbour the other day."

"Really?"

He remembered the gentleman friend.

"I think you... had a visitor."

"I'm sorry. Was that you? I didn't realise..." An ambulance siren submerged the rest of her words. "... Mary Flaherty. It was very difficult."

"Yes," he said, wanting to be helpful.

"I've just been to see her, but I don't think I did much good."

"Oh dear, that's a pity."

"Has she spoken to you?"

"Well," he said. "I'm not sure I ought ..."

They had to separate to go round two young women with prams. What had Mrs Flaherty to do with the boots, he wondered. And what was difficult? Was the family in trouble? He understood the son-in-law had not yet found employment. He hoped Mrs Flaherty hadn't been pestering Lesley to help the man in some way...

"Isn't that her son?"

"What?"

"Her son," she pointed to a dark-coated figure leaning against the window of the Hospice Shop. "She said he'd shaved all his hair off. Peculiar thing to do in the middle of winter, don't you think?"

A girl in a beige-coloured duffel coat came out of the shop. She said something to the boy, and they turned in the direction of the New Bridge.

"I know that girl. That's the minister's child," Duncan exclaimed.

"Hardly a child, Duncan."

Lesley had stopped. He stood beside her. They watched for a moment. Should he express approval or disapproval? Or change the subject? Could he tell her about his new book? It was glowing quietly in his briefcase. "Darren," he said out loud. Of course it was. Not Lebanon at all.

“Pardon?”

“Oh. Nothing,” he said, with a dismissive chuckle. Where to begin?

But she was saying goodbye then and see you again soon, and pushing open the door of the shop beside them, and gone. Taken aback, he stood outside the shop for a while, his explanation ungiven, until, noticing from the window display that it was the ladies’ hairdresser’s, he grasped what had happened, collected himself and walked on.

He crossed by the old metal footbridge, letting the ferrule of his umbrella trail with a series of rapid clicks along the wire mesh. Then he realised what he was doing. Fortunately it wasn’t scratched. A clear thought rose above his mind’s restless surface. Lesley was always discreet, but her tone of voice had given the game away. The Flahertys were Catholic. The son had formed an attachment with the Protestant daughter of the local minister.

He could understand Mrs Flaherty’s distress, although frankly it was ridiculous in this day and age. Nor was it right of her to trouble Lesley, not at this time. Lesley had no-one to protect her.

“You’ve led such a sheltered life, Duncan,” Mrs Fleming had said more than once, smiling, as if a sheltered life was something bad, as if sheltering her baby was not Mrs Fleming’s own first priority. As if sheltering his family was not the first priority of a husband, even Mrs Fleming’s husband, a man with beads on a leather string round his neck who held his baby under his arm like a parcel.

*I want to shelter Lesley.*

The idea grew and grew until everything else was gone from his mind. The terrible completeness of it stunned him.

But it brought no delight. Instead he felt as if he were walking towards a huge blockage, a wall, something that would stop him in his tracks like the immense steel buffers at the end of a station platform he’d seen once as a small child.

The wind had shifted, what little wind there was. It blew now from the north, bearing the acrid smoke from the ruined shop further along the valley, lifting it in a long plume, dark against the pale pearl-coloured sky.

## Treasure

*She was a very beautiful child. Her face had been dirty that first day and he had ached to wipe it clean for her, but he knew instinctively that this would have been a mistake. Her eyes were wonderful – generous, innocent but aware at the same time. He knew children’s eyes were big compared to the size of the face, so that they would be more appealing, a louder cry for the parent’s care, as it were, but he had seen a lot of very plain, mean-eyed children in his time. It was easy to tell she was a gentle soul from the way she held the feather, from the fact that she’d picked it up in the first place and hidden it protectively from him. She was so solemn, agreeing with him that eggs should never be stolen. He looked round the room, wondering what small treasure he might carry in his pocket the next time he went for a walk. What might he give her? What would she like?*

## Clamped

Harriet recognised Ryan through the shop window, just as she was putting her coat on. She made some excuse to June and went through to the back, hoping he'd be gone when she came out.

He wasn't.

"Comin' to see the fire?" he asked.

"I'm going to the Post Office."

"There's nothin' much to see now, anyway, unless you like dirty water. I took some photos earlier." He patted a bulge in his coat pocket. "They might come in useful."

"Good for you," she said.

"There's no' been excitement like this since McIntyre's cows got out the dairy."

"Before my time," she said.

The whole of the village was on the streets, it seemed: several shop owners in their doorways, young children sleeping or getting impatient in pushchairs while their mothers talked, and drivers whose cars were stuck in the parking inlet arguing with Brenda, the lady traffic warden, who had one hand clamped on her ear while she tried to talk into her phone. Clamped. That's quite funny, Harriet thought. Not funny enough to share. Not with him.

Across from them in the Millenium Garden the Pensioners Refuge looked deserted. All the old men seemed to have come over to the edge of the grass to see what was going on. One of them had a mug in his hand. Another had lit a cigarette and was coughing badly.

She was being unfair. He wasn't that awful. At least he didn't smoke. He looked better with his hair gone than he had before. It was just that he made her uncomfortable. She couldn't help speaking the way she did. She sounded so posh, but they weren't posh. They hadn't been posh, even in Aberdeen when they had money...

"I'd better get on," she said.

"Wait."

"I'm sorry?"

"There's a thing you could do for me. Help me with."

He pulled out something from an inside pocket. The brooch.

"Come in the shop with me."

"I'm sorry?" she said again.

"Come in with me, and I'll put it back." He began picking bits of fluff off the

scrolled silver leaves.

“You can’t... You shouldn’t have taken it in the first place.”

“I only did it ‘cause you were expectin’ me to.”

“What?”

“Come on, admit it,” he looked from the brooch to her. “You were watching me out of the corner of your eye, like a fucking raptor in the jungle.”

The word was like a slap. She turned, her face burning. That word still had the power to sicken, no matter how often she heard it. Overhearing was bad enough. To have it so close, to have it said to her...

He had caught up, was walking next to her again. She kept her head down. He said nothing more, but he didn’t go away either.

When eventually they reached the Post Office, he said, “I’ll wait here.”

“Please don’t bother. I might be quite a while.”

There was no queue. The letters were weighed. She pocketed the change and the receipt. He was leaning against the window, rocking slightly, as if some tune was playing in his head.

“I’m perishin’. You want to go to the café?” he said, the minute she reappeared.

“No, I have to get home. Goodbye.”

“I’m not good enough, is that it?”

“What?”

“What, what, what? I’m offerin’ to buy you a diet Coke, no’ cocaine.”

“I have to go home.”

“Sure you do. OK. How’s Kerr?”

“He’s fine. He’s off bouldering with some friends.”

“Bouldering? What the fancy fuck’s that?”

“Don’t!”

“Don’t what?”

“Use that word.”

He stared at her, eyebrows raised.

“You’re no’ real,” he said.

The road was clear. She darted over, walked quickly, ready to run if need be.

His voice pursued her, “I said, you’re no’ fucking real!”

## **Margaret doesn't work here anymore**

Lesley lay back with her head in the basin, agreed that the water was fine for her, and let the junior begin the shampooing. She recognised the girl, one of the more pleasant children whose uniform and appearance had always been neat. The mother had been a willing helper at parties and days out. Sick notes were spelled correctly, written on proper paper, not on a page from a jotter.

"I don't like the head massage, Candy," she said, as the water began to flow. She had to speak quite loudly against the background music.

"Oh, do you remember me, Miss Crosthwaite?" The girl sounded pleased.

They talked a little about school, and what Candy's friends were now doing. Her fingers were very gentle, in fact it was so soothing that Lesley felt after a minute or two that she might fall asleep.

The stylist brought her back to full wakefulness. She was new and wore a small diamond stud above her right nostril. Her hair looked as if it hadn't been combed and there was a disconcerting purple streak in front of one eye.

"Who cut your hair last?" she asked, lifting it up at the back.

"Margaret." Lesley felt like a traitor. "But I haven't been in a long time." She had originally asked for Margaret, only to be told that she had retired.

"Right. Well it's not in very good condition. You're not using conditioner, are you? So how much are we taking off? We'll need to take all these split ends away."

Candy appeared with a cup of tea and placed it on the small shelf in front of the mirror. "No sugar, Miss Crosthwaite, was that right?" she said. "Would you like a magazine?"

To her embarrassment, Lesley couldn't immediately tell the stylist which side her parting was usually on. The girl handed her a comb to help her remember.

Between snips there were attempts at conversation. Was she going anywhere special that night? Had she enjoyed Christmas? Was she working? Lesley held the magazine up resolutely, trying to ignore the woman, though conscious at the same time that it might be dangerous to antagonise her. She thought of Margaret who had looked after her for years, and had known exactly what to do without being told.

"Have you considered using some colour?" the girl said, twisting a section of front hair and catching it in a clip.

"No," Lesley said quickly, keeping her eyes on an advert for face creams. Seven different products by one manufacturer, at prices she considered ridiculous. Why did anyone need seven different things to make their skin presentable?

“Well, I would if I were you. A whole head of grey hair can very attractive in an older lady like yourself, but lots of grey hairs amongst the brown isn’t really so nice.”

“Hello, Lesley, how are you today?”

A young woman she didn’t know from Eve was smiling at her in the mirror, dressed in a trim white uniform like a nurse.

“This is Claire, our new beauty therapist,” the stylist told her.

Lesley accepted the leaflet out of politeness.

“...and we have a special deal today for £10. Just a file and polish. It hardly takes a minute. Would you like me to do it while Marie’s drying your hair?”

Candy brought her coat. Lesley had hoped for this, and slipped some pound coins into the girl’s hand. She had no intention of putting money into a fund that would be shared by everyone. She paid the bill, which was more than she expected, by credit card. While they waited for it to clear, the receptionist said how nice her new nails were. Two women waiting to make appointments agreed they were really lovely. Lesley looked down at her terracotta finger tips and wanted to scream.

## Respect

After a dinner of tomato soup followed by lemon sole, “lightly dusted with a seasoned dressing” according to the label, Mrs Crawford went upstairs. Duncan stacked the dishwasher, made himself a decaffeinated latté and sat down to watch the news on the small kitchen TV. Generally this was enough to send him into a light doze. He wondered if Mrs Fleming would be back soon. Perhaps he would suggest they send a card. From Mrs Fleming his thoughts drifted without hindrance to Lesley. In truth, worrying about Mrs Fleming’s health was more of a delaying tactic for preventing himself from thinking about Lesley.

How had this happened? One moment Lesley was an old friend whose company he enjoyed, and whose views he respected. The next she was something else entirely. He stepped back from defining the “something”. At last the idea of a gallant knight in armour came helpfully to mind. But how exactly was he going to shine?

*You could have insisted on seeing her home at New Year.*

He’d been willing but Dr MacKinnon had overruled.

*You could have insisted on taking back the boots.*

True.

*Have you ever asked her how she is? Have you offered her anything?*

She knew he was concerned. She knew where he lived. And she was a private person.

When someone knocked loudly at the back door, he wondered wildly whether it might be her. He didn’t feel like answering, but Mother never went to the door at this hour, despite the fact that the security light illuminated everything with a blaze worthy of a concentration camp.

Close to, the Flaherty boy was taller than Duncan remembered, able to look him straight in the eye, which he now did, with a look entirely devoid of...of what, exactly? Deference was hardly the right word. Respect? He was wearing a knitted hat pulled low, almost down to his eyebrows. His eyes were so intensely blue it crossed Duncan’s mind he might be wearing coloured contact lenses. The young did such things.

“Mum’s no’ well. But if she’s better by Friday, she says she’ll come then. If you want her.”

“Mrs Flaherty.”

The boy nodded.

“Wait here a moment.” Duncan indicated the general area of the porch. He closed the door into the kitchen proper, dismissing the impulse to slide the sneck over as

uncharitable.

There was nothing on the calendar, so he assumed that the Friday morning would be suitable as usual. Friday was a big day. Sheet washing and ironing. Mrs Flaherty was of course restricted to the downstairs of the house. Mother managed her own bed linen but he stripped his bed and carried everything down to the utility room.

When he came back to the porch, the boy was pressing the scented geranium leaves and sniffing his fingers.

“Friday would be suitable,” Duncan said. “Please give Mrs Flaherty our best wishes for a quick recovery.”

The boy stuck his hands in his coat pockets and sauntered off. Not kicking at the gravel, thankfully. Duncan watched him all the way to the side gate and out into the street. He looked at the geranium leaves. An odd gesture for a barbarian, he thought.

*Better.* He tried the word aloud, the way the boy had said it, with the hideous glottal stop. It was hard to imagine him as an artistic soul. Lacking any academic qualifications, he was nevertheless, according to Mrs Flaherty, so talented that he’d been accepted into the School of Art on the strength of his portfolio alone.

The last inch of the latté was cold. Duncan picked up the Herald, begun that morning at breakfast, and tried to summon some interest in the Blogs. He wondered whether the boy could even write in proper sentences.

He glanced at the mantel clock. Lesley would be asleep. She would be having a late meal. She would be... any number of things, and possibly more than one at once, but whatever these might be, he knew for a certainty that, following her custom of the last several days, she would not pick up the phone.

*Leave a message. Ask her to phone back.*

Mrs Fleming was right. She was shaking her head at him, the bald baby on her lap, both laughing at him from the chair opposite.

*Why do you want to phone her, Duncan?*

*I’m worried about her.*

*That’s good. Nothing wrong with that.*

*And Mrs Flaherty, of course. I’m not indifferent to her problems.*

*Then what’s stopping you? For all you know, Lesley could be sitting there in that big empty house, looking out at the unkempt garden and the bare branches of her willow trees, wishing somebody would phone her. Besides, you can ask if she got the boots. Your mother would appreciate you asking.*

There was that. And he might mention the gentleman friend.

The bald baby frowned and Mrs Fleming shook her head.

He was stunned when Lesley's live voice answered.

"Yes, ah...Duncan here," he said.

"Hello, Duncan. Is something wrong?"

"No. Well, not exactly. I was thinking... Mrs Flaherty."

"Yes?"

"Her son...came by just now. Apparently she's... ill."

"What happened?"

"Well, I don't think anything happened exactly. He said she's not well. I thought it was perhaps a cold. Bad time of year for colds." He picked up his pencil and began doodling in the newspaper margin. "Just that you mentioned her earlier. Decent person, Mrs Flaherty. Wouldn't like to think she was neglecting herself. Needing the doctor in and not calling him, that sort of thing."

"Well, she has two daughters," Lesley said, "They both live locally. I expect they're looking in on her."

"Right. Anyway. Just in case you hadn't heard. Sorry to bother you at this hour."

"No, it's all right. I'm glad you phoned. You know he's called Ryan, don't you? Not Darren."

"Of course. Well. You know where I am. Anytime."

"Thank you, Duncan. I appreciate that very much."

"Right."

He put the phone down and sat back in the chair. There was no sound from upstairs. Of course Mrs Flaherty had daughters. They'd be doing all that was necessary. Damn, he thought, he'd forgotten to mention the boots. She was glad he'd phoned. He allowed himself a smile. He was glad too. No harm had been done. She'd appreciated his offer of help. He turned to see if Mrs Fleming and the baby approved, but they had gone.

## Clichés

Lesley rose early, meaning to begin sorting clothes from her mother's drawers. Some would go to Oxfam, and some into the recycle bins behind the Co-operative store. She took a roll of black bin liners into the front bedroom and emptied the contents of the bottom drawer onto the bed.

Two neatly folded pink bed jackets wrapped in tissue paper. Scarves in their original cellophane packets, never worn, Fair Isle gloves ditto. Two knitted tea pot cosies with felt flowers on the sides, red with green, and green with red. A box of gents tartan handkerchiefs. The next drawer up was full of tights and socks. Long winter socks, grey and darned at the heels in a lighter shade, folded in pairs.

She had a vague memory of these from her childhood. On her mother's feet, worn inside rubber boots when she brought in coal from the bunker or scraped snow from the steps. Everyone had identical rubber boots then. And every winter brought snow. It occurred to her for the first time that these socks might originally have been her late father's.

It was barely seven o'clock. Outside the sky was dark blue, just beginning to grow paler where the sun would eventually rise above the hills.

At the back gate she turned to look at the house. She'd left some lights on to fool the burglars. Anyone passing might assume that a cheerful breakfast was going on behind the partly drawn curtains. Next door, the Robertson's house was in darkness. She stared at the windows upstairs, but there was no sign of Mrs Robertson, no twitch of a curtain.

For the first several minutes she felt good. She had acted on impulse, made an instant decision, and done just what she felt like doing, with no one to stop her. Cars were moving on the motorway, but there were few people about. A handful waiting in the bus shelter. A few walking their dogs. But by the time she reached the War Memorial, she was beginning to feel conspicuous, walking with no purpose, and no direction. Blessed are the early morning dog walkers, for they do not look ridiculous. Not that she was fond of dogs. A cat would be easier, but she actively disliked cats: their unreasonable behaviour, their torturing of small mammals and birds, their indolence. Besides, the spinster with the cat was such a cliché.

She passed the wooden hut where once upon a time she had been a cheerful Brownie. All those happy hours ironing a yellow scarf, polishing a leather belt and purse. And the games, the singing, the making of scrapbooks under the benevolent smile of Brown Owl, whose black hair was so shiny, whose pink-tipped fingers had

curved elegantly like some oriental dancer's. How full of good intentions she had been; a small, round Gnome in plaits with brown ribbons, fully determined, as their particular rhyme put it, to help mother in the home. And how wonderfully helpful she had continued to be, through High School, and college, on and on and on...

Enough. She made a right turn into a well-lit street that would take her back in the direction of home. Duncan clearly thought she should still be doing helpful things. She was surprised by his concern for Mrs Flaherty. To be completely honest, she was a little surprised that Mrs Flaherty had confided in him. Although of course Duncan was the kind of person in whom one might confidently confide. Straight as a ramrod, always the perfect gentleman. Just as well Mrs Flaherty wasn't the sort of woman to take advantage of him. Dear Duncan. She had known him all her life, but she hardly knew him at all. She had exchanged more words with him in the last two weeks than in the last ten years.

## The Dust Heaps

“Thank you so much for coming, Harriet,” Mrs Robertson said, “June had such a sore throat on Monday I just knew she wouldn’t be well enough to come this morning, and Letty’s still at her Auntie’s...”

Harriet smiled back. She hadn’t wanted to come, but it was better than having to start revising for prelims.

“.....going to send a manager over, but I just thought, with it still being the holidays, we could open up if you could be here for a couple of hours...”

Mrs Robertson’s eyes, enormous behind her glasses, were deeply disturbing. They reminded Harriet of a picture of the Cheshire Cat in *Alice In Wonderland*. Her hair was just as worrying. She had a girlish deep fringe, and her back hair was combed in a straight line from crown to nape where it turned under abruptly, as if she’d set it on tight curlers.

“What would you like me to do first, Mrs Robertson?”

“Would you like to refresh the window, dear? I feel I must vacuum this awful carpet before I do anything else. And of course we should take the decorations down.”

The beige carpet, 100 percent nylon and resistant to the removal of stains, was the bane of Mrs Robertson’s life, but no-one else was allowed to do battle with it. Refreshing the window was less prestigious, but still a mark of approval. Letty, eager to please but “not quite all there”, was never allowed to “refresh” the window, which involved taking everything off the three glass shelves, wiping them and choosing some new arrangement of delicate objects. These generally included various china vases with floral designs, ashtrays, jam dishes, condiment sets and crystal milk and sugars. On the top shelf, at eye height for anyone passing by stood three very large coffee pots. They were in perfect condition, but bore no famous maker’s mark on their bottoms. As June said, they were too large to be useful. No-one made coffee in china pots for eight people any more. She had tried putting flowers in them, but they remained obstinately pot-like, and unsold.

Nevertheless like everything else in the shop, they had to be kept clean. “We’re not a second-hand shop,” June regularly reminded them. “We are a Charity Shop.”

It was an important distinction. And to support it, there were always brand new goods for sale, such as handbags in imitation leather, and fridge magnets in the shape of bright coloured abstract cats or dogs. New bracelets for £4.99 each. “Magic” gloves, where one size fitted all. Scottie dog key rings made in China.

In the back room, Harriet dug out the box for the Christmas decorations. The

three sided mesh cage against the back wall was piled high with bulging black plastic bags, waiting to be emptied out onto the table. This task made everyone nervous. No-one liked opening bags if there was no label to say who had donated them. “Do we look like the kind of shop that would take stained goods?” was the regular pained cry on discovering an offending object.

“Mmm. The Dust Heaps. Very Dickensian,” her father had commented, when she’d described her first day.

“Meaning?”

“People sometimes throw out valuable things by mistake.”

“Not very often,” Harriet said. All the antique programmes on TV had made people much more aware, according to June. Now and again something would be found, like a Delft vase, or a piece of gold jewellery, or brooches that turned out to have real stones, but all such things went to auction. The brooch Ryan Flaherty had stolen was pretty, but not real silver. Which didn’t mean it wasn’t theft.

She began to clear the shelves, disentangling the gold tinsel and fairy lights from the vases. Behind her the vacuum cleaner roared. June made cups of tea first, but Mrs Robertson had to clean. How old was she? Her trousers, always navy or dark grey, came just short of her flesh-coloured nylons. Her shoes, (Harriet had described them to her mother as “Old lady shoes”) had low heels, navy when she wore navy trousers, black for the grey ones.

She’d have to do some work soon. Christmas was long gone. The prelims would begin a few days after school began. Tonight she’d make a timetable. Making a timetable was a good start. She carried the cardboard box into the backroom and half filled the red bucket with hot water.

The electronic door alarm did its loud “Peep poop” noise as a customer came in. It was the man they’d given a lift to, the thin tall man with the white hair and bristly moustache. “Poor Duncan,” her father called him. He had two large plastic bags in his hands, which he put down carefully on the counter. Mrs Robertson switched off the vacuum cleaner and went over.

“Just some oddments,” he said in a gruff voice. “And some gloves. Leather. Hardly used.”

Harriet picked up the bucket and cleaning rags and went through.

Mrs Robertson trilled, “Oh, thank you so much. We’re always in need of new items after Christmas.”

“Why ‘Poor’?” she’d asked her father.

“Not financially poor. He lives with his mother in that huge house near the

woods, the one with the turrets. I called in not long after we came. He made me a cup of very decent coffee, and we sat out on the terrace. Very pleasant it was, watching woodpeckers on the feeders. He's terribly keen on birds. Then his mother appeared and he shrank into his chair," her father mimicked the action, drawing his shoulders together. "It made me think of those plastic things you and Kerr used to put in the oven."

She remembered the smell of the plastic as it cooked, and Mum's insistence on keeping the kitchen door wide open. Kerr hadn't been all that interested after the first session, but she'd made endless rings and charms to be worn on string necklaces, and badges to be given away to selected friends and relations.

"That's three pounds, please," Mrs Robertson said.

Evidently he'd bought something. Harriet didn't catch his reply.

"Oh, thank you. And please do say thank you to your wife for the last bundle. She has such good taste. Those Liberty blouses just flew out of the shop."

"My wife?"

Harriet looked round at Mrs Robertson.

"She always looks so elegant, I think. We do appreciate all her donations. If only more people would be so thoughtful."

Harriet waited for him to correct Mrs Robertson. Instead he touched his cap and went out. Mrs Robertson kept the smile on her face until the door drifted slowly shut behind him, then began examining the contents of the bags. *You stupid, stupid greedy woman*, Harriet said silently, turning back to her shelves. *I hope you find something you totally can't live without.*

No-one on the staff was allowed to buy items until they'd been on display for two full weeks. June had told her about an Italian silk scarf Mrs Robertson wanted so badly she kept putting it under other items. When the two weeks were up June pretended she'd sold it, but she relented afterwards, she said.

Poor Duncan had left his book on the counter. It was an old hardback, the lettering on its blue spine too faded to read. While Mrs Robertson was fighting dirty marks on the carpet beneath the DVD shelf, Harriet slipped it into her own bag.

## Age

On the way home Duncan was overtaken by Miss Calvert, pedalling hard against the gradient. She lifted one mittened hand from the handlebars as she passed. He touched his cap in acknowledgement.

Miss Calvert wore bright berets in winter, set at an angle, an imitation, he assumed, of the continentals she so revered. Today's was scarlet, with a matching scarf tucked into her jacket. She couldn't be much more than forty yet he thought of her as being much older than himself.

Not an attractive woman. For one thing, she never truly listened to anyone but herself. A word of conversation instantly triggered in her a memory of somewhere she had been, a view of the Jungfrau, or a "first-rate" hotel. If it was term-time, she would be pronouncing on staff shortages or some new folly of the local Education Department. All entirely predictable.

How predictable am I? he wondered. The pattern of his days hardly varied: Imperial Leather soap in the shower, Weetabix sprinkled with bran for breakfast (porridge in winter), decaffeinated coffee after six pm, the regular radio programmes he listened to, the TV programmes he despised and avoided... This life might easily seem dull to someone else, someone ignorant of the welter of thoughts that coursed around inside his head. He'd decided to work part time because it gave him afternoons to follow his own interests, not because he was old, or unable to cope.

That girl kneeling at the window, the minister's daughter, she had heard everything. She'd taken it all in.

He passed the Pensioners' Refuge, a white-painted wooden hut, next to the remaining beech tree in what was now known as the Jubilee Garden. Storms in past years had brought down the other two. Their sad stumps remained, incised now with slogans and profanities by the village youth.

Mr McKenzie, who for many years had taken care of their garden, was standing in the doorway. He touched his forehead and Duncan waved back. The man was old now, and stooped, but Duncan remembered watching one hot summer in profound envy as he and his two teenage sons, naked to the waist, the boys pale-skinned and the father deeply tanned, had chopped down an overgrown rowan and constructed a tier of raised beds out of old cobble stones, so that his mother could grow herbs near the kitchen door.

Forty years ago, at least. The old man's passage through the village was slow these days, and getting slower; a few steps, then a long wait for the breath to come

back, then a few steps more. It was perhaps made bearable, he supposed, by the fact that the old man was well known, that so many stopped to exchange a word. And yet with every year, there would be fewer of his vintage left, clay workers who had turned to other things when the factory closed.

Mr Mackenzie was wearing a tweed cap almost identical to his own. He glanced back, noting the man's training shoes, worn grey trousers, and black fleece jacket. His own brogues and flannels were smarter. He was certain Mr Mackenzie did not own more than one cap. Or perhaps two. He himself had five: this all-purpose checked one, a waxed Barbour to be worn with his raincoat, a soft leather one for his brown tweed jacket, and two for summer, one in cream and one in light blue. He was fond of caps. They kept one's head appropriately warm or cool, and had brims broad enough to shade the eyes. He had always felt that a cap made a man look dressed whatever the situation. A cap enabled one to be a gentleman. Or did it merely enable one to look like an old age pensioner?

The simplest explanation, he told himself, was that the woman in the shop had mistaken him for someone else. She'd always struck him as being a little odd. She always spoke with particular care, as if she might too easily mispronounce words.

The girl had noticed everything. She would think it was amusing. She would tell her whole family the joke, and then she would tell the tale to her friend, Ryan Flaherty, and he would laugh too. He would tell his mother and she...

No. Mrs Flaherty wouldn't laugh. She would stop the boy short. *That's a terrible thing to say*, she'd tell him. *Mr Crawford's such a nice gentleman*, she'd say. *Imagine thinking him the same age as his mother.*

## **The sugar bowl is broken**

“Mr Crawford, there’s someone at the door.”

Mrs Flaherty’s shout roused Duncan from his reverie. He went unhurriedly down the stairs, cup in hand, trying to make out who it was through the glass. From the distant sounds of drawers opening and closing, Mrs Flaherty had evidently gone back to the kitchen.

He recognised the girl. “Good afternoon,” he said cautiously. Perhaps she was collecting for some good cause. He tried to recall where he had left his coin purse.

“I brought your book. You left it behind this morning.”

“Oh, thank you. Yes, you were in the shop.” Surprise made his voice loud and rough. He tried again, “Very kind.” He looked past her for a car. She wasn’t wearing a coat, just a cardigan. Boots yes, and a cream scarf which looked like cashmere, but no hat, no gloves. No wonder she was shivering.

“You’re not on foot, are you?”

“I just came from the shop. I usually just do Saturdays, but Mrs Robertson was short staffed.”

“Mrs Robertson.”

“The one with the blue eyebrows.”

“They are rather blue, yes.” He was unable to repress a slight smile.

“I didn’t mean to be rude,” she said.

“No. Of course not.”

“Will I make another pot, Mr Crawford?” A voice from the far end of the hall.

His mother was out. But Mrs Flaherty was in. Where was the harm?

“May I offer you a cup of tea?”

When she said yes, he thought rapidly. The kitchen would be best. Mrs Flaherty would be ironing in the utility room and could chaperone from there.

He seated the girl in the wicker chair beside the window.

“So, do you enjoy working in the Hospice Shop?” he began.

When she didn’t answer he went on, “It’s a very worthy cause. At least, I hear people say so, I don’t know how much of the...”

To his surprise, she stood up. “Mr Crawford. I wanted to come and tell you... because I saw...I wanted you to know that...” She took a deep breath as if to steady herself. “To apologise... Mrs Robertson... everyone knows the clothes are from your mother. She’s a very... She’s just weird. I’m really sorry.”

Before he could answer she was heading back towards the hall. He just managed to get to the front door before her.

“Thank you so much for bringing the book,” he said hurriedly. She looked as if she wanted to vanish into thin air. “It’s quite a find,” he went on, “I’m quite ashamed that I only paid three pounds for it. No dust jacket, unfortunately.”

Her face was reddening.

He heard himself wittering on, “That’s the term used for the paper cover. It’s always more valuable with the original cover. Well-known author on birds, James E Whiting. If you come across any more...”

He closed the door behind her. *Idiot, idiot* he muttered under his breath. She would know perfectly well what a dust jacket was. Next it occurred to him that Mrs Flaherty would still be constructing a cup of tea for his visitor and would have to be stopped. As he pushed the kitchen door, he suddenly remembered that the girl whom he had been momentarily entertaining was intimately connected to Mrs Flaherty.

“Good Lord,” he exclaimed.

Mrs Flaherty jumped, and the gold-rimmed tray tipped off the work top, cascading cups and saucers, milk jug, sugar bowl, biscuits, spoons, the whole caboodle onto the floor.

Words essaying comfort, and the rescue of pieces followed. It was not as bad as it might have been, but bad enough. The teapot had not yet been filled with scalding liquid, but the sugar bowl had suffered, having neatly split in two. He became desperate when tears threatened, taking hold of her plump shoulders and directing her into the conservatory. He made her sit down, placing in her hand a clean handkerchief, ironed by herself on a past occasion.

His first instinct was to cover the mess with a tea towel, rather in the manner of covering a body on a battlefield. This, he quickly realised, would solve nothing. His mother was due home at any moment from her committee meeting, but Mrs Flaherty could not be asked to help. He alone had to clear things up. He put the undamaged items back into their places in the cupboards, then was at a loss as to what to do with the spoiled sugar cubes. Finally he gathered them into a plastic bag, along with the broken pieces of the bowl. At the bin he hesitated. If it went into the kitchen bin, Mother would find it. Even in the wheelie bin outside it might not be safe.

He went upstairs to his own room. He took his summer sandals out of their box, placed them boxless back into the shoe cupboard, put the plastic bag inside the box and pushed the box under his bed. He got to his feet, feeling strangely exhilarated. Now to dispose of Mrs Flaherty.

She was exactly where he had put her.

“I have tidied the kitchen myself, and there is no reason for you to feel upset,” he said.

“I’m that sorry, Mr Crawford,” she began, “The good china...”

“The fault was entirely mine, Mrs Flaherty, and I want to hear no more about it.”

“Mrs Crawford’s goin’ to...”

“No, she won’t. And if she does, I will deal with it. You’re not yourself, Mrs Flaherty. Perhaps you should have taken a few more days off. Miss Crosthwaite and I are both concerned about you and your worries.”

He liked this linking of himself with Lesley. Besides, it was true, they were both concerned for her well-being. Each in their own way.

“About me? She told you about him?” Mrs Flaherty’s mouth fell open.

“No, no,” he said hastily, sensing danger in the shape of a long conversation, “not in any detail. None whatsoever. No, hold on to it meantime,” he added as the handkerchief was proffered.

“It’s very nearly your stopping hour,” he hurried on, lifting his wrist to make it plain that he was looking at the watch. Often it was helpful to give Mrs Flaherty visual aids when saying something important, “and after the shock I gave you... I believe we could call it a day, don’t you. If you want to do a little more next time...”

In his study, he opened the Herald, but could not concentrate. What a strange afternoon he’d had. Poor Mrs Flaherty. Odd that she and not the minister should be the one worrying about her child’s relationship. It was beginning to appear that he had himself misjudged the girl. A flighty girl perhaps, but well-intentioned and thoughtful. One assumed that came from the mother’s side.

He stood to look at himself in the oval mirror above the fireplace. He hardly thought himself middle aged. His hair was prematurely white, but as thick as it had ever been. Each month the village barber commented on it approvingly. And his teeth were his own. The back ones, - he studied them now, his mouth wide, were well-filled but the front ones were still straight and serviceable. “Metal fatigue,” his dentist had assured him. “That’s all you have to fear now, Duncan. And the gums of course. Keep up the flossing. Are you seeing the hygienist regularly?”

He was, though he didn’t enjoy it. The hygienist was a small, fierce woman, armed with various sharp metal instruments. *Raise your hand if it hurts*. He didn’t dare. Most of all he hated the polishing that came at the end, with the sweet-sour, orange-flavoured grit and the vibration against the backs of his teeth, and that horrible split-second a bit of gum was polished by mistake.

Were his glasses possibly a little old-fashioned? His prescription hadn't changed in several years. The optician had mentioned new frames when he'd last had an examination but this seemed to him another way of increasing the bill. Leaning forward, he examined his nose. It was unremarkable, inherited, like his vigorous hair, from his mother's side of the family. With an index finger he stroked each side of his moustache. The hairs were mixed, some grey among the white. He laid two fingers above his upper lip and wondered.

## Gorgeous

The street lights came on just as Harriet neared the bottom of the hill. She pulled her hood up, glad of the dusk, wondering if her face was as red as it felt. Everything had seemed very clear cut when she set out. She'd looked up the telephone directory for the address, worked out where it was, and full of righteousness had marched to Mr Crawford's door. But before she could decide where to leave the book, on the shelf between the pot plants, or on the tiled porch floor, a woman in a blue checked housecoat had seen her through the bay window, nodded and pointed with her finger towards the door.

But the woman hadn't come to the door. It was Poor Duncan himself, with bits of his hair standing up at the back, and his droopy moustache, and a mug in his hand, and his shirt tail escaping out of his trousers beneath the maroon sweater, and she should have said no to the tea, but it seemed rude to say no. And then she'd felt so uncomfortable, she'd blurted out all that stuff about Mrs Robertson, wanting him to know it had nothing to do with her. He'd looked shocked, as if he'd forgotten all about it.

There was something at her heels. A dog, a thin, grey-brown mongrel with spindly legs and a long thin face, sniffing at her. She stopped.

"Go away," she said.

Its wet pink tongue hung loose from its mouth. It made to jump up with its paws at the front of her cardigan. She stepped back. It jumped again.

"He's just being pally!"

Some boys were coming up the hill. "He'll no' hurt you, Missus," one called.

It was trying to wrap itself round her boot.

"Aye, he's just a wee bit randy. Kinda like yourself, Stevie."

"Call him off, please."

"Ooh, call him off please," one of them said, mocking her accent. Instead of doing anything to the dog, they gathered round. They were younger than her, but there were four of them. One tugged the back of her scarf. "What's your name?" he said.

"Hey, Stevie."

They looked round. "Hey, Ryan," the one in the leather jacket said. "How's things?"

"You lot got nothin' better to do?"

They exchanged glances, and slowly began to walk away. One snapped his fingers and called harshly to the dog.

“You all right?” Ryan, asked, his eyes on the departing boys.

She stared at the muddy streaks on her skirt. It would need dry-cleaning. She should have taken Mum’s advice and gone for black or navy.

“Come on,” he told her, “I’ll walk you to the main road.”

“I’m not good with dogs,” she told him.

“I got that. So, how many points have I earned so far?”

She looked up at him.

“For no’ swearin’,” he explained.

“Why did you say I wasn’t real?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“No, seriously. Just because I don’t swear, it doesn’t mean I’m an idiot.”

“I never said you were an idiot. I don’t think you’re an idiot. You’re..” He took a detour round the lamp post then fell into step beside her again. “...gorgeous.”

“What?”

He didn’t say anything, just looked at the river, a slight smile on his face. The arrogance of it! Though it was nice to know someone thought you were gorgeous. Her mind began to spin. Obviously it was good to know, though of course being nice inside was more important. And was it really a compliment when it came from someone you weren’t certain you liked all that much, who thought he could get away with anything just because he was handsome?

“Cross by the road bridge,” he suggested. “You’ll be ok. There’s plenty folk around. It’s no’ five o’clock yet. What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“They’re no’ comin’ back, if that’s what you’re worryin’ about. What’re you doing up this bit anyway?”

“I had to deliver a parcel,” she said.

“To old man Crawford? I saw you come out the gate,” he explained. “He’s a weirdo. We used to play in the woods behind his house, and he’d come out and watch us with these massive binoculars. What was the parcel?”

She didn’t want to talk about it.

“Thanks again,” she said. “I’ll be all right now.”

She had gone a short distance when he called after her.

“Hey. You want to do something sometime?”

She shook her head. “I’m studying. Exams.”

“Well, if you get bored, give me a phone.”

As if, she thought.

## Sugar

As usual, Mrs McKinnon did not park her cheery red Clio directly outside the Crawford house. The road there was rather steep, necessitating a hill start which was not her favourite manoeuvre. Instead she stopped where the road flattened out a little further on, which allowed Mrs Crawford to make her way down to her own gate with the assistance of the handrail on the sandstone wall, a handrail which, as visitors to the house were always told, was of historical interest, having escaped the hunt for iron during the Great War when railings in the poorer part of the village had been cut away.

They had just begun their discussion about the afternoon's high and low points when the doctor's wife glanced in the mirror and said, "Edith, is that someone coming out of your front gate?"

Mrs Crawford looked in the side mirror.

"Possibly. I don't know who it is."

It was a woman, quite a young woman, judging by the skirt which ended above the knees, and the black tights and boots. The hair, what one could see of it escaping from the hood of her cardigan, was blond. Unfortunately the woman didn't cross the road before she was out of sight, so there was no opportunity to see the face, but young or old, the tights and the short skirt propelled her immediately into the category of "hussy."

"Were you expecting someone?"

"I imagine it was another piece of mail gone astray," Mrs Crawford said calmly, "They've named one of the streets in the new estate Hawthorn Bank..."

"And you're Thorn Bank. I see. It must be very irritating for you. Of course, you can just readdress it, you know. That's what I do. Most people don't realise they can do that, of course. As long as you don't open it. Oh, I know what I was going to say," she became animated, "Tell me, did you think Helen was a little subdued today, or was it just my imagination?"

They exchanged views on this and other subjects for quite a time, then finally Mrs McKinnon took her diary from her handbag. "So, our next turn for doing teas isn't till the 14<sup>th</sup>. Are you sure you want to bake, Edith?"

"I have sponges and shortbread in the freezer," Mrs Crawford assured her. "Thank you again for the lift, Marjorie. Do drive carefully."

There was no flier on the porch floor, nor any letter or parcel on the hall table. Presumably the caller had.... But what *had* the caller done? No easy solution presented itself. Nor was there any sound in the house, which was surprising. There was a distinct

smell of lavender polish, but surely the vacuum cleaner should be on. Mrs Flaherty did things in the same order each time; she always came in to the sound of the vacuum cleaner.

“Duncan!”

He appeared at the top of the stairs.

“Did Mrs Flaherty come?”

“Yes. Umm. I sent her home. Didn’t think she was quite herself. I believe she’s done most of it, though.”

“I do hope so.”

“I said she wasn’t to worry. She could do a little extra next week.”

Mrs Crawford half turned, then called back “Duncan, dear?”

His head reappeared.

“Did I miss anything? Any phone-calls?”

She could not bring herself to be more specific.

“No, nothing.” he said. “How was your meeting?”

She didn’t answer. The Discussion Group seemed neither here nor there.

She made her way through the house. Everything seemed normal in the sitting room; floor swept, the Doulton ladies dusted, fallen petals removed from the arrangement of apricot-coloured roses on the pedestal table. She preferred scented blooms but the colour was heart-warming in winter. Across the hallway, the cloakroom floor was still damp but everything was otherwise satisfactory. In the kitchen, the sink shone and the ironing pile was neatly stacked on the table. The board and the iron itself were back in the utility room, and the newly washed clothes lay folded in the wicker basket on top of the tumble drier, as always. Mrs Flaherty, though the most trustworthy of cleaning ladies, (and Edith had met some untrustworthy ones in earlier times; there was the disappearance of the fur lined gloves in Catterick for example) had never quite grasped the significance of “low” and “high” on the drier control panel, and she preferred to do this little task herself. Could the blonde have been some relative of Mrs Flaherty’s?

She was walking back through the kitchen when something crunched beneath her shoe. Sugar? A sugar cube? But no-one took sugar. Not herself, not Duncan. And Mrs Flaherty would never drink anything other than hot water when she came.

The blue and white box of cubes was in its usual place in the cupboard, the tab folded into the slot. She dampened a piece of kitchen towel and gathered up the pieces of sugar to drop into the bin. But the bin had not been emptied. Presumably Mrs Flaherty had become unwell before she had time to attend to it.

Who then had been using sugar? Had Duncan been entertaining someone? Mrs Crawford, still in her coat and gloves, carried her curiosity upstairs. Duncan's bedroom door was firmly shut. She raised her hand to knock. Then lowered it. She would not pursue the matter. There was a small mystery here somewhere, but she would not enquire. All would eventually become known.

## **Jumble**

Saturday morning began brightly, but the clouds soon gathered over the hills to the north. Duncan watched his mother make her way round the various tables in the Church Hall, talking to this acquaintance and that. He was not at peace. Mother had asked him to empty the kitchen bin, which was usually Mrs Flaherty's job, and might be an entirely innocent request, for there was no evidence in the bin. Had she missed the sugar bowl? And if so, why had it not been mentioned?

Another small thing. Mother came to the Boys' Brigade Jumble sale every year, but it was unlike her to want him to bring her, since she had several friends who still drove. She also had made rather a point of his staying. He might see something he needed, she said, and besides, she might get tired and want to come home. Winter, especially a wet winter such as this, seemed to drain her more than in the past.

Tea and coffee was being served in the downstairs basement room, but she declared herself not quite ready, so he went down alone. It was a windowless room, with pale pink walls, decorated by pictures drawn by the Sunday School children and photographs of African orphans for whom they collected pennies. Duncan bought tea and a cheese scone, and stood beside a radiator with his back to the wall rather than sit at a table where he would have to make conversation. Lesley was sitting at the other side of the room. But she was with Miss Calvert. Still, there was a spare seat. Before he could decide, another woman sat down. Mrs McKinnon, underneath a very large black fur hat.

"Mind if I share your radiator, Duncan?"

He moved over a little. Dr McKinnon propped something against the wall at his feet, a heavy squarish object in a plastic bag.

"Did I tell you Marjorie has taken up Art? Arranging flowers isn't enough for her, she has to paint the bloody things. Costing me a fortune, all those squirrel brushes. And now we're collecting frames. I haven't a clue where she's going to put the finished articles. The girls won't take any more. If she offers you one, Duncan, say you'd like two and put them in the attic.

"Wouldn't she notice? Their absence, I mean? When she visits."

"I shouldn't think so."

"She would ask Mother."

"True. That stuff drinkable?" he indicated Duncan's mug of tea.

"Slightly stewed, I'm afraid."

“Always the same at these things. Ideal if you’re in need of a diuretic. No, she doesn’t miss much, your mother. She saw your visitor leaving the other day. I’ll bet you didn’t count on that.”

“My visitor?”

“Blond lady with black leather boots.”

“That was the Reverend Smith’s daughter.”

“Ah.”

“I took a bundle to the Hospice Shop for Mother, then I bought a book and left it on the counter. She very kindly brought it round.”

“I knew there would be some dull explanation. Marjorie watches too much television. I won’t enlighten her just yet. The minister’s daughter, eh. Well, the mother’s genes won out there. They’d better get started building the moat and drawbridge round that one.”

“Too late for that.”

“Really?”

“She seems to have attracted Mrs Flaherty’s son.”

“Mary Flaherty’s boy? Is he that age? I suppose he must be. Last time I saw him, I was suturing his head in my kitchen after he fell out of one of my trees.”

“He’s a very strange-looking individual.”

“Probably what attracted her. The stranger the better. Katy and Lillian brought all sorts of peculiar boys home at that age. I kept well out of it, let Marjorie do the sleepless nights and tantrums.”

“Where did you meet Mrs McKinnon?” Duncan asked.

“What? Oh, mutual friend introduced us at a birthday party. She had a car and I didn’t, and she took me back to my digs. Why d’you ask?”

“I just wondered.”

“Duncan, why don’t you go on one of those cruises?” Dr McKinnon said, after a moment or two.

“I’m sorry?”

“Don’t say you can’t afford it. One of those National Trust cruises would suit you nicely. Scandinavia. Or the Antarctic. Lots of penguins. Even an albatross or two. Packed to the gunnels with single women and widows, those ships.”

“I don’t think Mother would...”

“No, she wouldn’t. Go by yourself, Duncan. You might even buy yourself some new clothes. I believe I’ve seen that jacket on you for at least ten years. Oh, happy day, we seem to be done.”

Mrs McKinnon had risen from her chair, and was waving to them.

“Remember what I told you about the paintings, won’t you?” the Doctor said.

Disgruntled, Duncan watched him join the women. Possibly it was the word “dull” that had triggered it, the assumption that anything connected with him would be “dull,” would have a “dull” explanation. It had stung more than a little. He dropped his chin, trying to see himself. What was wrong with his jacket?

“Well, whoever made these is not half the baker your mother was,” Eunice Calvert announced, inspecting the inside of her scone. “I can’t see more than three sultanas in total, and I suspect they were made with very cheap margarine.”

Lesley felt the eyes of both women regarding her sadly.

“You must find the house very quiet, dear,” Mrs McKinnon ventured as she pulled on her gloves.

Lesley smiled and nodded. Mrs McKinnon was such a gentle, well-meaning soul. She must, once upon a time, have been a very caring nurse.

“The thing is, you have to remember what she would have wanted.” Eunice wiped her lips with a paper napkin, a Sunday School Christmas leftover, Teddy Bears decorated in holly leaves and red berries. “You have to give thanks for all the happy memories, Lesley, and go forward into the rest of your life.”

“But it’s early days yet, Eunice,” Mrs McKinnon pleaded.

“Of course it is. I’m not suggesting it isn’t. But the fact remains that we all have to consider how we...”

“How are we all, ladies?” Dr McKinnon beamed down at them. “Have you made some exciting find? Not more wool, Eunice.” He poked at the plastic bag hung on the back of her chair.

“My Primary Sevens enjoy learning, even the boys. Hardly any of their mothers know how to knit.”

“I have drawers full. I should give you some,” Lesley said.

“Oh, you’ll use it up yourself,” Eunice said.

“Actually I hate knitting.”

She had silenced them. Eunice was baffled. Mrs McKinnon looked stricken.

“Perhaps painting would...” the latter began.

“Behave yourself, Marjory,” Dr McKinnon said. “Lesley needs less clutter, not more. If this continues,” he hefted his parcel higher, “we’ll have to move to a larger house, instead of a smaller one.”

When they were out of hearing Miss Calvert said, “He’s such a very big man, don’t you think? Most men shrink as they get older but he seems to get bigger somehow.”

Lesley felt irritated. What did the woman want? A world populated by men under five feet four?

“Now, as I was saying...”

Lesley interrupted, “Forgive me, Eunice. I really must have a word with one or two people. Please don’t wait for me. I have my umbrella.”

She carried her cup and saucer over to the kitchen hatch. There was no-one serving, so she put them beside some others, and turned round, right into Duncan’s Barbour jacket.

They both apologised, then Duncan said, “Did you find something on the stalls?”

“Just a book.”

“Something interesting?”

Reluctantly she slid the small volume out of its bag. A Ladybird book. *The Story of Joseph*.

“A bit ridiculous at my age,” she said. “I had this as a child, but it got warped after I dropped it in the bath.” She thought he might smile at this but he didn’t.

“You know, some Ladybird books are very valuable,” he said, as they moved to let two small girls dance past. “The early editions, especially in good condition. And it’s important to have the dust wrapper.”

How earnest he always was. He was an early edition himself, complete with dust wrapper, pages unmarked.

“I think there’s a whole box of these in the roof space,” she said.

“Really?” He grew more earnest. “You should search the web sometime and check them. Not that you haven’t got plenty of other...”

“You’ve shaved your moustache.”

He cleared his throat. “Ah. Yes. Is it all right?”

“It looks fine. What made you decide...”

“I did it yesterday.” He coughed again. “Actually, you’re the only person who’s noticed, apart from Mother. That is, she looked at the space where it had been,” he tapped his upper lip, “but she didn’t comment. I suspect she doesn’t approve. I must confess, the wind felt a little cold this morning,” he smiled shyly at his own joke. “Probably the wrong time of year to do it.”

“Well, in summer you’d be left with a strip of white skin, and the rest of your face tanned.”

“Right. Hadn’t thought of that one. I thought more people might notice,” he added.

But no-one looks at you, she thought, feeling a little shiver of sadness. Faithful Duncan, always ready to be of use and never appreciated.

“Well, frankly, I think you look much better without it.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

It was true. Without the moustache, his face was...softer?

“No going back then. Right. I should perhaps check whether she’s ready to depart.”

She walked with him towards the stairs. Just before they reached the door into the main hall she said, “Duncan.”

“Yes?”

“What you were saying, about the Ladybird books. I don’t have a computer. Could I look on yours sometime?”

“Of course. Whenever you like.”

## **The done deed**

Walter opened the back of the van and looked with satisfaction at his new fish tanks. He laid hold of the nearest one, bending his knees to avoid straining the back, a life-long habit he had always tried to pass on to his apprentices, then hesitated. Mouth pursed, he closed the van doors and turned the key.

When he went through the gate into the back garden, he saw Lesley on the other side of the hedge, taking sheets down from the washing line.

“Not a bad drying day,” he called. She waved back. How like her mother she looked, with that scarf tied round her head. Poor girl. The sheets would be more frozen than dry. A tumble drier was what she needed. Ruby never hung clothes out between December and the end of February, except for tea towels and the like.

He had a quick look at the goldfish then continued up the long path towards the back door.

“Mr Robertson.”

He turned. She had left the clothes line and was just visible across the hedge.

“I’ve been thinking about double glazing. You mentioned you knew someone reliable...”

He said he would find the man’s card and slip it through her letter box, entering his own kitchen with a smile on his face, glad that she was doing something to benefit herself, and glad too that he had been the one to give the good advice in the first place.

“That was a long day, dear,” Ruby said, not looking up. She was chopping carrots. He could smell onions frying. What she meant was, what have you been doing all day.

“Oh, I just had a wee wander around the town while I was in.”

He had gone into the city with the gift voucher Walter Junior had sent for Christmas. It had taken him five minutes in the store to be certain there was nothing he particularly liked. The next hours had been happily occupied in collecting the fish tanks, discussing his ideas with the proprietor of the Tropical Section, and reading his newly purchased magazine in the cafe nearby.

“Did you have some lunch?”

“I had a cup of tea.” And a slice of something called Mississippi Mud Pie.

“And did you get a new jumper?”

“There was nothing I fancied. That smells good, dear”

“Lentil and carrot soup,” she said, “and there’s beef olives.”

“Lovely. Home made? Not the ones from the butcher’s?”

“Of course not,” she said. “How could there be nothing you liked, Walter? I saw lovely cardigans before Christmas. That old green one’s not fit to be worn in public. ”

*Tropical Freshwater*. He unrolled the magazine and fingered the glossy cover.

“I don’t know how they keep finding new things to say every month,” Ruby said. “Would you like me to make some croutons?”

He wondered what Lesley was having for tea. She seemed to be getting thinner and thinner.

“Are we having Lesley in sometime?” he said.

Ruby stopped chopping, knife in mid-air. “What for?”

“You said you thought we should have her over for tea, now that she’s on her own.”

“She doesn’t seem to be on her own very much, if you ask me.”

Walter hung up his jacket, and, glancing back to see that he was not observed, went through to young Walter’s bedroom.

He sat down on the bedside chair. In his mind’s eye he cleared the room, except for the desk and the bookshelves. They could stay. The breeding tanks would sit against the side wall away from direct sunlight and the outside wall of the house. He had settled on Guppies after much deep thought. A few top quality fish would suit him. They were hardy little fish, but high stocking levels meant more frequent water changes, and he would not risk leaving this to Ruby. The filtration was crucial. First of course he had to overcome Ruby’s resistance. The best thing would be to confront her with a “done deed” as the Americans put it. He’d order a skip and get a couple of the lads to empty the room. She’d make a fuss, there might even be a tear or two, but it wouldn’t last long and she’d be on to something else soon enough.

## Guppies

“I’ve jumped the gun a bit,” Walter explained.

“How big are they exactly?” Lesley asked.

“Not very big,” he told her. “The big one holds about forty five litres.”

“But they would be empty.”

“Oh yes, of course. I could put them under the roof of the garage, but it’s not good for them to be in such a cold place, you see. And it wouldn’t be for long. I just need to find the right moment. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked you.”

“No, it’s all right,” she said. Though it wasn’t really. “Would the front sitting room do? I haven’t got central heating, but the storage heaters keep it reasonably warm, and it gets any sun that’s going.”

She hung up the phone.

“My next door neighbour,” she said to the minister, coming back to her chair. “He’s bought himself new tanks for breeding guppies and he needs to store them somewhere for a few days until he breaks the news to his wife.”

“I haven’t heard that one before. Very odd.”

“Oh, this village has more than its share of odd people. Hardly anyone’s normal.”

He smiled, “Apart from you and me.”

He seemed not to realize she was being serious. Mother had blamed the many eccentricities and peculiarities on inbreeding; cousins intermarrying year by year in small hamlets where, without effort or ambition, sons followed fathers into a trade, farming or the brickmaking works. There was just enough employment, she said. Less would have driven them out, more would have brought new people in.

*Mother always said.* The words took shape in her mouth. No, she told herself. Mother had no right to speak now. Her opinions, right or wrong didn’t count.

He was watching her, she felt, letting her choose what to say, where to go. Waiting for her to unburden her secrets? Was he like this with everyone? Well, he was in for a disappointment. That wasn’t why she’d phoned him. It had been her intention to outline Mrs Flaherty’s problem and ask for an answer. But the daughter had answered the phone. He was on his mobile. He asked, via the daughter if he might instead call round on his way elsewhere. It wouldn’t be a long visit. He had other calls to make.

He’d not taken off his coat, and she in return had not offered to make tea.

“Someone I know,” she began, “not a church member ... someone I feel obliged to, if that makes sense, is having quite serious problems. She doesn’t want to ask

anyone for help. I think she needs to, but I don't know who to speak to, or how to go about it."

In case he thought she was talking about herself, she added, "This person has a family, grown up children, so she isn't on her own, but she says she can't tell them what's happening. She's very protective of them."

Too protective. There was a difference in taking care of your children and becoming a doormat for all and sundry. Especially when the children earned more than Mary herself did.

"And you feel you can't break this confidence and tell them? What's happening exactly?"

'Very little' was the true answer. Mrs Flaherty was a circuitous story teller, and Lesley had had to listen hard to work out what exactly she was afraid of. It was more a case of what might happen.

"She was separated from her husband a long time ago. He abused her rather badly, and was rough with the children, so she threw him out, with the help of her parents, who were still alive at that point. She moved here with the children. Now he seems to have reappeared, and wants back into the family."

"And she doesn't want him back?"

"She's terrified of him."

"And the police won't be interested, since he hasn't done anything. Or has he?"

"So far all he's done is make phone calls. He's told her he's a changed man."

"It can happen. Presumably he wasn't abusive when they first met."

"I don't really know. She said he was the best-looking boy in the village, and everyone knew he got violent when he drank, except her. All her friends knew. And afterwards she said to them, 'why did none of you tell me?'"

"Why didn't they?"

"They told her they thought marriage might change him."

"Ah. The love of a good woman," he said, with a deep sigh. "Well, love just doesn't cut it all of the time. I take it her parents are dead?"

She nodded.

"And there's no male figure who can intervene in any way? No brother or uncle..."

"I don't think so. I suggested her priest and she was horrified. She would be very upset if she knew I was talking to you."

The minister folded his arms behind his head and stared at the ceiling, as if struck by the cornicing. It was a good room, she knew, in spite of everything. The

fireplace was fine, as Mr Robertson had said. But the rest of it... all these too-large, unrelentingly solid family heirlooms that left so little space in which to move. The bookcase full of books unread for decades, the pink-flowering cacti that only flowered for a fortnight and looked so depressed for the other fifty weeks of the year.

“Did you know,” the minister said suddenly, “that guppies were named after a clergyman in Trinidad?”

It took her a moment to remember that she was the one who had mentioned them.

“The Reverend Robert John Lechmore Guppy. What a leisurely life he must have had, the dear man.” He looked up at the clock, and got to his feet. “I’m sorry. I’m afraid I’m full of useless information. You don’t need an answer from me right now, do you? For your friend? Give me a day or two.”

She closed the door behind him with a feeling of relief. Turning, she glimpsed herself in the hall mirror. She wasn’t altogether displeased with what she saw. The woman with the diamond in her nose had actually cut her hair very nicely. She might ask for her again. But not the manicure. She’d bought nail polish removal pads on the way home, unable to think straight until her fingers looked like her own again.

## Intarsia

Duncan felt that fate was blessing him, when his mother mentioned that it was her turn to host the Knitting Circle. It was still called the Knitting Circle, though few of the ladies knitted now. The exchange of news was reason enough to keep attending. Supper was never lavish. The hostess was expected to provide tea and biscuits and there was a rota for the bringing of a plain sponge.

Over the years Duncan had overheard mysterious words like *intarsia* and *self striping* and *double front cross*, but his mother never attempted anything complex now. She made crochet squares that someone else sewed into blankets destined for Peru. Those ladies with grandchildren made small pastel-coloured items. It was a monthly ritual that seemed to gain just enough new members to compensate for the loss of others.

If Mother had been going out to the group, there would still have been problems. She might change her mind, there might be snow, her knee or her neuralgia might play up. Hosting the Circle, however, was a matter of honour and duty. She would be preoccupied with her own visitors, and although winter vomiting was doing its rounds and might keep some away, it was most unlikely that everyone would cancel.

What pleased him most was that there was no need to lie. He'd failed to mention that Lesley was coming, but he hadn't lied. And now, soon, when it was too late for Mother to change anything, when her first fellow knitters were beginning to arrive, Lesley would turn the corner, and her brave little boots would ascend the hill towards him. As soon as he saw her, he would go and announce diffidently that she was about to arrive.

There was a fluttery sensation inside his chest. That very morning, Mrs Fleming had asked if he was doing anything interesting at the weekend.

"A friend's coming over for coffee tonight," he'd said, wondering how much he might say, if she asked what for, or who.

She'd not asked.

From his position on the upstairs landing, he could see everyone before they reached the house. It was an easy matter to reach the door just as Lesley pressed the bell.

"Did I say something wrong?" They were in his study.

"Wrong?"

"Your mother looked..."

"Flustered?" he suggested.

“I was going to say surprised.”

The correct word for Mother’s expression was “astonished”, so astonished that she had gone back into the lounge, completely forgetting to help Lesley off with her coat. It was her good one, he saw, with the velvet band round the edges of the collar, not the brown one she wore every day.

“Here, let me take...” He hesitated. If he went back to the hall with her coat, he might be caught and questioned. “Let me put it here.” “Here” was a row of small hooks on the back of the door where he kept his caps. He put one cap on top of another to clear a hook.

No woman, except for his mother, and Mrs Flaherty who was permitted to vacuum the carpet and dust around objects without moving them, had ever been in his study. What would Lesley think of it, with its shelves of magazines and books, paintings inherited from his grandfather and great grandfather, the line of boxed Dinky cars that stretched along the top of the fireplace. Suddenly everything looked commonplace to him, even the Melville original.

Lesley had seated herself in the leather recliner.

“If you push that button, you can lie back,” he told her. “That is, if you were wanting to make it recline. Not that you look tired. I mean, you’re looking well. Very trim. Not that you were needing to lose weight...”

“Yes, I was. And I still do. Mother went on cooking for three after father died and I ate for two.”

He was burbling on like an idiot. And *trim? Trim?* Where had that rusted relic of a word sprung from? He’d never used it in his life. It was a word for a vintage car, or a gent’s haircut...

“I made a list of the books,” she took a sheet of paper from her handbag.

He switched on the computer, the word “trim” still spinning in his brain. His screen saver was a photograph of his favourite bird, a robin. Oddly, there were two in the garden this week, both males and furthermore they seemed to be ignoring one another, which was strange. Robins were so territorial...

“Here we are,” he said.

He placed the list on the desk and Lesley stood behind him. The most valuable was *The Story of the Motor Car*, for sale at £15. None of the others, including *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Ugly Duckling*, was worth more than five pounds.

“I’m sorry,” Duncan said, swivelling round. “I shouldn’t have raised your hopes.”

“No, that was fun,” she said, moving back to her chair. “I don’t mind if they’re not worth anything. Some of those were Mother’s and some were Sunday School

Attendance prizes. I don't think I'd like to sell them anyway. I used to read them over and over, probably because the illustrations were so good. *Joseph* was always my favourite."

"The one you bought at the Jumble Sale."

He did a quick search. "How much did it cost you?"

"Ten pence."

"A bargain. There's one here for 99p."

"He looked so sad, I think that was it. I was furious when his brothers put him into the pit and sold him."

"I don't think I won any prizes. I must have missed too many Sundays."

"You won the writing prize in Primary Seven."

"So I did," he said, remembering. A Parker pen. It was probably still in a drawer somewhere. Mottled green, with a silver clip. He hadn't been allowed to use it at the time.

"You know, Duncan, I always wondered why you didn't learn the piano. You have such long fingers. Wasn't there a piano in the back sitting room?"

"It made too much noise," he said, trying not to look at his hands. "And it was a very old piano. I suppose if I'd shown any proficiency, they would have let me continue."

"But you love music, Duncan."

"I expect the world has been spared another dreadful amateur," he put on a smile. "Would you like some now?"

She nodded. "You choose something."

Beethoven. Brendel. Not the *Appassionata*. He settled on The Late Piano Sonatas, Opus 110.

Why *had* he stopped? It couldn't have been his decision. Of course he must have been deported to boarding school around the same time. But some of the boys had music lessons. Why hadn't he?

"Actually," he said, "I do feel strongly about it. I wish I hadn't stopped. Which is rather a waste of emotional energy."

"Take lessons," she said.

"What?"

"Take lessons. Lots of people do. I would, if I wanted to."

As the first notes of No. 31 trickled gently into the room, he pictured his "long fingers" on piano keys. Of course he would first have to buy a piano. And where to find a teacher? Perhaps the people at the Music floor would know. Liszt would never be

within his grasp, but some Mozart perhaps? His mind drifted to Austria and the Rheinland and all the music festivals advertised in his monthly BBC Music magazine. And cruises where experts gave lectures.

“Lesley, what do you think of cruises?” he asked.

She looked puzzled.

“Cruises. Holidays. On the crest of the wave, as it were.”

“Why are we talking about cruises?”

He’d thought about them on and off since the day of the Jumble Sale, picturing himself in a deck chair, waiting for Italy to materialize out of the mist.

“Your mother might hate it. It’s an awful lot of money to spend if you don’t like the people you meet. And she doesn’t eat much either. People who go on cruises always say the food is the best part. And then there’s those dreadful bugs that go round the whole ship.”

These were exactly the reasons his mother would have given for saying no. “On the other hand, it might be restful. I can understand why some people like them. You see different places, you have lots of people looking after you, even a doctor if you’re sick, and you can do as much or as little as you want. And the same with the food.”

He felt a little sad. Perhaps he’d hoped for more enthusiasm.

“On that note, shall we have some supper?” he said, “Coffee or tea? Or something cold?”

“Tea, please. Just milk. No sugar.”

“I broke a sugar bowl last week,” he confided, “one of the good ones. I haven’t mentioned it to Mother yet.”

“Why not?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

Lesley let out a laugh. Or was it a giggle?

“This is serious,” he told her, wishing he hadn’t broached the subject.

“Not that serious, Duncan.”

“No, really. She’s had the set for years. I think it may have been a wedding present.”

“Duncan, you’re an idiot. You could probably find a replacement in ten minutes on Ebay.”

“You told me you didn’t have a computer,” he said.

“I don’t, but I hear the staff talking about the internet and Ebay all the time. What make of china is it?”

“I don’t know. Blue and white, with handles. And in my defence, to be strictly truthful, it was Mrs Flaherty who broke it.”

“Oh dear. Poor Mary.”

“Yes. On top of everything else.” He pictured again the dreadful son with his black coat dragging on the ground and his pointed shoes.

Lesley’s face had grown sad and serious.

“I haven’t been much help, I’m sorry to say. Going to the police seems a bit extreme, but it might come to that, I suppose, if Johnny doesn’t go away.”

“I thought his name was Ryan.”

“No, that’s the son. Her husband is Johnny.”

“Right,” he said. The quiet passage was approaching. He wanted to hear the hushed descending notes.

“Why are we talking about him?” he said at last.

She looked up. “Because we’re concerned? I hate gossip as much as you do. But how long has Mary Flaherty been part of our lives? I don’t think this is gossip, Duncan. The only person I’ve spoken to is Mr Smith and I didn’t say who I meant. I’m glad she spoke to you,” she went on, “I think she confided in me by accident, really. I was no use to her. It was just days after the funeral.”

Brendel’s magic was drawing him away. He tried to concentrate.

“And the boy, Ryan...”

“Oh, she hasn’t told him or the daughters. I think she’s afraid he would want to take the father on. He’s very moody. I don’t know. We see some people every day, and we don’t see them at all. Not as real people. I wonder if it’s because we just don’t want to.”

Purely by chance these last words sounded as the final crescendo gave way to silence.

After a while Lesley asked, “Do you want to look for a sugar bowl? All we need is the maker’s name and the pattern.”

“How do we find that?”

“Oh, Duncan. Go and look,” she told him.

He paused with one hand on the half-opened door.

“On the bottom of a plate,” she said. “Or a cup. Or a saucer.”

“That’s what I thought.”

He liked to see her smile, hated it when she looked miserable. She was so sensible. And sympathetic, although he wasn’t sure he liked the thought of her being

involved with Mrs Flaherty and her problems. Whatever those were, exactly. Not that he wanted to know. He'd managed to keep out of it, and he would stay out of it.

Take piano lessons, she said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for a man his age to be queuing up beside five year olds. It would never happen, but it was kind of her to think it could. She'd called him an idiot. He didn't mind being called an idiot, not when it was said that way. And he'd made her smile. It was a long time since he'd seen her smile.

His mother was standing in the hall.

"We're wondering whether you and Lesley might like to join us for supper," she said.

How long had she been there? He stood where he was, blocking the already shut door, waiting for her to wave him out of the way so she could go into the study to ask Lesley herself, but to his surprise she went back to the lounge.

He made a mug of tea, and poured mineral water into a glass for himself. He studied the underside of a dessert plate. This taking orders from Lesley, being told to do something, and being able to, made him feel... How did he feel? Reflected in the Gaggia's polished surface, his face looked squat and untrustworthy.

It was a small conspiracy. He did not feel in the least guilty. He felt cheerful. It was the only word he could come up with. Yes, cheerful.

**“There is absolutely no reason why you cannot have a perfectly healthy tank of these stunningly coloured fish”. Derek Jordan, Practical Fishkeeping.**

Sadly, there was, and it was Ruby.

Deception - Walter watched his TV programme without seeing - was not really his forte. He would have fared badly as a spy, or a member of the resistance in enemy-occupied territory. It was one thing to eat Dairy Milk en route to work, quite another to do what he was about to do.

He could hear Ruby moving about in the kitchen, making their suppertime cup of tea. Later she would go upstairs and run her bath. Twenty minutes with *My Weekly* in the hot water would follow. Walter Junior had got into the habit of sending expensive oil each Christmas. This year it was something to do with oranges, Mandarin Muse or some such name. The smell was not unpleasant: it drifted through the house each evening, and the association of the gift and the giver gave Ruby some comfort. He looked towards the kitchen. She'd driven him to it, really. Driven him into Lesley's arms, you might say.

He had given her every chance, really, on that earlier night. He'd begun, as usual, by complimenting her cooking.

“Lovely soup, Ruby, is there something different in it?”

“It's organic celery,” she said. “I told you the organic tastes better.”

Harmless, these little compliments each night. His own father had done it all his married life. “A small price to pay, son.” The thought that he might now be prevented from getting his heart's desire, in spite of all such payments over the years, was almost unbearable.

Would it have been different if they'd met and married earlier, or if Ruby had been younger than him instead of the other way round? More children might have helped. From time to time Ruby had asked him to speak to Walter Junior, to tell him that a personal visit was in order, instead of phone calls and the odd card from some exotic holiday, but he'd said no. They couldn't force him, Walter said wisely. The boy had to live his own life. At work, he would now and then mention how Ruby seemed to have forgotten how much the boy's erratic comings and goings had disrupted their life, how his appeals for money had been such a drain on the budget, how he'd refused to even consider working in the family firm, and how often he, Walter Senior, had had to ferry the boy and his pals home when they couldn't get a taxi. Every one of the fathers agreed with him. They loved their sons, dearly, but life was a lot easier without them on the premises.

“Ruby, I think it’s time we cleared out the back bedroom,” he’d begun, “We’ll get a nice new wallpaper. New curtains.”

“Why?”

“We’re not using it. I don’t know how long that paper...”

“It’s Walter’s room.”

“He’s got three rooms of his own in Croydon. And when,” (just in the nick of time he changed “if” to “when” ) “when he comes back for a visit, we’ve got the fold down settee in the front room.”

He watched her put the mugs and the plate of biscuits on the low table in front of him. He reproached himself. Any other man would have grasped the nettle, produced a large box of Kleenex, and instructed his wife to phone the Salvation Army or whoever else uplifted unwanted furniture.

Once he was sure Ruby was in the bath, he called upstairs to say he was going for fuel. “Will you be all right, love? I’ll lock the door when I go out.”

He switched on the back porch light. As if in reply, Lesley’s back door opened. Walter waved. Lesley nodded.

He looked back from the foot of the garden, but the Venetian blinds were down and closed at the bathroom window, small lines of light escaping at the bottom and sides.

Lesley’s back gate was unlocked as promised. He put on his work gloves, manoeuvred the first tank from the back of the van onto the trolley and following the strong beam of Lesley’s torch, walked up the path. It had whin chips, not slabs like theirs. His shoes seemed to crunch more loudly with each step.

She had helpfully moved her back-room furniture closer to the fireplace wall and laid a strip of sheeting all the way to her front room. Painter’s sheeting it was, judging by the dried-in stains. Not that anything had been painted recently, from what he could see. It wasn’t dirty, just old. In his opinion, and he’d seen a lot of houses, there was ‘lovely old’ and there was ‘ugly old.’ This house was a mixture of both. And there was far too much in it. He’d grown up in a cluttered house and been glad to get out of it.

Ruby liked a good clear out each spring. Sometimes he rescued a few things when her back was turned, but on the whole he felt she was right. He looked round him at the anaglypta. A bit of pressure on those whorls and he could have picked it off with his thumb nail.

Another trip to the van, and the second tank was placed safely in its new home, beside its fellow on the sheeted carpet. Nice cornice though - he looked at the ceiling - quality plasterwork. If Ruby saw that, she’d want something similar.

“Just as well I didn’t get the filters and fluorescents,” he said. “I hadn’t decided on the best ones.” He peered through the plastic wrap once more. Nothing had been damaged.

“I can’t return them, you see. It’s the nature of buying fish tanks.”

“I’ve been thinking about your difficulty,” Lesley said. “Would it help if you told your son all about this, and he told Mrs Robertson he was well and truly settled in London? You might have him suggest you go there for a visit. Wouldn’t that help?”

Walter scratched the back of his neck. “It might.”

It might not, he thought. Common sense was not always in plentiful supply where Ruby was concerned.

“You could stay nearby,” Lesley suggested. “You wouldn’t have to stay with him. That might be easier.”

It touched him that she had thought all this through.

“She likes to get her own way, you see,” he said. “No reason why not, as a rule.”

“But if she knew how much you wanted this...” Lesley patted the rumpled plastic edge of the nearest tank.

“People think it’s easy, breeding guppies, but it’s not. You need to get the water quality just right. It’s like, you have to keep them happy, but not too happy. I mean, if you overfeed them, they get constipation, just like us...”

“I didn’t know that.”

She was looking at her watch. He remembered that he was on borrowed time.

He crunched down the dark path with a heart less troubled. It was a pity they’d not become better acquainted with Lesley years ago. She was quite different from the mother. There was more to her than met the eye, so to speak. Her encouragement, her suggestion about speaking to Walter Junior, her acceptance of his dream as something normal, all served to make him feel that what he wanted so desperately was possible.

It was a clear night. To the left of his roof, Orion’s belt twinkled in the blackness. The only other constellation he knew was the Plough. He turned and there it reassuringly was, just where it ought to be.

**This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.**

It was hard to find much to rejoice in. In the moment before full wakefulness, his right arm had reached towards where his wife's warm, naked back was not. After breakfast he drove a silent, unenthusiastic Harriet to the station in the next village, his expressed hopes that the Geography exam would go well being met with a grimace.

His next task was to take Morning Assembly at the Primary school. For some reason it went well. He was forced to conclude that Miss Calvert, though lacking in subtlety, had a kind heart. He'd felt himself in danger of being quenched in the early weeks and months, but he had worked hard, prayed much, and, judging by the fact that chocolate biscuits were offered for the first time with his customary cup of tea, she seemed to be warming to him at last.

"Was that all right this morning?" he asked.

She nodded. "I was happy to hear you include the Royal Family in your prayer."

"I was happy to include them," he said, keeping his face solemn.

"Thank you."

Was that the key to acceptability? He'd assumed it was some deep-seated flaw in him she objected to. How strange people were. With all her enthusiasm for foreign travel, he'd never have guessed she was such a fervent Royalist.

"Will you be replacing the gerbils? I heard there were many tears yesterday."

"I suppose we must. Mrs Gibson diverted the children by suggesting they chose new names, which was rather unfortunate."

He nodded sympathetically. "Well, that tea was most welcome." He got to his feet.

"There was something I wanted to mention," she said, as they walked to the front door. "I'm hoping it's not going to turn into a problem. Some of the children have been chattering about a man hanging about, offering sweeties. You haven't heard anything?"

"No. Nothing at all. "

"We get these rumours every so often. When parents call us, we pay much more attention, of course. The children would believe you if you showed them a tinfoil hat and told them Martians had landed in the playground," she pushed a button to release the outer door. "We're not sending notes home yet. But naturally we're keeping our eyes open."

“I’ll let you know if I hear anything,” he said, zipping his jacket higher against the cold. “I tend not to ask questions when this kind of thing happens, in case it fuels the fire, but I’ll call you if anything comes up.”

The High School stood across the playground, behind a tall wire fence. Just in time he stopped himself from saying how hard it must be for Lesley, being on her own. But of course she and Miss Calvert were very different women.

“Have you spoken to Miss Crosthwaite recently? Is she back at work yet, do you know?”

“Oh, I’m sure she’s fine,” Miss Calvert said. “She’s her mother’s daughter.”

“I never met her mother.”

Mrs Crosthwaite had withdrawn her lines from the church years before, as had Lesley, but if Miss Calvert didn’t know, it wasn’t his business to tell her. When Lesley had asked him to conduct the funeral, he’d felt obliged to say yes.

“She was a fine hard-working woman. She married late and Mr Crosthwaite was much older, so she had all the work of bringing up Lesley when he died. And she was on the Friendship Club committee for twenty eight years. ”

“Yes,” he said, remembering that he himself had mentioned the fact at the funeral. He waited for some reference to fruit scones, for which the woman had been famed, but enough had apparently been said.

## Carrot cake

He had arranged to meet Lesley in The Sunflower. He assumed she would feel comfortable there. The Dirty Duck public house was not her style. If Jean had been at home, he would have suggested she do the counselling. She was far better at it than he was.

He arrived first. He was wearing his clerical collar so that all and sundry would know this was the minister meeting a member of the congregation. One of the lecturers at Divinity College had wanted to make all the male students swear never to be alone with a woman not their wife in a room with the door shut. Some laughed, a few booed, but most had taken it to heart.

The front of the place offered a mixture of gifts and cards. He studied the nick-knacks on sale. There was some jewellery Jean might like. He was doing his best, but his misery at her absence was getting worse as he scored off the days.

The tearoom had originally been a house. The old fireplace remained, with a proper coal fire burning. The Van Gogh reproduction hung above. There was something mildly disconcerting about a field of sunflowers above a coal fire. Each table had a small white vase with three fake sunflower heads stuck in it. The plastic covers were white with a pattern of bunches of pale green grapes. He recalled a sunny vineyard they'd visited near Sirmione, their last holiday before Kerr arrived. Picking some grapes when the guide wasn't looking, he'd been momentarily shocked to find them warm. All he'd known were grapes cold from a supermarket shelf, or at room temperature in a bowl on the sideboard. It had been a small but profound epiphany, as his tongue gently rolled the warm fruit.

Lesley was on time and apologized for being late. She had come from work. She was doing two and a half days. One of the other women wanted a job share. She hoped this might become permanent.

The waitress, still in her teens, with a shiny multi-coloured brace on her upper teeth, suggested carrot cake with their coffee. The carrot cake was always popular. Lesley agreed to share one. When the girl brought it to them she said, "Will there be anything else, Father?"

"And I thought I was universally known," he said, when she was out of earshot. "Isn't it strange how even in a place this size we live in separate worlds with different information in our heads?" He touched the small beads of clear acrylic on the sunflower leaves and petals to confirm that they were artificial. "Years ago when my wife was still teaching, she told me she'd had to explain to some of her pupils that Sir

Winston Churchill was not a member of the royal family. And these were teenagers, not little ones.” He put half of the cake onto the spare plate and pushed it over to her.

“They don’t read anymore,” she said.

“That’s true. Although I think it’s more than that. I think it’s getting harder for us to concentrate. We don’t retain anything. Everything whizzes past, without making a dent. If my sermon lasts more than twenty minutes, I’m in deep trouble.”

In his first month the Session Clerk had taken him aside for a quiet word. Could he perhaps shorten the sermon? “You see, Minister, quite a lot of the older folks are incontinent,” he’d whispered. He had responded, cunningly he thought, by missing out a hymn and changing the offering from the middle of the service to the end as folks were leaving.

“Speaking of trouble,” he went on, “the last time we met we were talking about your friend.” He was still not sure if the friend existed, or if the trouble was Lesley’s own. “I spoke to one of the policemen in the congregation. The first thing she must do is have the telephone company interrupt her calls. This is the number she should ring,” he detached a leaf of paper from his Filofax. “Then she has to see a solicitor.”

He explained as simply as he could about Non-Harassment Orders, and interdicts. And how there was a criminal route and a civil route, but getting a solicitor was by far the best thing when there hadn’t been actual violence. Though he had been wrong about the police, he told her.

“She needs to go to them. They might go and visit the husband, and that might be enough to stop him. The word ‘harassment’ seems to take in almost anything that makes her frightened.”

“Even if he hasn’t broken the law?”

“So it seems. You said he abused her in the past. What has he been doing all these years he’s been away?”

She said she didn’t know. She folded the page in half and put it in her handbag.

“Lesley, the one other thing I wanted to say was, I’m not sure you ought to get too involved in this.”

“Why not?”

The short answer? She was female, single and vulnerable. He hated short answers. Too often they led you into conversations where you felt you were moving from one stepping stone to another, except that the stones were floating in the air. He was learning, or trying to learn, not to guess where the heart of a problem lay when the person involved wasn’t ready to confide. In his past life he’d pounced on problems

shaking them by the neck till they gave up, but people were very different from pipelines. “Be still and know that I am God.” was still his least favourite Bible verse.

“I know that you want to help this friend of yours,” he began, “and by listening to her you’ve probably helped already, more than you realise.”

She didn’t look convinced. He took a little step backwards. Keep it light, he told himself. Once upon a time the clerical collar had meant something, had signalled the wearer’s trustworthiness. Not any more. He’d once been told that lawyers were the only professionals trusted, ministers and doctors were out. That had been at least ten years ago. Who was trusted now?

“I’ve heard it said that being bereaved is like walking on a leg that’s been broken. You might feel it’s mended, but too much pressure too soon, and you’re back to square one. If this man has been violent in the past, he may be violent still,” he added. “Fair enough?”

“Yes.”

When they parted outside the tearoom, he was left with the feeling that he might have helped the mystery friend, but not her. She’d listened, but she hadn’t thanked him. Which was fine. He didn’t need thanks. Were the friend’s problems a useful distraction? Whatever she was feeling about her own situation, he wasn’t going to get a glimpse of it here. She hinted at so much before the funeral: old hurts, resentments, opportunities not taken. He had hoped to talk about the need to forgive and be forgiven. About love, and the impossibility of getting it from the dead. He worried that this sad, loveless woman would now waste her life trying to gain her mother’s approval.

## Kids

Monday afternoons were not peak times in the Sports Centre. Dr Gordon glanced at the two middle aged women, and the elderly man reading a newspaper. None of them were patients. Radio One was playing in the background, but not too loudly, the smell of toasted sandwiches hung in the air, but not too strongly, and the immense TV, perpetually tuned to Sky Sports was easy to ignore if you sat a distance away with your back to it.

He and the Reverend Smith had met here by chance some weeks earlier, and now it had become a habit. They arrived separately, allowing themselves enough time before the schools closed and the kids arrived. After a while Smith would come down from the gym and salute him through the glass wall that separated the pool from the café area. They had the timing down to a fine art. Smith waited the requisite number of minutes then ordered two double espressos, which arrived on the table just as he came through from the changing room.

“So how was the water today?”

“Chilly. Had to keep moving.”

For the first fifteen minutes, before some senior citizens had arrived, he'd been able to pretend it was his personal pool. An infinity pool was at the top of his fantasy “must have” list. There was something wonderful about standing in a completely motionless sheet of water then crouching down to begin, something almost sacred, with the hands coming together as if to pray, then pushing out, caressing the water with the first breaststroke.

“I suppose I should try the pool, but I'm not much of a swimmer,” Smith said. “You didn't sugar mine, did you?”

“No. You're far less likely to damage yourself with the water supporting you.”

“I know. But swimming makes me feel sleepy, whereas the running and cycling wakes me up a bit. And I like to see how many calories I'm burning. I get so many cups of tea and home-made cakes when I do my visits, and it's kind of encouraging to see if I'm using up any.”

“What happened to resisting temptation?”

“Sorry. I can't hear you.”

“You don't have much to worry about yet,” he said. “You look pretty good for your age.”

“Have you any idea how much those three little words hurt?”

“How many pills do you take a day? ”

“None.”

“Exactly. I have patients your age who can’t see their toes when they stand up or climb a flight of stairs without getting breathless. Stop complaining.”

“I gained more than a stone the first year I was married. Jean put me on a diet. I’ll be in trouble if I’m any fatter than I was when she left.”

Men did gain weight after marriage. Many a research paper had confirmed it. He himself had gone up a trouser size, only to find the pounds dropping off when things went sour. At present he was living on microwave meals and toast, distrusting the gas cooker in the flat. It was depressing. He envied Smith his Jean. He was looking forward to meeting the woman, if only to see whether she was worth all this devotion.

“When does she get back?” he asked.

“Another three weeks. The fact that she says how hot it is in every e-mail doesn’t help. They’re on the beach, and I’m in the graveyard in the rain. Enough of me and my moans. How’s your week been?”

“Awash with winter vomiting, as we say in the trade. Nobody believes you when you say stop eating, drink lots of fluids and wait for it to go away. All they want is antibiotics. The best one was Thursday. A chap who waited till he recovered, and then came to see me.”

“Why?”

“I haven’t a clue. I wouldn’t mind but I always have a queue of people waiting, some of whom are, in fact, rather ill.”

“We must be a bit late today,” Smith looked at his watch as the first of the adults with children arrived. “Here come your favourite little people.”

“How many times do I have to defend myself? I don’t hate children. I just don’t like sharing a swimming pool with them. They’re dangerous. See, that one’s actually been labeled.”

The child trying to wriggle out of his father’s grasp was wearing a white woollen hat with a black skull and crossbones on it.

Smith said, “Interesting how it’s the Dad’s job to take them swimming these days. I suppose they’re on shifts, or unemployed. Maybe it’s a good thing. At least there’s a male role model.”

If they stayed long enough, Gordon thought. The world was insane. An awful lot of kids had a series of men in their lives, none of whom would be considered suitable if they applied to adopt. Children were fragile. The lines of an old poem came into his head, ‘She was beautifully delicately made, so small, so unafraid...’

“... I’m a bit jealous. The minister used to be the most important man in the

village. We're only called in when it's too late..."

It was a wartime poem about a child being killed, Gordon remembered. 'Bombs are the same. Beautifully delicately made.'

"I know. I'm moaning again," Smith was saying. "Monday's my worst day. I'm a different person once I get Monday out of the way. But I do envy you. Sometimes you save lives. That boy in the primary school who collapsed.... Miss Calvert was telling me you ran from the surgery to the school."

A peanut allergy, a severe first reaction. One of the new intake had accepted a home made biscuit from a small friend. He'd been standing by the reception desk, bag in hand, when the call came. A few days later, the parents left him a bottle of wine. "It's our own," they told the receptionist. Dutifully she passed the gift and information on. He'd been impressed, imagining they had a patch in some Mediterranean country. He'd seen such schemes advertised as a gift for those who had everything. On stripping off the paper, he found it to be a Rhône.

It was a nice tale, but before he had the chance to tell it, the Reverend redirected the conversation. "Kerr was constantly at our doctor's when he was small. His first hospital visit took place when he was less than a year old, after he swallowed one of those large nappy pins."

"Open or shut?"

"Shut, thank God." His hat, balanced on top of his anorak on the back of the chair, fell to the floor. He bent to retrieve it. "Nobody warns you. You look at this little thing in your arms, and you wonder who's in charge, who's going to protect it. Then you realize it's you, and a wave of pure terror sweeps over you. You think I'm exaggerating?"

"No, I'm sure you're right."

Sometimes it was the child who felt the terror. He was glad he had none of his own. He'd hated his time in the neonatal unit. There was only so much one could do. Or rather, so little.

He wanted to say these things, but hesitated. The trouble with Smith was, he was too bloody direct. Too ready to make things personal. You had to stay alert. You never knew where a conversation would lead or what you would find yourself saying. Now he was playing with the pompom on the top of the hat, a grayish knitted object, like a tea cosy.

"We can't keep them behind fences the whole time. I was reading an article somewhere the other day," he frowned, plucking some fluff from the wool. "Some scientist, I think he was Danish, he was suggesting that with serious child abusers,

there could be faulty wiring in the brain, that their urges didn't just come from trauma in their own childhood."

"Then we wouldn't hold them morally responsible."

"I know. But everything in me says we should." Smith glanced at his watch again. He lifted his jacket and put on the tea cosy, adjusting it to cover his ears.

"Thanks again for the coffee. My turn next time."

## **The carborundum stone**

All of Ruby's knives were sharp. Several times a week she sharpened them on a grey carborundum stone which had belonged to her grandmother and then to her mother. There was no need therefore to chop the leeks, potatoes and carrots with such vigour, but she banged on nevertheless, hardly seeing them. While they sweated, she poured two pints of boiling water into the measuring jug and dissolved two organic herbal stock cubes – lovage, celery, parsley, oregano and thyme – this to be added to the soup pot when the sweating was complete. The process was orderly, the ingredients were fresh and free from MSG. One item only prevented her from feeling satisfied with life's rich feast.

Walter had lied.

When he came to bed she'd pretended to be asleep, and for much of the night she had pondered. At breakfast she gave him a fresh chance to confess, feeling that she had perhaps been unfair. She was not ordinarily one who rushed to judgement, not like some.

"Was there a queue at the garage last night, Walter? You were gone a while," she'd begun, pouring tea for them both.

"Was I?" he said, with an air of unconcern. He was reading his newspaper as if nothing was amiss. "Not much on the telly tonight," he said. "Unless you like snooker. It gets worse and worse. I don't know."

Clearing the cereal bowls, she gave him yet another opportunity. "I didn't even hear the car. I suppose I must have fallen over quickly."

"Mm," he said, turning a page.

Ruby stared hard at the back of his head, willing him to confess and save himself, for had she not seen him with her own two eyes, tramping down Lesley's path? The window was open an inch to allow steam to escape. Had she not heard his familiar whistled rendition of "Scotland the Brave", heard too the squeak of that woman's gate, and seen the silent opening of their own before she let the white metal slat of the Venetian blind fall back into place? She'd barely had time to dry herself and get into her nightie before he came into the house.

She was meant to be in the shop at twelve, but as the morning progressed she felt more and more upset. Should she phone June and say she was ill? Certainly she was very tired. Her mid-morning tea, normally so welcome, tasted strange. Her head felt light, and there was a constant sensation in her bowels as if she needed to go to the bathroom, despite the fact that the needful had already been done.

She phoned June, changed back into her nightie and dressing gown and sat down on the front room settee with a crossword.

Just after one a knock at the kitchen door startled her.

Surely June hadn't come to see how ill she really was? She buttoned up her dressing gown, and unlocked the door.

"Hello," the young woman said, holding out a box. "I need a signature. Would you be able to take it for..." she looked down at her clipboard, "... Crawford?"

"There's no one here by that name," Ruby told her. "Not in this street."

"It's care of number four, Crosthwaite."

The woman pronounced it "crosstait" and it took Ruby a moment or two to realise what was meant.

"But this is number six."

"I know," the woman said. "It's for your neighbour." She spaced the words out as if Ruby was deaf. "Will you take it for her? It needs to be signed for."

"Oh, all right," Ruby said reluctantly, taking the fancy machine and stylus to sign. What a coarse, rude woman. Her hair looked as if it had been chewed by a dog. She was surprised that the Post Office employed such a person.

She relocked the door and studied the box. Bold red letters on white tape said "Fragile" on two sides. It was addressed to a Mr Duncan Crawford. There was no clue as to what lay inside. She gave it a gentle shake, close to her ear, then placed it on top of the biscuit tin.

As soon as he came in, Walter noticed it.

"What's this?" he asked, "Something from the boy?" It was the way he always referred to Walter Junior.

"It's for her next door," she said. "She was lucky to get me. I've not felt well all day. I didn't manage to the Shop."

"I could have come back earlier. You should have phoned me, Ruby." He was still holding the box. "I'll take this round after dinner."

She let it pass, but she was ahead of him. She had changed back into her clothes mid-afternoon, and had finished preparing the evening meal. She ate her own and there was a plate in the fridge covered with cling film, ready to be microwaved for him.

"Aren't you having any, dear?" he said, when only one bowl of soup was placed on the table.

"I had mine earlier," she said. "I thought it might make me feel better."

"No croutons tonight, dear?" he said.

He liked his croutons. Cubes of wholemeal bread were bathed in Extra Virgin olive oil, then toasted in the oven. Sometimes Italian seasoning was added, or cracked black pepper. Toast Melba, which he also enjoyed, needed more care; the slices were thin after being split, and when the raw sides were put under the grill, they tended to burn if unwatched. But there were no tasty extras, peppered or otherwise tonight. Nor would there be until he stopped keeping secrets from her.

She waited until he was halfway through the soup.

“I’ll think I might take that parcel round next door, Walter. Your main course is in the fridge. I’ll just pop it in the microwave when I come back.”

She went to Lesley’s front door, rather than the back one that faced their own.

Lesley came promptly.

“I took this in for you, Lesley,” Ruby said. “Although I wondered if it might be a mistake, because of the name.”

She couldn’t help noticing Lesley’s necklace, which had plastic beads like big chunks of sweetcorn, yellow and pale brown, and some darker ones, as if they’d been cooked too long.

“This is getting to be a habit,” she began. “I meant, like your boots. Not that we mind, of course.”

“Thank you,” was all Lesley said. She was holding the parcel up to the light, reading the address label, and her face cleared. “Oh, that’s fine. I know what it is.”

But she didn’t tell. Nor did she invite Ruby in, not even when Ruby said she hoped she wasn’t interrupting Lesley’s tea, and the answer was no. She tried another approach.

“You’re back at the school, then, Lesley. Is that going all right?”

“Well, it’s tiring, but I quite enjoy being back, seeing all the children. Anyway, thank you so much for taking this in for me.” She was moving to shut the door.

“I didn’t recognise the name, you see. I said to Walter, I hope Lesley’s not taking in lodgers, now that her dear mother’s gone.”

Lesley stared at her.

Ruby said hurriedly, “I almost didn’t take the parcel, you see. Is Mr Crawford new to the village?”

“But you’ve met him, Mrs Robertson. I’m sure Mrs Crawford often sends him with things to your shop.”

She nodded and smiled as if of course she had. But had she? What did he look like? Why was Lesley getting parcels for him? But Lesley was saying goodnight, and

thank you again, and better not keep you standing in this bitter, cold wind, and abruptly, quite rudely in fact, the door was being shut in her face.

“So what’s the news?” he said.

“This and that. She’s back at work. Said she missed the children.”

“It’s a shame she never had any.”

Ruby made no comment. She lifted Walter’s empty bowl and went to microwave his main course. The roast potatoes looked a bit leathery, as she’d half expected - roast potatoes never reheated well - but Walter ate without complaining. Nor did he push the green beans to one side. The minute she observed this, Ruby felt sure in her heart that something was amiss.

“Well, I think I can solve your mystery,” he said. “I remembered after you went out. We put in a new boiler for a chap called Crawford about three years ago. He said they knew our next door neighbours. He lives in that great big house across the river, the one with the turret. White hair and a big droopy moustache, like one of those wee Scottie dogs. I see him at the bus stop some mornings.”

When supper was over, the mugs dried and put away and all the worktops disinfected, Ruby sat for a little while in the front room, fighting vainly against the hardening of her heart. She looked over the top of her magazine at her husband of thirty four years. His sandy curls had receded neatly, like his late father’s, leaving his head looking very clean. His eyebrows had become bushy, but she encouraged him to trim them each month with the help of her needlework scissors. Not that she sewed these days. Fine stitching made her finger joints ache. Walter’s hands, reddened by honest toil, lay one on top of the other on his cardigan front.

Ruby had always respected Walter. He was the breadwinner, and his firm had an excellent reputation because of his own high standards and his insistence that the men follow suit. He kept his tools out of the house, and took off his shoes as soon as he came in. He knew how to fix almost everything so that she rarely needed to have workmen in her house, and he always showered before bed, where he was affectionate but undemanding. Until now this had always been enough. There had never been a shadow between them until now.

## Old friends

Intelligence, Roderick McKinnon reckoned, had been simpler in the old days. Before medical progress rendered it redundant, he had devised a foolproof method of predicting the sex of the next baby. He would write down “Boy” or “Girl” in his personal diary, on the day of the first visit, while assuring the mother verbally of the opposite. By this means he had quickly acquired a reputation for astonishing insight and cleverness. Some of his patients possibly still believed it. He himself felt less and less certain. He hoped he was still learning. It was just that the amount he had to learn seemed to grow greater with every passing year. The very concept of intelligence had become more obscure to him. He had seen great courage, and more determination to fight the odds than he himself would have possessed in the same circumstances, but he had also watched seemingly “intelligent” men and women ignore his warnings and bring themselves to a premature death. He had an idea in his head now as he walked towards the Crawford house, where the cold February sun hung motionless in the bare branches of their ancient beech trees, but he wasn’t sure if it was an intelligent idea or a foolish one.

“Just passing, Edith. Thought I’d check up on you, since you never come to see us at the surgery.”

She led the way to the front sitting room. As always the room overwhelmed him with its beauty. He and Marjory came from working class backgrounds. They’d inherited nothing but their genes. *My shoulders and your mother’s brains, and thank the Lord it was yon way round*, had been his father’s pronouncement. Even now, accepted without question as an equal by Edith Crawford, in a room like this he felt very conscious of his roots.

“Sherry?” she asked.

“A small one.”

He sat in the rocking chair, a modern heirloom. Hand carved with its trademark Mouse, it had, he recalled, taken three years to come after the order was placed, arriving perfectly in time for her seventieth birthday. But who would inherit after Duncan died, apart from the taxman?

“Well then, any problems, or just the same old friends?” he began. It was impossible not to rock. He placed his glass on the shelf beside him.

“Fit as a fiddle,” she said.

“Let’s have a wee look at your blood pressure.”

She unbuttoned her sleeve and let him tighten the grey cuff around her upper arm. The pressure was a little high, but he felt there was no need to up the dose. The grandmother, deaf but otherwise hale, had lived to well over a hundred. Edith's arms and legs were losing bone mass - few women her age could defy osteoporosis - but she was still straight, still elegant. Was that important in these times? To her it would be, he thought. Her hair had a natural wave, with whiter strands around the face. Marjory had told him, not disapprovingly, that she paid an expensive hairdresser from the city to come to the house.

"So how are the legs? Still getting down to the shops and back again?"

She had broken an ankle some years earlier, which had taken its time to heal.

She made a little face. "Not so often. We go into town sometimes but Duncan does a weekly order on his computer. I'm fine on the flat, though."

"I wanted to talk to you about Duncan," he said. He took a small sip of the sherry.

"Yes?" she said.

The moment of truth. He felt as he had felt in his youth, waiting for the whistle, when his broad shoulders had made him an obvious but unenthusiastic prop forward.

"I'm feeling a little concerned," he began.

"About Duncan? My Duncan?"

"Yes. And I hoped you might help me, keep me right, as it were."

She had poured sherry for herself, although she hadn't touched it. Nor did she now. She picked what might have been a hair from her skirt, then placed her hands in her lap.

"Tell me," she said, looking beyond him at the now shadowed garden.

## Hurt

The box wasn't very big. It looked old but nice. Dark red, the shape of a heart. It took her a while to get it open, because the gold hook and the button it was caught on were so small. If it was sweets inside, they'd be really wee ones. The last time, he'd left chocolate coins wrapped in gold paper. Just two, but they were big. She'd eaten one on the way back to the van, and one in the dark after she was in bed.

But this time it wasn't sweets. It was a ring with a stone on it. It was the smallest ring she'd ever seen. She didn't know you could get rings that small. She thought maybe it was a pearl, because her Nan wore pearl earrings. It was too big for all her fingers, but stayed on her thumb without falling off. It was like a crown for a fairy queen.

Chocolate was better. If she wore this, they'd take it off her. If she hid it, they'd find it. They'd ask where she got it, and she had promised him not to tell anyone they were friends, not ever.

She put it back behind the stone. Then she changed her mind and, leaving the box, put the ring back on her thumb. It was so small, there must be somewhere in the van to hide it.

The twins found it before supper. She saw them whispering. They whispered together, then Josie got her by the ankles, and Martine pushed her over and sat on her tummy, holding one wrist down on the floor between the bunks, pulling at the arm which ended in the hand whose thumb was locked in her mouth, pressing hard against her teeth. Then Martine started bouncing on her, really hard, thumping the breath out of her body.

It hurt so bad she opened her mouth and screamed as loud as she could.

The door of the van opened. The twins instantly jumped off her and onto the beds. She rolled over on to her front, the thumb with the ring again wedged against her top teeth.

"She's got a gold ring! She let a dirty man touch her bum an' she's got a gold ring!"

Dad yelled at them to be quiet, grabbed her by the arms, and got her to stand.

"Shut up! An' take that bloody thumb out yer mouth!"

The thumb was red, and white where she'd bitten down on it, but there was no ring. It had slipped silently past her tonsils and down into the dark.

## Amber

At three am Lesley gave up trying to get back to sleep. She put on her dressing gown and went downstairs to make some hot milk. Last night's scrambled egg pan sat in the sink. It was an easy, filling supper, but there was something so disgusting about a pan with water and the remains of cooked egg in it that she had left it unwashed. Now that she could. Now that there was no-one standing behind her.

The Robertsons' outside light flashed on, then off seconds later. A cat on patrol along the bottom of the hedge? Mrs Robertson was getting sillier and stranger by the day. *I hope Lesley's not taking in lodgers.*

The glass disc began rattling in the milk pot. She lifted it off the heat before it could boil over. Had she been unkind, not inviting the woman in? She poured the milk into a mug, stirring in a squeeze of honey. *You're doing so well, Lesley. You're being very brave.* Being back at work had nothing to do with being brave. With her financial situation more secure than she'd expected, she could stop working, but who would there be to talk to? Her days would be as lonely as the nights.

She'd meant to phone Duncan earlier to let him know two items of news that would surely please him. First that she'd left the minister's useful information on Mrs Flaherty's answer phone and second that the replacement sugar bowl had arrived. He looked so much better without his moustache. When they finally found a website with what they needed, he'd let out a sound that was almost a whoop of glee, before pressing a finger to his lips. It cheered her to see him enjoying their conspiracy. That's what he called it.

The sugar bowl had been properly wrapped. She'd checked to be sure it hadn't been damaged in transit. The staples were embedded in the cardboard, and she had to use a nail file to lever them out. Inside, the bowl and lid were separately wrapped in tight layers of bubbled plastic.

She had to find scissors to cut the plastic wrapping, so much Sellotape had been used. The last piece of wrapping fell away and to her great relief all was well. It looked like new, although it had been advertised as "Used." Did anyone ever use their best china? The cabinet in the dining room contained a set of the same vintage, rarely used even when Mother was alive, *and* what was left of her grandmother's dinner set.

Mug in hand she went back upstairs. The string of beads she'd been wearing all day lay coiled on the bedside table beside her watch and reading glasses. She'd never been much of a one for beads, or jewellery of any kind. Wearing them to work had

been rather out of character, but finding them in a drawer, she had liked the feel of them, and the colour.

“Lesley, are those amber?” someone in staff room said. “Can I have a look?”

She’d begun clearing out, Lesley explained, handing them over for inspection.

“They’re gorgeous. You know, if they’re amber they might be really old. I saw one like this on the Antiques Road show. It made more than £400.”

“Lesley, anything else you’re thinking of throwing out, could you bring it here first?” one of the other teachers said.

She wondered if she might ask Duncan to look on the web again.

Being the centre of attention was embarrassing but gratifying at the same time. She didn’t usually wear beads, although she liked seeing jewellery on other women, earrings in colours that matched a blouse, or enamelled lapel brooches to brighten dark suits. Where then had it come from, this misbegotten, perverse idea that while it was fine for other women, wearing jewellery was in her case a sign of vanity, something to gain attention from men, or provoke envy from women? Even if it had been true once, it wasn’t now. She was too old to make other women jealous, even if she wanted to, and the contents of an entire street of jewellers’ shops would hardly be enough now to attract a man.

The sugar bowl had been a wedding present, according to Duncan. Not something she would ever have. This mug in her hands was stoneware, with the school crest on one side, and the dates of the centenary on the other. Not that she needed presents. If she needed anything, she could afford to buy it herself now. She might buy a new washing machine, the kind with the tumble dryer function. It would be lovely to get rid of the pulley. The women in the staff room would know which one was best.

Duncan was so funny. He thought he lived a very simple life, but really he was so fussy about so many things. Proper coffee. Writing with a fountain pen, and blue-black ink. He refused to wear synthetic materials. Braces on his trousers rather than a belt. Proper shoes no matter what he was doing.

What had made him shave off the moustache? She’d always assumed he wore it as an act of homage to the Colonel, whose portrait hung half way up the stairs. She remembered him as a silent figure in the background of parties, or rather of the beginnings of parties, as he never seemed to stay long.

If she ever had to choose wedding china, she’d have something without a pattern. No tangled roses or butterflies or hand-painted gold rims. It would be beautiful, of course, but plain. The way the amber necklace was plain. The way the full moon was plain. It would be used every single day of its life.

As she switched off the bedside light, it occurred to her that she was involved in three conspiracies, not one. She'd shared Mary Flaherty's troubles with the minister, and helped Duncan find a sugar bowl and she was storing Mr Robertson's fish tanks. All conspiracies with men, and two of them married!

*Don't let her spoil the rest of your life.*

Easy for Dr Gordon to say. Young and handsome and kind to stupid middle-aged women who thought momentarily and quite mistakenly that he resembled their lost lovers. How easy life was for men like him. She felt for the necklace on the bedside table, and raised the cool, uneven lumps of amber to her lips.

"I would have been a good wife," she told them. "I would have let my husband have all the fish tanks he wanted."

## **The world too much**

When Dr McKinnon left, Mrs Crawford returned to the kitchen. The pleasant, authoritative female voices on the radio which had previously been discussing pension plans were now debating the virtues of breastfeeding. She switched them off. She had been weighing flour for a batch of fairy cakes – most of them to go into the freezer, but a dozen to be iced for Duncan to share with the library staff.

The daisy-patterned paper cases were as she had left them, crisp and frilly in their trays, and the cooling racks were waiting on the worktop. The maxims of Miss Scott the Cookery Mistress, immaculate in white, spoke to her still across the decades. *Good cooks think ahead and tidy as they go.*

Instead of putting her apron back on, she switched off the cooker, and made her way, one hand lightly touching the dado rail, through the corridor and up the back stairs to the small second floor room which had begun life as a maid's bedroom and was now her sanctum. After his father's death, Duncan had helped her with the colours. They had found a replica Owen Jones wallpaper in exactly the correct shade of muted pinkish red to suit the ancient Crawford tartan curtains and carpet. North-west facing, the room was often dull, which was a soothing thing when the world became too much. There was no clock, no calendar, no rack of magazines, nothing by which to guess the date or time. A gold-framed blackwork representation of York Minster hung above the mantelpiece, silk on linen worked by herself when a girl. On the opposite wall was a black and white photograph of her late parents in front of the bungalow in Rangoon. Her father had one hand on the bonnet of the newly arrived Austin 12, the other arm round her mother, tall, slim and looking like a film star in her sunglasses.

She sat down as usual in the Indian rosewood armchair. Turning it slightly so that she could look out at the hills, she settled a mohair rug over her knees. After a little while she drew it higher, until it was over her shoulders. She fussed at it, trying to tuck the sides in tight around her.

Once upon a time there had been nothing but fields beyond the mixed hedge of holly, hawthorn and beech, planted in her grandfather's time. As a child she had crouched to look through the gaps at the Clydesdales, with their pale brown foals sleeping in the sun. She had only one other memory of that era; being given a white enamelled pail with a royal blue rim (or was it a colander?) to fill with gooseberries - pale green, perfectly veined, enormous to a child's eyes. Hard and sour when raw, they were wonderful when grandma's cook made them into pies with the thinnest, crispiest pastry imaginable.

## **Under siege**

“I’m not asleep, dear.

Dr McKinnon ceased tiptoeing and approached the bed in a normal fashion.

“Your feet are freezing,” his wife added moments later.

He removed them from her pleasantly warm calves, switched on the bedside light and opened “Fortress Malta: An island under siege.” He had left the submariners trying to maintain good spirits the previous evening in Chapter Seven, and was not hopeful that things would improve. Chapter Eight was entitled, “Valour at Sea”, which was worryingly unspecific.

“I’m sorry, I tried to be quiet,” he apologised, as his wife turned on to her back.

“You were quiet, dear. I can’t sleep. I’ve been thinking about Eunice Calvert and the Primary children and all these terrible rumours.”

“I’m sure she’ll appreciate that. I’ll phone and let her know.”

“Don’t be silly. It’s after midnight,” she told him.

He tried to get back to the brave submariners, but his mind was elsewhere. Would Edith Crawford take up his suggestion? More to the point, would Duncan? Had he acted with valour, or was he meddling where he had no business to? He had no faith in a Supreme Being, and no desire to begin acting like one at this stage of his life.

Squadron Leader Peter Townsend was just beginning to train a younger airman in the art of dog-fighting when a small voice said from beneath the quilt, “Darling, you don’t suppose there could be any truth in what they...”

“No,” he said firmly. He closed the book and laid it on the floor. “I must confess I’ve sometimes been tempted to start a rumour. Something harmless about myself. An ingrown toe nail, or something of that ilk. I’d tell three different people in complete confidence, and see how long it took to come back to me transformed into chronic gout or gangrene. Please don’t get yourself agitated, Marjory. It won’t help.”

She turned to cuddle into him. “Why is the world so terrible? It wasn’t like this when our girls were growing up.”

She was quite wrong, the world had always been terrible but he was too tired to argue. He tried a different tack.

“You did a good job with them. You were always there for them.”

“Well I didn’t have to work. They were my work.”

She seemed to settle, and after a while he switched off the light. But there was one more question. Later he would remember how it had come last, like the question

patients would ask on the point of leaving, casually mentioning what was uppermost in his or her mind.

“Roderick. Mrs Flaherty’s one of your patients, isn’t she? The woman who cleans for Edith. ”

“Yes.”

“Someone said her husband’s back in the district.”

“And?”

“They thought he’d been in prison. Mrs Flaherty threw him out years ago, because he ....”

“Johnny Flaherty wasn’t a paedophile, if that’s what you’re thinking. He was an alcoholic and a womaniser, and he battered his wife when he was drunk, but I am absolutely certain he never hurt his own children or anyone else’s. Now please can we go to sleep?”

She was silent. After a moment an apologetic arm crept round his stomach. He patted it through the quilt. *Never let the sun go down on your wrath*, his father had told him, the day before the wedding. A very wise man, his father. Some clichés were worth holding on to.

## **Pals**

“Daddy.”

The Reverend Smith typed on to finish his paragraph but mentally readied himself. When Harriet used that word instead of Dad, it was usually a signal that something with the potential to ruffle feathers was to follow.

“Can I talk to you?”

“Yup.” He misspelled “apocalypse”, and pressed the plus sign instead of the delete.

“It’s quite important.”

“Mmn.” On the third try it was correct.

“I went into town this morning, and I’ve just had my belly button pierced.”

“No, you haven’t, but you can if you want to.”

“Really?”

“Of course not. What’s the problem?” He pressed “save” and swung round to face her.

“Ryan wants me to do something, and I’m not sure if I want to do it.”

So it was Ryan now, not Ryan Flaherty.

“Go on,” he said. And silently, God help us all...

She’d taken a jar of coloured paper clips from the window ledge and was picking out the white ones. “Someone’s been making funny phone calls to his house. Not obscene calls exactly, just not speaking...”

“Heavy breathing.”

“Well, not even that, really.”

She sat on the rug beside the desk, so that her back was against his left leg. He had to stop himself from touching the fair head so close to his hand. Those days were gone. How he hated it that they were gone. In the bookcase against the wall, almost exactly level with Harriet’s shoulder he saw “How to understand your teens.” An excellent book. He recalled reading it. In fact he had underlined several useful passages. Sadly, the book on how to handle Harriet had not yet been written.

“He says his mother’s all worked up about it, making herself ill, but she won’t do anything.”

The paper clips were being linked into a necklace. He had a sudden memory of summer daisies being made into chains in their first garden, Harriet sitting against her mother on the back doorstep, concentrating fiercely, tongue between her lips, carefully inserting the stems into one another after Jean had made slits with a pin, while he and

Kerr practised putting strokes on the tiny strip of grass where an empty soup tin had cut out a circle of turf and been reversed into the hole to catch the ball.

“And what does Ryan want you to do?”

“Phone the number and find out who’s calling them.”

“And he can’t do this himself because...?”

“I’m not sure. That’s what worries me. But I don’t want to say no, either.”

Was this their fault, this unwavering determination in Harriet to adopt every lame duck in sight? One day a duck more lame than any who’d gone before would limp across her path, and some completely unworthy young man would take her from them.

Every milestone had hurt. Her first period, not that he was supposed to know; her first bra, ditto; the first phone call from a boy whose name he didn’t recognise; the first party when he wasn’t allowed to come inside but had to wait in the car.

“But she doesn’t fall out with you,” Jean told him. “I’m the one ruining her life. She still thinks you’re her pal.”

It was nice to know, but it wasn’t enough to make him feel secure. Pals came and went.

He cleared his throat. “What do you want me to do? Would you like me to talk to him?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, I suppose you could suggest it. If he says no, we’ll go to plan B.”

She raised her arm. “What’s plan B?”

“I’ve no idea.”

This was the question and answer always used in family ‘discussions’ when they took wrong turnings and got lost, or forgot to set the oven timer to cook Sunday lunch, or put diesel in the new car (an opportunity for grace). This time it sounded worn and tired, and not the least bit amusing.

Harriet got to her feet. When had she got so tall? Something seemed to go ‘ping’ between his ribs, like a button flipping out of its hole.

“Are you going to unclip those for me?” he said.

“Of course not.”

She draped the long loop over his head and left.

He turned back to First Corinthians. Some time later, in mid sentence, it struck him that he knew who the mystery caller was, knew who Lesley Crosthwaite’s unnamed, unhappy friend was, knew more about Ryan Flaherty’s troubles than the boy did himself.

## Waifs and strays

“So how are Harriet’s exams going?” Dr Gordon asked, watching the Reverend lower his trousers.

“I don’t think they’re causing any real trouble. She’ll do well in the subjects that interest her and quite well in the ones that don’t. With Harriet it’s always been a case of whether she likes the teacher or not. That’s it there,” he indicated the small dark shape on his inner thigh.

“Skin tag,” Gordon said, after a close look. “Fibroepithelial polyp, to give it its Sunday name. Completely harmless. It’s gone dark because it’s not getting any blood supply. It’ll fall off pretty soon. You could put an Elastoplast over it when you get home, if you like, but I wouldn’t bother.”

“I was a bit worried.”

“Absolutely nothing to worry about. But you were right to get it checked. We might as well do everything since you’re here. If you roll up your sleeve... You know, I can’t imagine Harriet being bad in class.”

“She isn’t bad. She does this passive aggressive thing, not doing more than the bare minimum required to pass. She’s too proud to actually fail, unfortunately.”

Gordon watched the dark red fluid enter the Vacu-tainer, then handed Smith a small pad of cotton wool, telling him to press down on it. He applied the Steri-strip. “Why ‘unfortunately’? No, keep the arm up for a couple of minutes.”

“She’s never failed at anything in her short life. It’s not good preparation for the big, bad world. I worry for her.”

Was this said as a joke? He’d never trusted grand statements about learning from failure; they generally came from people who eventually found success. Failure seemed to him a little like salt in your soup, fine in very small doses. He’d had enough failure in his life to last him for the next few decades. Chiefly his marriage. Two years that had lasted.

“Ok, blood pressure next. Other arm. So what did you fail at?”

“Depends which day of the week we’re talking about.”

“No, I’m serious. Major failures. You can put that one down now.”

Smith obediently rolled up his other shirt sleeve. “I’m not telling you about those. Those are gone. Even God’s forgotten those.”

Gordon said nothing. When God occasionally strayed into the conversation, it wasn’t a problem. He’d discovered early on that the Reverend was too polite to continue in a religious mode when he met with silence. He liked the man, admired his

love of family, his genuine concern for his parishioners, even the occasional naivety he'd first interpreted as an ironic take on life.

"That's fine. Nothing to worry about," he jotted down the figures. "Maybe Harriet's tougher than you think. Or wiser."

"Wiser? It's a nice thought. Her intentions are always good, but not necessarily wise. I'm supposed to be helping one of her lame ducks tonight but I've a feeling the duck might not want my help."

"Surely that's your job, helping waifs and strays. "

"It's not so easy when the waif in question isn't in the least waif-like. Strange word, waif. One of those words that loses its meaning when you say it over and over."

"Most words are like that," Gordon suggested. "I take you to mean you can't help someone who doesn't admit he needs help. I had a patient in my last practice who kept coming for weeks before I found out what was actually wrong with her, and when I did, she stopped coming. Now then, no headaches, chest pain, dizzy spells?"

"No. What was wrong with her?"

"She was a kleptomaniac, though she'd presented with back pain. Because she only stole from department stores, and nothing she stole was valuable, she didn't think of herself as a criminal. But at the same time, she was crippled with guilt.

"And that caused the back pain."

"No, it was postural. We solved that with a new office chair. But I wanted her to get counselling. It was such a shame, because kleptomania is one of the few control disorders that people can recover from."

It wasn't altogether his fault. She hadn't been his patient to begin with. If she'd shown signs of depression, the diagnosis might have come sooner. And she had never mentioned the substance-abusing brother, which would have been highly significant...

"What's the current thinking on paedophiles?"

The question startled Gordon.

"We're not talking about Harriet's lame duck, are we?"

"God forbid. Is that me done?" Smith reached for his jacket. "I was thinking of these rumours going round the village."

"I've been warned that most of them begin in our Surgery. You think this one's true?"

"Who knows? But what you were saying about control disorders... Can paedophiles recover? Supposing they want to?"

Hadn't they talked about this before? Gordon tried to gather his thoughts. "Recover? Huge question. I don't think so myself, but that's more of an instinctive

reaction on my part. Why does it happen? I honestly don't know, and I don't know anyone who does. It's not the same as alcoholism, for example. Alcoholics are never cured, but they recover in the sense that they stay well, provided they don't touch alcohol. But that's incredibly simple in comparison. There are so many different forms of paedophilia. I can lend you some books if..."

The minister held up both hands. "No, don't. I've a stack of books a foot high beside the bed already."

"Let me give you a question," Gordon said, mildly irked that his offer had been so flatly refused. "The bible says that man was made in the image of God, right? So whose..."

"Whose image is a paedophile made in?" The minister grimaced. "I had an awful feeling you were going to ask that. I'd have to lend you a whole library of books on that one."

## Black

Ryan stood at the manse gate. He crunched through what was left of an extra strong mint and put another in his mouth. He'd resisted the urge to put on a shirt and tie for this. Now he wished he had. "You're so bloody depressing," his sisters said. "Why d'you wear black all the time? Black's for funerals." He'd never actually been to a funeral. On the way in he'd tried not to notice the old graveyard with its shaggy yews and leaning slabs. He didn't ever want to be dead.

He wore black because you didn't have to make choices in the mornings. Black didn't bother him one way or another. And he didn't feel depressed the whole time. Sometimes there were good things no-one else noticed. Like the smell on the leaves of old Crawford's pot plants or the green lines inside the snowdrops growing at head height beside a wall he walked past near the Art School. They were early, he guessed, because they faced south, and the stone wall sheltered them. He was ready to bet that no-one else he knew had ever looked inside a snowdrop. A small, beautiful thing like that was sometimes enough to keep him from giving up. Did anyone else wonder why flowers were scented and coloured? He knew the slick answers, different coloured molecules make different colours, different colours attract insects or birds, different fragrances do the same thing at night. He remembered that much from Biology in first year. But this felt like saying snowdrops have to be white because they're white. Why shouldn't they all be shades of grey? Why did they have to be beautiful?

Harriet was a beautiful thing. Her name was wrong, though. It was a hawk's name, ugly, nothing soft or smooth about it. Not that any name really fitted her. He'd gone through the alphabet more than once trying to find one that was right. It would be enough just to watch her every day, see her doing ordinary things, like lifting roast potatoes from a dish onto his plate the way she had that time he'd eaten with them. When one landed in Kerr's lap, her laugh seemed to get right inside him.

He should have known Harriet would talk to her father. She'd no reason not to. For her, talking to a parent made sense. She was one of those lucky people whose whole life made sense. She could laugh when things went wrong. It was like she'd had happiness or whatever it was pouring over her since she was a baby. He could picture it, like a shower of light, like glittering special effects in a TV ad.

The outside light came on.

"Why the fuck am I doing this?" He said aloud, pressing the doorbell.

She was wearing a sweater he hadn't seen before, a pale pink v-neck that showed her collar bones and the smooth hollows above them. She led him to the sitting room.

Her father was reading a newspaper, which he folded and laid on the coffee table. He was wearing a dark green fleece over a tee shirt, and jeans, not the priest's outfit.

They shook hands. Harriet said something Ryan didn't catch, and went out of the room.

"So how's the new term treating you?" The man gestured to a chair.

"It's OK."

"Kerr went back a couple of days ago. We haven't heard from him, so I suspect he's probably not out of bed yet. Did you ever hear anything about your mobile phone, by the way? Did you get a replacement?"

Ryan shook his head. In fact he'd bought one from another student without questioning the ridiculously cheap price.

"Harriet's going to come back in a minute. I wanted a word with you on your own first."

He didn't like the look on the man's face. "I haven't touched her, if that's what you want to know."

Why did it sound like a lie? He shouldn't have sat down. He'd be at least three inches taller than the man if they'd both been standing.

"That wasn't what I wanted to talk to you about, Ryan, but thanks anyway."

The sarcastic smile was too much. "This is a fucking mistake," he said, getting to his feet.

"Ryan, wait. I think I know who's making these calls to your house."

He turned slowly, his hand still on the door.

"That's why I asked Harriet to give us ten minutes. I wanted to discuss it with you first. By a series of small coincidences..."

"Who've you been talking to? Father Breslin?"

"No. Nobody else knows about this."

"Yeah right. You can't fart in this fucking place without someone knowing. You think you..."

"That's probably true. But I'm pretty sure no one's talking about you. I hear things because of who I am, but what I know stays here," he tapped his forehead. "It was all in small, disconnected parts. No-one else could put them together. Harriet doesn't know."

"Doesn't know what?"

"I may be wrong, Ryan, but I believe these calls are coming from your father."

It was exactly what he'd thought himself.

“If you want to be certain, I’ll call the number for you. My feeling is that it would be better to keep Harriet out of the loop, at least until we know for certain. What d’you think?”

What did he think? He didn’t know. He’d never even seen his father. There wasn’t a single photo of him in the house.

“If it is him, what will you do?” The man said finally, “Would you want to meet him?”

Harriet had grown up in an old house with walls made of strong, grey, Aberdeen granite. The manse was less than ten years old. Simply by standing in the corridor beside the closed sitting room door, she could have heard every word, but overcome by goodness she went to the kitchen and switched on the radio. There were times, and this was one of them, when her father stopped being Dad and became someone else. Not that being good made her feel cheerful.

She took out a can of Coca Cola, and rifled in a drawer for the pink swirly straw which was kept for the youngest of the Scottish cousins. Needing more comfort, she went back to the fridge and took out the remains of a chocolate cake. The sponge had gone a bit dry, but the icing was still good; thick and dark, with just the right amount of apricot jelly under it. She broke off a piece, decided it was too small, but managed with a struggle to close the door on what remained.

Was being good a virtue if it was just a habit? She was probably the only one in her class unable to drop litter, the only one who had to carry an empty crisp packet in her blazer pocket until she came to a bin. She couldn’t lie about undone homework, or make believable excuses for not going to things. Because, basically, she was a coward. She’d been afraid to do what Ryan asked without consulting the Fount of Wisdom, and now he’d taken over. She stuck out her tongue at one of the fridge magnets. “Do you want to speak to the man in charge or the woman who knows what’s happening?”

*Just give me a few minutes with him.*

*Why? What for?*

Was he warning Ryan off? Telling him to keep his distance?

She had her back to the corridor, and her legs under the table. When the door opened behind her, she turned round too slowly. Ryan was at the outside door and gone into the night before she could stop him. She ran to her father.

“What did you say to him? What have you done?”

Before he had a chance to speak, she flew back to the kitchen, grabbed the first coat her fingers found on the pantry door and rushed down the steps.

Ryan had only reached the far side of the car park. She ran after him, not calling, in case he too would begin to run. When she caught hold of his arm, he went rigid.

“Don’t,” he said, so quietly she could hardly hear. He spoke to the ground, didn’t look at her.

“What’s wrong? What did he say? Did he tell you to stop seeing me?”

Slowly he pulled his arm free. “This isn’t about you, Harriet.”

“Don’t make it sound like that. I meant him... I wanted him to help you.”

“Yeah, right. After I jump off the bridge he can do the fucking funeral.”

He pulled a bottle from an inner pocket, took a swallow, flung it towards the graveyard and started walking away, still facing her. “Would you miss me, Harriet? Would you cry? My Mum would, but that doesn’t count. She cries all the time. Just promise you won’t wear black.”

“I’ll wear black if I want to.” she called back, she tried to match her steps to his, not wanting to get closer, not wanting to lose him.

“You won’t look good in black.”

“Maybe I won’t come. Maybe I’ll have something better to do.”

They were yelling now, as the space between them grew. A large yellow Labrador with a man at the other end of the lead came out from one of the bungalows further ahead. The man glanced at Ryan, then tugged the dog over to the other pavement.

Harriet hesitated. The raincoat she’d thrown on was unlined. Her shoes were more like slippers with thin soles and the cold of the pavement was seeping up her body. She turned back.

“You have to come! Harriet!”

Frightened, she stopped. In the same moment, there was the sound of a car horn. On the other side of the road, a car was pulling to a halt.

She went over.

“Get in the back,” her Dad said through the lowered window, “And stay put.”

She watched him cross to where Ryan was standing. There was a brief conversation before they both came back to the car. Ryan got into the front passenger seat.

In silence they drove down the first side road, turning towards the centre of the village and along Main Street. Her father pulled into the car park beside The Dirty Duck.

“Fifteen minutes,” he said to Ryan, “Then we’ll take you home.”

“Why are we going into the...”

“I’m going in, Harriet. I have to confirm the booking for the Pie and Pint night. You and your friend are waiting for me.”

She hated it when his voice took on that flat, sarcastic, superior edge. Undoing the seat belt, she slid over so that she could see Ryan’s face. He was quietly, rhythmically thumping the window. The thumping stopped.

“So do you want to know or not?”

She didn’t care, didn’t want to talk, didn’t want to listen. She didn’t care what happened to him next or ever.

“Yes,” she said.

“He said it’s my dad. Makin’ the phone calls. He wants to come back. He left when I was younger than Chrissie.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he didnae like the look of me.”

It wasn’t what she meant. Later she was to give thanks that she hadn’t tried to explain, or worse, made some kind of flip remark.

He went on, “It’s like everybody’s going one way, and I’m being pushed in the other direction. Every fucking day. I’m a joke. It’s no’ as if I don’t know.”

Was he talking to her, or to himself?

“It looks good, but it’s no’ real. It’s pure shite. All of it. I just want... I don’t fucking care what they want from me.”

“I have this weird dream sometimes,” she said. “I’m in some kind of Army, and people are ordering me to do things I don’t want to. It’s not our Army, it’s some foreign place, and they’re evil, and I know I’m not supposed to be there, but I can’t get away from them.”

He didn’t say anything. What could he say? He probably wasn’t listening anyway.

When her Dad came back, there was no more conversation at all, apart from Ryan’s brief directions to his home. He left the car without a word.

## Caruso

Lesley lifted her mother's fur coat out of the wardrobe and laid it out on the bed. The colour was richer than she remembered from childhood. It was the shade a woman's hair might be if you began with dark brown and added something like a maroon rinse, but there was a gloss on it no woman's hair could ever have. She trailed the back of her hand down the sleeve. The outer hair felt cool and slippery. Next to the skin the softer hair was unexpectedly warm. The lining matched the colour of the fur. Her mother's initials were embroidered across one corner in copperplate, two inches high, as if to say, let there be no doubt whose coat this is. Had furriers done this on all coats in the days when furs were common, where two might hang together side by side, and be so alike that the owners needed to initial their property? Perhaps they still did in countries where fur was worn. A few years back one of the staff had returned from a Christmas honeymoon in Athens. "I couldn't believe it," she told them. "I counted seven women in furs before we even got to the hotel. They all wear fur over there."

This wasn't Athens. Lesley glanced at the black bin-bag, into which she had earlier emptied two drawers of underwear. Cardigans and blouses she had divided into three piles: worn/bin, worn/still decent, and unworn. The worn/decent pile could go to Mrs Robertson's Hospice Shop, and Mrs Flaherty could have her choice of the latter. It was difficult to imagine when Mrs Flaherty might wear a fur coat. Ought she to offer it anyway? One of the daughters might take it and shorten it into a jacket.

She had decided not to feel guilty about Mrs Flaherty. She'd put a note through the door with the information from the Reverend Smith about diverting calls, repeated his advice to contact the police, and assured the poor soul that she was not to come back until she felt strong enough. What more could she do?

The mantel clock downstairs chimed the half hour. One chest of drawers and half a wardrobe cleared. It was a beginning. Now she needed to bathe and change. What time had they decided on? Seven or seven thirty?

Mrs Crawford picked up the phone. Duncan was at the computer. Was it something she, Mrs Crawford, could help with?

"We're having tea tonight," Lesley said, "but I can't remember what time..."

"It's seven, Lesley dear. When I suggested he should take you out, I said to make it seven. The service is always better, and it's so much quieter. I do hope it's all right. It's under new management, but Eunice Calvert went with her staff at Christmas. She said the food was very acceptable."

Lesley turned on the hot tap, and regarded the floor of the bath through the steam for some time before actually seeing it and realising she'd forgotten to put in the plug. A shallowish bath would still have been possible, but instead she turned off the tap, went to her room and lay down on top of the bed, pulling the top quilt over her. The curtains were open. For a time she watched the unmoving shadow stripes on the Paisley patterned wall paper, before turning on her side, away from the window and the street lights.

A cream silk blouse and a pleated black skirt hung on two hangers on the door knob on the inside of the door. The blouse buttons, mother of pearl, caught and reflected the light from outside. On the dressing table lay two packets of tights, "one to wear, one for spare", the cellophane wrappers still sealed. On the floor beneath, waited a pair of black patent court shoes, size 4, C fitting, and a matching handbag containing a small comb, a white handkerchief with embroidered gentians in one corner (Made in Switzerland), and a tube of Taylor of London's Lily of The Valley hand cream.

Duncan had tried on three different ties, and was not convinced about the one he was now wearing, a cream and pale green stripe. It looked almost colourless in the restaurant's dim light. He sat perched at the very edge of the bench seat, next to the passageway, in case Lesley, being short, might not see him when she arrived.

Paper-wrapped breadsticks filled a white stoneware jar in the centre of the table. Product of Firenze, according to the labelling. It was quite disconcerting to be less than a mile from home in a room that tried to convince you that you were in Italy. A continuous mural on the longest wall represented a summer lakeside scene, viewed through windows. In one alcove, real water trickled from a stone spout into a stone basin, draped above and below with ivy and other greenery, which might have been real, and black grapes which he assumed were not. The smells coming from the direction of the kitchen were exactly those he remembered from the long ago school trip, olive oil and garlic frying, coffee beans newly ground.

"Would you like to order, sir?" It was the thin, young waitress who'd earlier led him to the table and lit its candle.

Duncan explained that he was a little early. He would wait for his friend.

Would he like something to drink, then? Perhaps the house red? One glass while he waited?

She made little marks on her small square pad, and turned to the couple in the next booth. The man could have been any age. He could only see the top of the woman's head. Her hair puffed up like white candy floss. The waitress was pretty, but

terribly thin. Sideways on, she seemed to have no flesh under the short, black skirt and blouse; her legs were like straight poles, the same circumference from thigh to ankle.

“So how’s life treating you, Diana,” the man was saying.

The girl leaned towards them, out of his line of vision.

“You’re absolutely right,” the woman’s voice, “And I can tell you what I’d ...”

“Margaret,” the man said sharply. ‘Mahgrit’ was how he said it. Duncan transcribed the next sentence on the table cover with his index finger. *We’re here tae enjoy wurselvs.*

Music came on, very loudly at first, then reduced after a few seconds to something more reasonable. Il Trovatore. Duncan listened carefully to the voice. Caruso? Could it really be Caruso? Astonishing. He willed Lesley to come quickly and share his delight.

The glass of house red arrived.

“Is that Caruso?” he said.

The girl looked blankly at him, managing a little diffident smile as she withdrew.

For years he had walked past this restaurant, never dreaming that such pleasures lay within. He would have to compliment the owner. Unable to stop himself, he unwrapped one of the breadsticks and bit off a small portion.

Over the next three quarters of an hour, with two whole breadsticks nibbled to extinction and the glass of bright wine drunk, sip by increasingly anxious sip, his sense of delight gradually evaporated. He dialled Lesley’s number. After several tries he gave up. The staff were beginning to glance at him, and the restaurant was filling with cheerful couples. Finally he went to the bar.

“I’m terribly sorry, I think something must have happened to my friend.”

“We can’t keep the table, sir,” the man said. “Unless you’d like to order...”

Duncan put more than the cost of the wine down, and made for the door, fumbling his coat and hat off the crowded rack himself.

In less than fifteen minutes he was at Lesley’s front door.

There was a light on in the hall. The storm door wasn’t locked. He pressed the doorbell. Nothing. He tried the inner door. It opened.

With a sense of mounting anxiety, he stepped into the brightly lit hall.

“Lesley?” he called hesitantly. “It’s me.”

He tiptoed through the ground floor, glancing fearfully into each darkened room. He’d never thought of himself as particularly imaginative, but now one image presented itself to his brain. Lesley struck down by a burglar, lying in a pool of blood. The kitchen light was on. Nothing seemed out of place. A few dishes in the draining

rack. The pulley overhead was draped with drying clothes, including several feminine garments. Hurriedly he tried the back door. It was locked. Should he call the police? If not the police, then who?

Lesley's window faced straight into her neighbours' kitchen across a thick privet hedge. There was a woman at the sink. She looked up. Would she think he was the burglar? Hesitantly he raised one hand in greeting. There was no answering wave.

He moved back to the hall. "Lesley? Are you here? Are you all right?"

He had one foot on the bottom stair when she appeared at the top, smaller somehow than she ought to be, a pale yellow quilt gathered round her.

"Duncan?"

"Are you all right?" he repeated. He began to climb.

"No! Stop."

He stopped.

"How did you get in?"

"The door..." he said falteringly.

One small hand emerged from the quilt, reaching for the newel, as if to steady herself. She was barefoot. Had she been in bed?

"Are you unwell? I phoned several times...."

She began to speak, then sighed.

"Should I call a doctor? "

When she still didn't answer he said desperately, "Should I make some tea? Or a Lemsip?"

"Fill the kettle, Duncan," she said. "I'll be down in a moment."

Averting his eyes from the pulley, Duncan prised the lid from the kettle and filled it from the tap. Like most of the things in the kitchen, it had seen better days. The gas cooker in particular worried him. He might suggest she had it tested. Thank goodness nothing was seriously wrong. A chill, a sore throat. A migraine perhaps. Mrs Fleming occasionally suffered from migraines when she hadn't had enough sleep. Over the last year he had come to understand that there was a world of difference between his occasional bad headaches and a migraine. Poor Lesley. She never complained. He imagined she'd lost track of the time. And how thoughtless of him, phoning so many times if she'd been trying to sleep. But now he could make amends. He lit the gas, put the kettle on the ring and prepared to listen for the first sign of a whistle.

It was just beginning to shrill loudly when she appeared. The quilt had been abandoned in favour of a heavy, grey cardigan. She had brushed her hair, and her face

was less pale. Probably she had splashed some cold water on it. It was a trick he often used himself to wake after a nap in the chair.

“Let me do that,” he said, as she opened the cupboard.

“It’s all right. You sit down. Here’s your mother’s sugar bowl, in case I forget.” She put a box on the table.

He watched her come and go from fridge to drawer to cupboard. How pale and small her feet were. Didn’t she mind the cold linoleum?

“There’s some biscuits in the tartan tin. Behind you.”

Obediently he stretched for it, and took off the lid. Inside were what his mother called “bought” biscuits; custard creams and ginger nuts and dusty-looking chocolate chip cookies.

Lesley put a mug of tea in front of him, and one for herself on the other side of the table.

“Milk?” she said.

He poured a little from the jug, then a little more. Too much. It slopped over onto the brown oilcloth.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t watching properly...”

Lesley pulled some sheets of kitchen paper from a roll and put them down over the puddle of liquid.

Why didn’t she say something? What was he doing wrong? He wasn’t really a tea drinker and he’d put in so much milk, it was lukewarm. He took a large swallow, as if it might improve with familiarity.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been in your kitchen,” he said desperately.

“What do you think of it?”

He tried to think of something positive and polite. The yellow wall-tiles reminded him of old hospital corridors. The Belfast sink had a brown streak below the cold tap, though he didn’t doubt it was clean.

“I hate every inch of it,” Lesley said. She took a sip of tea. “I hate this house, I hate this village, and I think I might possibly...”

She broke off. She straightened, as if there were hooks in her skin, as if invisible cords were pulling her head and shoulders towards the ceiling.

He’d never seen her like this. Slowly, slowly, he put down the mug, as if sudden movement might panic her, make her fly into the glass like the collared doves when he went out to refill the seeds. He hated that sound, hated to see the imprint of their fawn-coloured bodies on the patio window...

“I ought to go. I’m so sorry I woke you. I just wanted to make sure you were all right. When you...”

“I’m not all right, Duncan. And I don’t think I’m ever going to be all right, whether you’re sorry or not.” She drew the cardigan tight, folding her arms. “I mustn’t blame you, I suppose, since you haven’t a clue, have you?” She unlocked the kitchen door and pulled it open. A cold draught swept in.

“What have I done?” he said.

She shook her head.

“Go home, Duncan.”

He was at the front gate when he remembered the sugar bowl. It would have to stay where it was, he decided.

## Guilty

June was already in the Hospice Shop when Ruby arrived. She was applying mascara, using the mirror on the wall behind the cash desk.

“The kettle’s just boiled,” she said, “but Letty isn’t back yet with the milk. I told her not to rush, the pavements are that slippery this morning.”

Ruby looked at the high heels on June’s suede boots, and thought her own thoughts. June was in charge. Which was why they were always behind in the opening and sorting of bags. June would rather chat with customers than get down to dirty work.

“Shall I get started on the bags?”

“Oh, thank you pet,” June said.

Pet. Not for the first time Ruby wanted to scream. It was infuriating to be “pet’d” by someone younger.

She gave the back room a brisk spray of Woodland Breeze then emptied the first plastic bag onto the table. Shirts and trousers. Men’s tan leather shoes, a good make, nicely polished. They’d soon sell. Men didn’t seem to mind wearing other people’s shoes.

She hoped Walter wouldn’t have to wait long at the Surgery. He’d left the house before her. She’d told him to phone and let her know how it had gone before he went to work but whether he’d heard and whether he would remember was not certain. He was becoming quite absent minded, just like his father. She frowned at a tie with a distinct mark over the stripes. Neglected gravy stain? Too late now. Into the Discard bin it went. She heard the door open and the sound of Letty’s voice, cheerful as ever.

She herself could hardly remember what it felt like to be cheerful. She always slept like a baby, but more and more now she found herself lying awake next to Walter’s snoring body. Once, when the sound reached a crescendo, she had actually kicked him. It had achieved nothing; he was asleep again before she was.

And now he was looking for sympathy, complaining of stomach pains. For almost thirty five years she had devoted herself to this man, making nutritious, economical meals, catering to his every whim. The idea that there could be something wrong with his stomach was a piece of nonsense.

“It’s wind,” she told him. “You eat too fast. I’ve been saying it for years.”

It wasn’t wind. It was a guilty conscience. She’d waited and waited for him to tell her why he’d been in Lesley’s garden in the dark. This was his guilt breaking out. She frowned at a white handbag whose imitation gold clasp was resisting her. Sometimes

money was left in handbags, or nice little handkerchiefs that could be washed and sold separately. Less nice were unwrapped mints that had melted into the linings.

“That’s the tea made, Ruby,” June called.

“...Mrs Birnie was buying bread for Sammy’s sandwiches, and she said it was a disgrace.” Letty had evidently returned from her errand with much to tell. “and the police no’ takin’ a blind bit o’ notice.”

“You shouldn’t listen to Mrs Birnie,” June said, bringing the biscuit tin from under the counter. “That woman picks up gossip like a stray cat picks up fleas.” She took up her mug, then put it down. “Toilet first,” she said with a smile.

Ruby had often found out interesting things about the village from Letty, but it was important to ask at the time, because the girl forgot quickly. She offered Letty a chocolate digestive. And took one herself.

“Start at the beginning Letty dear, and go slowly,” she said. “What else did Mrs Birnie say?”

## Kettle Chips

As the train drew in to her station, Harriet pulled on a light waterproof over her blazer and took off her uniform scarf and tie. From here on, it was safer not to look like someone from a private school. It had been a long, exhausting week of exams, not helped by her period starting that morning. Day by day she had dredged up and scribbled down all she could remember; there were dents in her thumb and middle finger from pressing pen to paper. Now it was over. Her plan for the evening was to lie on the sofa with a large bag of salt and balsamic vinegar Kettle Chips and watch junk TV.

A bus took her to their own village. She didn't know the name of Ryan's street, but she remembered where it was: beside a street lamp, with low hedges in front and all the curtains the same, upstairs and down in brown and white stripes. There was no name on the door. She rang the bell, and when nothing happened, knocked on the glass panel. Moments later the door opened a few inches. She saw a chain stretched across.

"We're no' wantin' anything."

"It's just a letter," Harriet said. "For Ryan Flaherty. Is this his house?"

The chain was loosened, the door opened, and the woman stared at her. There was an overpowering smell of some strong citrus cleaner. The hall light had no shade. Harriet hadn't really looked at her that day in the shop. Her hair was held back from her forehead by a pink plastic band with teeth, the kind that little girls wore. A dark green jumper stretched over her front. Either she wasn't wearing a bra, or it was too loose to give her any shape.

"It's...it's just a personal letter," Harriet said.

Ryan's mother, if it was she, took it without speaking, and closed the door. Was he at home or not? Harriet walked quickly away in case the door should reopen and a familiar voice call her back.

When she reached her own house, the kitchen light was on. She took out her key, but the door was unlocked. Which it shouldn't have been.

"Dad?"

"I'm in the sitting room."

He was on the sofa, shoes off, and a mug balanced on his stomach, watching football.

"I thought you were going to be late home," she told him.

"Oh, they cancelled it, thank goodness. Not enough to make a quorum. Combination of illness and road closures. I'm so glad. I'm absolutely knackered." He turned the sound back up.

“Why didn’t you come to the station, then?” she asked. She had to say it twice, dropping her bag for emphasis.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, I’m really not that long in.”

Long enough to make yourself coffee, though.

“What’s for tea?” she said.

On the screen, a man in a white shirt jumped high in the air, his foot striking a red-shirted man in the groin. Her father groaned loudly with the rest of the stadium.

“My exam was very hard, since you ask. And my period started and my stomach’s very sore.”

“Fine,” he said.

“Dad!” she yelled.

He started, spilling his drink over his shirt.

“Harriet, what are you...” he got to his feet, wiping at himself with short, exasperated bursts of words and half words.

“I’ve just told Ryan Flaherty I don’t want to see him ever again.”

He seemed to struggle for a moment, then he said, “Why?”

“That’s what you told me to do.”

“When did I say that?” He seemed genuinely puzzled.

She gripped the top of the sofa. “On the way home the other night. You said you didn’t want me to see him.”

“I think I said you ought to....”

She hated it when he began to slow down his words as if she was stupid, as if she was five years old....

“No, you said, ‘Keep away from him.’”

And now he was using the hand gestures as well, “I said you should keep away from him if he’d been drinking, Harriet. I didn’t mean...”

“Yes, you did. And I’ve just seen his mother and his house and the hedge is all holes and it’s awful. No wonder he’s miserable. Anyone would be miserable in that house. I wish we’d never left Aberdeen. I wish we’d never come to this horrible place. I can’t even travel on the bus home without getting spat on, or chewing gum in my hair. And I’m tired of making the tea every night, when I’m not even hungry!”

She slammed the door behind her. Half way up the stairs she conceded that her last statement was not completely true. She went furiously through the kitchen cupboards, grabbing the Kettle Chips, a family pack of Kit Kats, and a can of Coca Cola. As an afterthought, she twisted two sensible bananas off the bunch in the fruit bowl and stuck them in her blazer pockets.

## **Rumours and confusions**

Rumours are spreading through Hartsend. Passed virus-like from one human host to the next, minutely altering they are turning back on themselves, turning again, until they become quite different from their original selves.

In the Primary School the staff are complaining that the children are becoming increasingly excitable. The place is already something of a fortress, has been since Dunblane, with cameras, tall locked gates, and staff patrolling the play areas at lunch time, but Miss Calvert has had to send out letters reassuring parents. She is certain that the rumour about High School pupils selling drugs disguised as Love-Hearts through the Primary railings is completely without foundation. Vigilance, she assures them, is high. The security devices are in working order. All the same, she suggests that children if not accompanied by an adult should walk to and from school in groups if possible.

In the heart of the village, Dr MacKinnon, after a quick word with the other doctors, has asked the Practice Manager to mail a firm reminder to the admin staff about confidentiality. Mindful however of the old maxim - a secret is something you tell one person at a time - his hopes are not high.

Mrs Crawford has chosen to ignore the whispers on the wind. She is preoccupied with her own thoughts. Too much time has passed to inquire about the mystery blonde. As far as she knows, the woman has not called again, but she cannot be sure. She has acted against her own better judgement, following a suggestion by Dr MacKinnon. "If Duncan took an old friend like Lesley Crosthwaite out for dinner, wouldn't that make him more cheerful?" Duncan had come back that evening in a very angry mood, but she is afraid to ask why in case it makes things worse. In fact, she feels herself becoming tense when they are in the same room and he doesn't speak.

Life is beginning to confuse her on many different levels. Mrs Flaherty has stopped coming to clean, which is not good. The Spode 'Camilla' sugar bowl has disappeared. Did she herself put it somewhere? A few days ago she found her pension book in the fridge without the least memory of how it got there, and when she looked at her old school photographs, she could not immediately recall the other Prefects' names.

Down in the Dirty Duck, however, where memories die hard, where the regulars long ago reached a weary, cynical consensus about wives, politicians, footballers and life's other disappointments, there is a new, swelling sense of outrage. Many of the pub's patrons are underdogs, done for by their genetic inheritance, unfairly treated by fate or baffled despite their own best efforts. They are the ones most vocal, most

outraged by the intelligence that someone is preying on the children of the village, for who is treated more unfairly, who is more regularly baffled in this life than a child?

## **No difference**

The child was found, before anyone knew she was lost, by local man Albert Falconer, aged 43, who had just come off night shift, and whose habit it was to exercise his two Alsatian dogs on the edge of the golf course before going to bed, so that they wouldn't wake him mid morning. The brief exposure to silence also helped him to relax, washing the din of the factory out of his head. Albert was a single man of quiet habits, one of a family of eight children, who enjoyed spending time with his siblings and their offspring, though as he said, the dogs went to bed when they were told and didn't ask so many questions.

As always, he carried a large torch by which to see his way, a walking stick, for no real reason except that he liked a stick in his hand, and plastic bags to scoop up the dog dirt, because he wanted no trouble with the green-keepers. He felt a sense of ownership and responsibility when he walked through the grass. He had lived in the village all his life; he and his two older brothers had played in these fields before they'd become a golf course. There was a thin layer of frost on the ground, but Albert remembered proper winters, when the small loch in its middle had frozen. His elderly father spoke of even colder winters, when the waters had frozen long and hard enough for a bonfire to be lit, and bonspiels held.

The younger dog had run ahead and didn't come when called. Its barking grew more energetic. Albert shouted again, thinking it had found a rabbit, or an injured bird. When he came close, he shouted at the dog to be quiet. It switched to growling. The old dog went forward a few paces, then stopped, looking back to his master, back to the young dog, echoing its growls.

In the light of the torch Albert saw something half in, half out of the shallow stream. A bundle of clothes, he thought. Another lazy git, too idle to take their rubbish to the dump. He went over to pull the daft dog away. A second look, and his heart failed him. He knelt down, heedless of the wet soaking his corduroys. His vision blurred. Only when the young dog began whimpering did he realise how tightly he was twisting its collar. Albert had never married, never had children, but it made no difference, not with this before him. No difference at all. Not with this.

## Late night

“Hello, Father,” the barman said. He was holding the phone to his ear.

The Reverend had given up trying to get the man to call him John, or Mr Smith.

“The room’s all ready. And the food’s to hand, though I doubt you’ll have many in tonight.” The man spoke hurriedly, as if his mind was elsewhere.

This was the fourth meeting of the Men’s Pie and Pint Night, held in one of the upstairs function rooms. He had persuaded Dr Gordon to talk about Overcoming Stress but some of the regulars had sent their apologies, the weather was so foul. He’d wondered about cancelling the evening. The news about the dead child had depressed the whole village, including himself. It seemed almost wrong to talk about anything else.

The immense TV had been switched off, and the background music, normally loud and pulsating, had been muted, so that the wind-driven rain could be heard battering hard on the stained glass panels of the upper windows. Two women sat at the far end of the bar, and an older man was working the slot machine. All three looked up and immediately lost interest.

“I’m on the phone to the polis,” the barman said. “They’re all on a mission, Father, off to deal with the bastard that killed that wee girl from....” He broke off to speak into the phone.

Moments later, the street door opened. Dr Gordon, one elbow against the inner door, gave his umbrella a vigorous shake before coming fully into the room.

“That’s some night out there,” he began.

Smith held up a hand to quiet him, as the barman hung up the phone.

“What’s wrong?” Gordon asked.

“I was just telling the Father here, somebody said he knew who’d done it, they’d known him from the old days, known him for a fucking bastard, excuse my French. So they’re off to Whiteford to sort him out.”

The Reverend forced himself to unhunch his shoulders and relax his grip on the wheel. Nights like this made him nervous, gusting wind and darkness and the windscreen wipers at full speed making not much of a difference. Gordon’s Lexus was far better equipped for this kind of weather, but the good doctor had walked to the pub, anticipating more than one pint with his pie.

“Thanks for coming,” he said, not taking his eyes off the road. There was a car in front of them, but not near enough to illuminate the winding country road and it was

impossible to put the lights on full beam with cars coming towards them round the bends.

Gordon said, "I should warn you, I'm not the heroic type. My usual role in a fight is to stand well out of the way with my eyes shut. Ouch," he exclaimed as they encountered a flooded patch, cascading a sheet of water over the field beside them.

He didn't consider himself the heroic type either. His own last involvement in a brawl had been twenty odd years earlier in a pub in Dundee. He could recall little of it, having been drunk at the time, but he'd a lasting reminder in the back pain that recurred when he least needed it.

"Hopefully the police might be there before us," he said.

"Don't count on it. I had a patient a couple of weeks ago. Manic depressive and off his meds. He told me on the phone he was going to slit his wrists, and mine if I tried to stop him. His social worker was elsewhere and occupied, no surprise there, but the police said they'd be within the half hour. So I sat outside in the car."

"And?"

"They weren't, so I went in."

"That sounds heroic to me."

"It's all role play. I should have been on the stage. Anyway, I'd seen a lot of him at the start of the week, and we both knew he didn't mean it." He made a sound between a cough and a laugh.

They stopped at a crossroads. Two miles to their destination, according to the sign.

"You said you knew this man?" Gordon asked.

"I know the family. Not very well." Saying more would take him into deeper waters. He didn't want to go into explanations that involved Harriet. She was speaking to him, but not with any enthusiasm. He didn't know whether she was listening to anything on her iPod, or whether the earphones were merely a declaration of mutiny.

"And you don't think he's the one?"

"He might be. I don't know."

## **Long night**

“Mr Smith?”

“Yes.”

“The Doctor’s asking for you. Come with me please.”

“I’ve lost my hat,” he told the Sergeant’s back, immediately realising how pathetic and pointless this sounded. He could explain death and hell with logic and conviction, but all he could talk about here was the fact that someone had knocked his woolly hat off.

They’d shouted, trying to get through the crowd. Dr Gordon ploughed into them but after a glancing blow left him hatless, he himself faltered, unnerved by the looping wail of sirens, the cries and screams of neighbours, the barking of stray dogs. Before he knew it, Gordon was out of sight and he was alone on the edge of the disordered mass of bodies.

He followed the Sergeant up a badly-lit stairwell, which smelled of damp and burnt fat and pee. There was a lot of noise echoing around. He felt, rather than saw, those they had to squeeze past, all wet like himself, some with heads down, some in black raincoats and police caps, a bulky man in a soaked tee-shirt who was doing most of the shouting, and at the top, a woman in uniform, her face impassive, her eyes seeming to memorise everything about him.

The room seemed full of people. All the lights were on. Gordon’s head rose from behind a toppled armchair, followed by the rest of him. There were streaks on his grey overcoat. “Your man’s going to be all right. Probably. I don’t know if he’ll hear you. He’s coming and going a bit.”

Had Gordon himself been hurt? He was holding himself a bit stiffly.

“That’s the ambulance now,” someone said above the other voices, and for a moment there was silence while everyone listened.

Gordon insisted on staying with the injured man, deferring to the paramedics in all else. His earlier cheerfulness had gone, his curls darkened by the wet, and his face ghost-like in the crisscross of headlights and yellow streetlights. The wind had dropped but the rain was still falling.

“I’m fine. You go home and get on your knees,” he told the Reverend. As the ambulance door closed, he gave a half lift of his hand and a brief nod.

He tried later to think what exactly he’d done after that, and couldn’t, although he did recall a plain clothes officer taking some details, and asking him questions. Then the Sergeant came over. Actually he was a member of the Church, he said, introducing

himself, grown up through the Sunday School and the BB, though he didn't get along much, what with overtime and shift work and that. They'd made several arrests, he said, though many of the culprits had disappeared into the night as soon as they'd heard the squad cars. They would probably all be well-known characters. It could have been much worse They'd used fists and boots, not knives. They might have tried to burn Flaherty out, endangering the lives of all the building's occupants. They'd been drinking but were not as drunk as they might have been later in the evening. The doctor's intervention had given the man a chance.

"How did you know what was happening?" he asked.

"We were in the pub. Pie and Pint night."

He watched the Sergeant deciding not to delve deeper.

"Aye well, it's going to be a long night for some," the man commented at last. "Drive home carefully, sir."

All the slow, cautious way home, Smith listened to loud music on the radio, afraid he might fall asleep at the wheel. When he reached the manse and checked his watch he was astonished to see that it was closer to four than three am. Every part of him was exhausted. He took his sodden shoes off in the kitchen, went upstairs, stripped, and fell into bed without his usual scrupulous brushing and flossing of teeth. He tried to pray, as was his habit, but couldn't manage more than a few words. God and the dental hygienist would have to forgive him.

When he woke, he felt rather surprised that he'd slept so well despite all the night's events, only to find that it was just after five. He switched on the light and looked at the phone. They had promised to use email and not to phone one another. It was too expensive, and made the separation unbearable. Both of them always felt afterwards that they hadn't said what they meant to say. He stared at the other half of the bed, flat and forsaken, and dialled the other side of the world. It rang a few times, then his father-in-law's voice, formal, but having lost none of its Scots accent, told him no-one could come to the phone, but please leave a message.

## Santa Claus

The room felt very chilly. Duncan pulled the quilt closer, wanting to go back to sleep again, but it was no use. Once more consciousness brought with it thoughts of Lesley.

And a feeling of guilt. He'd been quite angry that night, hurt by her lack of explanation. He'd pondered deeply on what he might not 'have a clue' about, and come up with nothing. But for Mrs Fleming, he might never have found an answer.

She'd been in need of painkillers. Apparently the box in the First Aid kit was empty. Negligence on the part of the Miss Guthrie the First Aid officer. He offered ibuprofen, which she accepted gratefully. Then, with a small fluttery gesture of one hand towards her middle, she mouthed the words 'time of the month.'

He was terribly embarrassed, but before long realized that she had done him a service. She had solved the mystery. Everything now made perfect sense. The younger generation discussed everything and anything. He supposed in a way it was something of a compliment, since it suggested Mrs Fleming didn't see him as an old fuddy-duddy. Lesley, being the person she was, would never dream of mentioning such things. Not to him, certainly. Her name now conjured up for him only vulnerability. He felt terrible. His heart ached with sympathy. Lukewarm tea, custard cream biscuits too long in the tin, a kitchen tiled in pale yellow Vitrolite – everything fitted together to make a sort of metaphor of her life. No wonder she disliked it so much. It reminded one of old hospital corridors, and boiler rooms in school basements. And yet, if she hated it, why didn't she change it? Surely there was something childish in this refusal to change things?

The temperature, as forecast, had fallen overnight. In the dim garden below the cracks in the tarred paths were frost-rimmed, the lawns turned to rough expanses of greenish white. Time to take the first suet balls from the freezer. Breadcrumbs. Beef suet from the local butcher. Oats and raisins. Chunky peanut butter. Sunflower seeds got from the Pet Shop, and polenta from the Co-op.

He was proud of his suet balls. He gave some to a select few of his colleagues in the library each year as an early Christmas present, with a note on the gift tag, "Not For Human Consumption," because as someone had jokingly said, they had more nutrition in them than supermarket sausages.

The sparrows would find them first. He'd changed his mind about sparrows, on learning that they were in decline. It cheered him to feel that they'd found a haven in his garden. The starlings would squabble over them. *Not* the favourites of his flock.

Their sheen reminded him of petrol on water. Greedy, vicious in their intentions and unintelligent, they were the avian equivalent of bikers in black leather. (He wasn't sure whether this idea was his own, or whether he'd found it somewhere, but when he'd used it in conversations, it had been appreciated, which was quite satisfying) In contrast finches and tits seemed to him to justify their existence merely by their bright defiant colours.

Washed and dressed, he made himself an espresso, set bread in the toaster, then decided to make porridge. While it rotated slowly in the microwave, he opened the blinds. The male robin was looking directly at him from the hydrangea. It might as well have been carrying a protest placard.

"I'm having my breakfast first," Duncan said. "Would that be all right?" It was as much of a bully as the starlings, but it was a loner, that was the difference. He would order mealworms if he could ensure that only the robins got to them, but they were very expensive and a gang of starlings could devour an entire tray in minutes. He'd put some out once when he had workmen installing a new boiler. The chap in charge had seen it happening and compared them to piranhas.

The shed door was never locked. Nothing of real value was stored there, their present gardener preferring to bring his own tools, but it was a useful repository for items that might yet be used; hairy balls of brown twine, ceramic bowls once faithfully filled each autumn with hyacinth bulbs, screws and nails in jam jars attached by their lids to the undersides of shelves, hessian potato sacks, rolls of netting for the long-abandoned strawberry bed, mousetraps, (not the humane kind) wooden-handled hoes and forks not used since Mr MacKenzie's day. A tired but somehow reassuring smell of dust hung in its air.

The door wouldn't open more than a few inches. Assuming it was to do with either the previous rain or the present hard frost, Duncan put his weight on it. When he heard sounds from inside, his first thought was that it might be a badger or a cat. But what cat could close the door behind itself?

He scraped the frost-encrusted side window and peered in. There was a body on the floor, face down, wrapped in sacking. Male, judging by the size of the shoes. He breathed on the glass again, making a wad from his handkerchief this time rather than use his leather glove.

All Ryan wanted was to be left alone, but Crawford wouldn't let him be. He'd been forced to sit up, then get up, his arms and legs totally numb, as if they were substitutes, his own taken away, and prosthetic parts attached to him in the night.

Crawfurd half dragged, half carried him into the house. Now he was in an armchair, with a scratchy rug round his shoulders, another round his legs and feet, in front of an electric fire, his teeth vibrating against one another, and his throat feeling like it had been scoured with one of his mother's sink cleaners. Now a cup took shape in the space just beneath his nose. Crawfurd told him to drink it, and he did as he was told. It was coffee, but there was alcohol in it.

"How do you feel? Any better?"

Fuck this guy who kept waking him. He looked like a teacher, the kind who needed to be liked, the one nobody took seriously, not even the rest of the teachers.

"You haven't done any harm, except to yourself, so I suppose I should just turf you out onto the street ..."

Ryan bent down, trying to find his trainers and socks, then decided against it. His head felt like it was going to break in two.

"I don't think you quite realise how stupid you've been. D'you know what the temperature is out there? Once your jacket's finished drying, I'll drive you home."

"Fuck off."

The old guy seemed to explode. "Don't you dare use that language in this house!"

"Stop it. You're doin' my head in."

The shouting stopped. When he next opened his eyes, Crawfurd was sitting across from him on the other side of the fireplace, with an expression on his face Ryan couldn't interpret. It could have been hatred or disgust. Or the opposite. This was, after all, the man his mother spoke about as if he was next in line to Santa Claus for goodness.

"Your mother must be worried to death about you."

"She's no' worrying about me. She's got a hell of a lot more to worry about than me."

"What did you say?"

Ryan shook his head, and wished he hadn't.

"We knew she was ill, obviously. Is it something...serious?"

Was the guy being stupid on purpose?

"I don't want to intrude of course, but if it's...something that a specialist might..."

Ryan looked round the room, seeing it properly for the first time. Rows of books, gilt-framed mirror above a marble fireplace, paintings, heavy, dark green curtains with tasselled tie-backs, the B&O music centre and the stacked CD's, the brass-studded tan leather of the chairs they were sitting in – it was a different planet. Nothing ugly,

nothing cheap, nothing that would have looked at home in their living room less than a mile away. Three times a week his mum had come into this world then come back to theirs. How had she stayed sane?

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you,” Crawford said.

“You’re no’ upsetting me. It’s having a fucking paedophile for a father that’s upsetting me.”

The word was out before he could stop it. He waited for Crawford to shout at him again. Nothing.

Next moment, the door opened.

“Duncan? I thought I heard voices.”

Crawford stood up.

“Raised voices, Duncan. What is happening? Who is this person?”

## **Influencing the situation**

The Manse door was opened, though not completely, by the daughter, the pretty blond girl. Although she wasn't very pretty right now. She was yawning, only belatedly remembering to cover her mouth.

"Good morning. Is your father at home?" Lesley asked.

"I'm sorry, I think he's still asleep. There was an emergency last night. He didn't get back till this morning..."

Clearly this was why the phone had been ringing out. Lesley stood her ground. Saying she would go and see, the girl showed her into a small book-lined room. Old weighty volumes stood neatly along the bottom shelves. Others more modern lay at odd angles or on top of one another. Facing the door was a small desk with a computer and a telephone. A poster of a black motorbike, with the word Honda in bold red letters, took up most of the other wall, but the oddest thing was a penguin, at least three feet long, hanging on a hook next to the window. It was made of black and white fur fabric, with spiky black hairs on the top of its head, a garish orange beak and over-large shiny eyes.

The daughter came back into the room. She had straitened her hair a little, and put a long jumper over her rather skimpy pajama top.

"I'm really sorry," she said again. "If it's not desperately urgent, could you leave a message, and he'll phone you in a little while?"

The penguin seemed to Lesley to be staring at her, trying to read her mind. She turned her back on the glittery eyes.

"Please tell him my friend's husband was attacked last night. He's now in Intensive Care in the District General."

The girl wasn't looking at her, more interested in the garden outside, where nothing at all was happening.

"I'll certainly pass that on. Thank you for ..."

"The point is, she can't stay in that house. I can't take her in, my neighbours would be hysterical. The police say they don't have the manpower to watch the house constantly, no surprise there, and she won't go to either daughter."

The girl retreated into the hall. Lesley followed her.

"I don't make a habit of interfering in other people's lives," she said as the girl opened the front door to let her out.

Once home, Lesley couldn't settle. Johnny Flaherty, perpetrator of unspeakable crimes, lay safe in a hospital bed being looked after, while Mary sat behind closed curtains, too scared to show her face.

Clearly the Reverend Smith didn't want to be disturbed. And indeed, why should he do anything? Mrs Flaherty was not one of his flock. Lesley took her shopping bag and placed various foodstuffs in it.

As she walked past the end of the Crawford's street, she told herself that she did not need help. A grown man who couldn't ask a friend out for dinner without his mother's permission, correction, on his mother's instruction, was hardly likely to help in this kind of situation. And if there were troublemakers outside the house, it was very likely that she would know them from school. She would know exactly who they were.

Turning back, she made her way up the hill. No-one answered the doorbell. She went around the side, avoiding the overgrown pyracantha and its sharp thorns, glancing into Duncan's study. He looked straight back at her through the glass, then signalled towards the kitchen door.

"I'm not stopping," she said. "I just wanted to tell you that I've..."

"I'm so glad to see you, Lesley. Please come in. I could do with your help. I've got Mary Flaherty's son in my study," he said.

"What? Why?"

"I found him in the shed, half-frozen. Come in, please."

She followed him into the kitchen.

"He's sleeping at the minute. But he says he won't go home, and I don't know what to do."

"What does your mother say?"

"I sent her back to bed with a cup of tea. She hasn't come down again," he glanced at his watch.

Lesley bit back the words she could have said. How could someone so intelligent be so dense? How could a grown man be such a child?

"I feel completely at a loss."

She could see it. She could see he wanted to do good. There was something of the hero inside him, in spite of everything.

"And by the way," he went on, almost in a whisper, "forgive me for the other night. It was complete thoughtlessness on my part. It won't happen again."

For a moment or two she couldn't remember what she'd been about to say.

"I was just on my way to their house," she said at last. "Mary left a message on my phone. She said Johnny was in the hospital."

“Johnny?”

“Her husband. And there were people outside, throwing stones at her windows.”

It was his turn to ask why.

She explained as best she could, leaving out completely her visit to the manse.

“Good Lord,” he said, when her tale came to an end. “How very brave of you.”

He raised his hand to his upper lip in search, perhaps, of the lost moustache. “I’ll phone the police at once,” he said.

“I couldn’t sit at home any longer. At least I can see she has enough food.”

“I’ll go,” he said. “You should stay here. Go and sit with the boy. I will make some calls first. I know one or two people whose word might influence this situation. If he wakes up, talk to him. I’ve a feeling he doesn’t like me very much.”

He showed her into the study. The boy was asleep in the reclining armchair, his feet on a stool, a cushion beneath his shaven head and a brown and white mohair rug wrapped over him. She understood why the boy had run away, but why had he taken refuge in the Crawford’s garden shed? And what was she meant to say to the lady of the house if she appeared before Duncan came back? Before she could ask, Duncan caught her hand, gave her a quick peck on the cheek and was gone. Actually, it was more than just a quick peck. Lesley had received enough quick pecks to know the difference.

## Glory

Thanks to calls from the local undertaker, a visit to a bereaved family, and a Presbytery committee meeting, it was late in the afternoon before the Reverend had time to think again about the Flahertys. He worked his way up to a senior member of the local police, only to be told that the Chief Inspector would call him back. While he waited it occurred to him that he might get the latest news on Mr Flaherty from Dr Gordon, but a voice at the Surgery told him that Dr Gordon was taking the day off. He tried the man's mobile. No reply.

He could hear music playing in the flat, and knocked hard on the door when his first tentative push at the bell brought no response. Then, bending to the letterbox, he shouted, "Gordon, it's your minister."

"I'm not here."

He knocked harder.

Gordon looked terrible. He was wearing a navy dressing gown minus its belt and brown pajama bottoms. His hair had not been combed; the curls rose at each side of his head, as if straining to meet in the middle.

"Are you all right?"

"Absolutely tip top."

"Tell the truth."

Gordon gestured towards his ribs: on his left side there was a largish discoloured area of skin. "Two cracked ribs. Not a problem. I have a little private store of painkillers. Very naughty of me but that's the way it is."

"I was worried about you."

Gordon nodded. He was still hanging on to the door. Smith felt it was about to be closed in his face.

"Any chance of some coffee? The traffic from the city was terrible." This was probably true, though he hadn't been in it.

The flat had so obviously been inhabited by a series of temporary tenants that Smith felt instantly sorry for his friend. The armchairs, high backed with dark wooden arms, took him back to his grandparents' house in Elgin. Married during the Second World War, they had lived in a house full of Utility furniture and being canny Free Church folk had never replaced it with anything more beautiful.

Gordon had gone to the bathroom, and was taking his time, so he made himself coffee. He glanced round the kitchen: stained vinyl walls, grubby net curtains, a lethal

looking gas cooker. He had never invited the man round for a meal. Once Jean came home, he would.

“I made myself a cup,” he said, when Gordon came back. He had put on black jogging bottoms, and there was a white sweatshirt in his hand.

“Shall I make you one?” he went on.

“No, no. Help me on with this.”

They did the sleeves first. At one point Gordon let out some small groans, undermining his claim to be pain-free. It was like putting clothes on a child. He’d learned how to stretch the neck of T-shirts when he dressed Kerr. Gordon hadn’t showered, he thought, just sprayed on deodorant. It put him in mind of how Kerr used to rub soap on the back of each hand before meals, and splash a little water on the palms.

Smith sipped his coffee. They watched the steady red glow of the electric fire.

“I think I really came to apologize. For not following you in,” he said at last. “I feel very bad about it.”

“Forget it. This way I get all the glory. I’m hoping for a brass plaque above the bar at the Dirty Duck.”

“I’m not sure the regulars would approve.”

“You’re right. I spoiled their fun. Next time make me count to ten. Or twenty, whatever it takes.”

The man seemed determined to avoid being serious.

“You are going to have to cope with a lot of glory, all the same.”

More silence.

“Well, if it’s any consolation, I’ve just ruined Harriet’s life. Again.”

He went on, though he felt Gordon wasn’t listening.

“Not deliberately. She thinks I told her not to see this particular boy. Not that she was particularly serious about him, until I banned him from the premises. According to her. You know, there must be some technical term for what happens to words when they leave your mouth meaning one thing, and enter someone else’s head meaning something totally different.”

“What would you do to someone who hurt her?”

“Badly?”

Gordon nodded.

Smith thought of the Flaherty boy, the smell of strong mints failing to mask the drink on his breath, not needing to even lift a finger to draw Harriet after him into the night. He’d thought he’d handled it pretty well, wise as a serpent, gentle as a dove.

Harriet had somehow turned it into a battle. And let him win. What was the name for a battle that cost you more when you won? It would come to him. Sometimes it seemed that praying made things worse.

“Well, if someone broke the law, they would be held accountable,” he said slowly, “but as a Christian, I would have to forgive.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

Gordon’s certainty cut like a whip.

“We’ve talked about this before. I’m not saying it’s easy, but if Christ commands it, it must be possible. I have to forgive if I want to be forgiven. You have to take into account the...”

“And that makes sense to you? You have to forgive, but God doesn’t? He separates the sheep from the goats and the poor goats don’t even know they’re goats. They’re in the same field, eating the same grass. They didn’t ask to be goats.”

“That’s a parable. You can’t read it in that...”

“No. As one of the bloody goats, I think I have the right to read it anyway I like.”

Smith couldn’t think quickly or clearly enough to refute him. Later he thought it was just as well. Any reply would have been wrong. He tried to sound amicable and generous and untroubled.

“Maybe I should let you get back to sleep,” he said, getting to his feet.

“Maybe you should.”

## **A tragedy**

“All right, dear?” Dr McKinnon asked, keeping his eyes on the busy motorway. “Warm enough?”

“Yes, thank you,” his wife replied. She adjusted the velvet cushion behind her head. The seat head rests in this car were too hard for her.

“I hate to mention it,” she began, “but people have been asking me why there’s no word yet about a funeral for poor Dr Gordon.”

“You’ll know when I know,” he lied. Of necessity he’d been lying to more and more people with each passing day. All would soon become public knowledge. The Social Work Department had already contacted Eunice Calvert to organise a Parent’s meeting.

Should he have known? The government had spent a very large amount of money training him to observe and recognise symptoms and years of practice had taught him more. The young man’s looks and charm had blinded them all. That old retrospectoscope, hindsight, was such a wonderful thing. With the benefit of hindsight, there were some indicators. Shortish spells in different jobs, a failed marriage, few close friends.

“He saved that man’s life. I think it’ll be a big funeral, even though he wasn’t here long.”

McKinnon thought not. Not when everything was known. The Fiscal was obviously still waiting for a Pathology report on the death of the travellers’ child. And depending on that, Gordon’s funeral might be weeks or even months away.

It would be conducted by someone from the Humanist Association, he’d been told. None of the local ministers would have to participate. Who would be there, besides himself and the practice manager? He thought it unlikely that the ex-wife would make an appearance. The executor was some kind of cousin.

“I thought we might stop at that garden centre,” he said, looking at his watch. “I told Lillian she needn’t make lunch.”

Soup and bacon sandwiches at the Garden Centre was a far better deal than one of his daughter’s lunches, which featured low fat ingredients; something called humus, which looked like farmyard slurry, bits of leaves and raw carrot and crispbread. No wonder she didn’t have a husband yet. No sensible man could live on rabbit food.

He would need to let Marjory wander; she had a passion for looking at nicknacks they didn’t need, but he would read one of the newspapers provided for husbands over a second cup of coffee. They would then drive on to Lillian’s house, where they would,

as usual, have a pleasant enough time. He would wash her car, give it a polish, then doze on the couch while mother and daughter walked to the local retail park where they would spend many happy hours buying a pair of pillowslips or something of that ilk.

When he'd come home with the news of Gordon's death, he'd found Marjory in the kitchen. The pulley was down and half-covered with sheets, with her barely visible behind it at the ironing board. She was folding one of his shirts. The iron, vertical on the end of the board, was giving out little snorts of steam. She'd refused to believe him. "Are you sure?" she'd said, several times.

The factor had gone to the flat in response to a complaint about damp, lodged at least a month earlier. Finding the body he'd phoned for an ambulance and the police. They summoned the police casualty surgeon, a GP from another practice, who attended the scene and confirmed life extinct. A syringe and ampoules were bagged, to be sent in due course to the forensic laboratory. She came to McKinnon at the surgery because they were old friends, having stood round the same dissecting table as students, and because she trusted McKinnon would have done exactly the same if their positions had been reversed.

She told McKinnon all the sad, purulent details – how one of the officers had touched the sleeping computer, and come back through to the living room saying, "Don't bloody move anything. We need the CID."

McKinnon took his time before replying. "I'm thinking of our recent tragedy," he said. Meaning the death of the child. Meaning that Gordon might have been involved somehow.

His colleague understood perfectly. "Such thoughts would certainly occur," she said, "though one would hope to be proved wrong. I gather they're calling it "Accidental Drowning" at the moment. But it's ongoing."

Johnny Flaherty, guiltless and minus his spleen, was still in the High Dependency Unit. The ringleaders of the mob were being rounded up. Inquiries were proceeding. Meantime, Hartsend abhorring a vacuum, opinion was beginning to harden against the child's parents.

He'd spared his wife all but the barest details. Suicide was suspected, but they would know more in a few days. Marjory's only comment, as she helped herself to more peas, was, "He had such lovely hair." He'd looked up from his roast lamb and mint sauce, aghast. Granted she had only met the man on a few social occasions, but a death was a death. It seemed to him the most fatuous statement he had ever heard.

He lay awake that night long after she fell asleep. This was the woman he loved. He'd expected more from her. Ridiculous tears formed in his eyes. For her, for himself,

or for Gordon? Perhaps. For the whole human race? No. The planet was far too big for him now, it had long since slipped beyond his grasp. He wasn't alone in this, most of his contemporaries felt much the same. They had believed at the beginning, eager to get into medical school. Once in, they'd quickly become cynical. He'd read someone's comment in a recent BMJ, warning of the danger of being like crabs or oysters in a pot, gradually losing strength as the heat, paperwork and targets, and political meddling, increased. No, he had given up on the planet, given up on the nation, given up, rationally if not emotionally on the NHS. Losing the people of his village was something he would fight to the death. But he wanted help here, in his small corner, in his own bed. He wanted some deeper, more profound verdict on all that had happened, something more than the fact that the man had lovely hair.

## Home

“I stink of garlic,” Harriet said. “I’ve been making meatloaf.” She held her fingers up to Ryan’s face. He sniffed and shook his head.

“No more cooking after tonight. No more cooking after tonight.” She made it into a song, as she went to the sink, clicking her fingers and wiggling her hips. Without the slightest idea of the effect she was having on him. She had a very pert little bum. He thought ‘pert’ was the word he wanted.

She said. “I’m so happy. I can’t wait to see what she’s brought for us.”

“You are so greedy.”

“I am not. Everybody likes getting things. Mum took Christmas presents for all of them.”

She was too fond of nice things, though. He’d have his work cut out trying to make her less materialistic. He thought of old Crawfurd, sitting up there on the hill with all his beautiful stuff, like the Crawhall original on the landing that was probably worth thousands. “They’re only things, Ryan,” he’d said. “They don’t bring any comfort when the cold wind blows.”

“I made this for you. For your Mum coming home,” he said, taking a roll of paper out of its cardboard tube.

“It’s brilliant. Thank you so much. I love all the gold bits.” She touched the letters. “Is that bubble wrap?”

“They never throw anything out. They have a whole room stuffed with things they’re never going to use. He told me to help myself.” When he’d explained to Crawfurd that he wanted to make a ‘welcome home’ banner, and who it was for, Crawfurd had said, “A nice girl, Harriet.” With a thoughtful expression, as if he was thinking, “Too nice for you.”

He didn’t completely get Crawfurd. He’d been treated decently from the moment he’d been brought in from the shed, more than decently, but in a kind of hesitant way, as if Crawfurd wasn’t sure he was allowed to. It was like how Chrissie looked round when there were caramel wafers on the plate, and not enough for everyone.

“Should we hang it inside or outside?” Harriet asked.

“I would say inside. OK. Phone me later?”

“But you just got here. And I want you to meet Mum.”

He knew she did. “I’m moving back home tomorrow. I haven’t packed my stuff yet.” Not that there was much to pack. And not that he really wanted to go, but he could feel the old lady’s silence getting louder every time she saw him.

“But there’s loads of meatloaf.”

He shook his head. “Phone me sometime.”

Harriet flung a towel at the door. He’d be embarrassed. He’d put a lot of work into the banner. He’d done brilliant cartoon drawings of Kerr, who was due back at the weekend for a few days, and of herself and Dad sitting on and looking round the letters. All grinning like idiots.

It was hard work. It was hard work just trying to make him smile. Even though good things were happening, the bad things were still pulling him down. He’d passed his first assessment, despite all the time missed. The graffiti on the pavement outside his house had been cleaned off, and his mother had moved back from his sister’s. Someone from the Community Council had even come round to see what else they could do for her. But none of the big things were being talked about.

“Kid gloves,” her Dad said, meaning, don’t ask questions, let him talk about what he wants to, when he wants to. She was trying, but it was hard. She hadn’t realised how much her life depended on being direct with people, and expecting them to be direct back. Being gentle with people wasn’t in fact her strongest point.

The potatoes were on the work top, waiting to be peeled. She put Ryan’s three back in the vegetable box, and looked at the clock. It had occurred to her that it would be a noble and generous thing to let them have time to themselves. She’d invented an excuse to conceal her generosity. “I hate waiting, Dad. It drives me crazy.”

“You’ll be waiting here. Longer.”

“I can tidy up a bit. I might go to bed and read. You should get some flowers,” she told him, “but not the ones at the petrol station. Get them at that Sainsbury’s on the way.”

Thank goodness she had given up the Hospice shop. No early rising tomorrow. She wondered if Mum would sleep all day, or if she had slept on the plane. It occurred to her that their bedroom might be a better place to hang the banner, but when she went upstairs she couldn’t go in. She hardly ever went into their room. Hardly ever needed to, but it was more a feeling of respect that stopped her. It was their space. She would have died rather than open any of the drawers. If they had secrets, she didn’t want to know, not ever.

She went into the downstairs study to find something to read. Mum had kept a lot of books from her own teenage years. There was a lot of nostalgia in here. The penguin puppet who’d once starred in a holiday club, an aerial photograph of their old house in Peterculter, school photographs of Kerr and herself, the beloved motorbike poster. Dad

had given up the bike when she was small. Kerr remembered it, said it should have been kept for him.

She had heard it used as a sermon illustration more than once. Giving up something you loved for something you loved better, Dad had said. Mum had a different interpretation. He wasn't very good, he fell off quite a lot, especially at traffic lights, so it was really self preservation.

Maybe he'd smile more now that Mum was home. He'd stopped going to the gym. He hadn't said why, but it was clear as the nose on your face. He was so angry at being deceived by that man. It made her skin creep. Only once he'd talked to her about it. She'd been in bed, with the light off and the radio still on. He'd opened her door.

"Time you were asleep, love," he'd said.

"I can't. I'm really really tired, but I'm not sleepy."

"It might be easier without Radio One."

She couldn't see his face. "Are you alright, Daddy?"

"Not really."

"Can I help?"

"You do help, Harriet. You help me all the time."

"Are you thinking about... That man." She couldn't bring herself to say, "Dr Gordon" or "your friend". It was unbearable to think that her father could have been friends with such a person.

"At least you never brought him home," she said.

He stood in the doorway for a long while.

"Try to sleep, darling," was all he said, as he closed the door.

### **A little strange**

It had been well below zero during the night; the pot-holes in Lesley's back lane were frozen over. Not many grubs or insects available in this kind of weather. She had evidently been watching from the house, and was waiting for him. Well-wrapped up, he was glad to see.

"D'you have a wheelbarrow?" he asked, unlocking the car boot.

"It's very rusty. I can carry one bag."

To prove it Lesley wrapped her arms round one of the seed-filled plastic sacks, shouldered the back gate open and made her way to the old boiler house. Duncan followed with the other sack, the box of suet balls and the bird feeders.

Now that the heavy mist had cleared, watery sunshine, coming and going behind the clouds, had melted the frost on those parts of the ground not in the shade of the house. The garden looked sorely neglected. The snowdrops were almost hidden by creeping ivy, and withered beech leaves.

They opened one sack and filled the two bird feeders.

"You want to have these where you can see the birds, but they can't see you," he advised. He suggested the lilac bush. Together they tied them on, at a height where Lesley would be able to refill them without standing on a stool.

She suggested coffee. He accepted.

"Sit beside the fire," she told him. "And by the way, that's yours", she pointed to a small square parcel on the table. "Don't forget to take it this time."

He nodded obediently. He remembered this room from the day of her mother's funeral. Apart from the rearrangement of chairs, nothing had changed. It looked as if she hadn't begun to clear out her mother's things. The previous year's calendar still hung next to the fireplace at the December scene. The Rialto Bridge Under Snow. A *vaporetto*, interior lights on, passengers muffled behind steamed-up windows was emerging from beneath it. The dark water reflected pale gold light from shop fronts. In the foreground the intricate tracery of a metal gate opening onto the canal was powdered with white.

Duncan cleared his throat carefully before calling to her in the kitchen.

"Lesley, could I perhaps have tea?"

"Of course. I thought you were a coffee drinker."

"Well, I am," he said, turning to look at the feeders. It would take a little time for the first birds to come, but the message would soon spread.

She brought through the tray. "I hope you don't mind sitting in here. The front room is temporarily occupied."

"Someone staying with you?" The shadowy gentleman visitor had never fully faded from his mind. He had settled on a cousin eventually, a distant and not very welcome caller, too insignificant to mention.

"Fish tanks," she said.

"Fish tanks?"

"It's a long story. Walter next door bought new tanks to breed fish, but Ruby won't let him, so the tanks are here till he works out what to do with them."

"What kind of fish is he wanting to breed, flesh eating piranhas?"

"Guppies."

Why anyone would want to breed fish? His sympathies were entirely with the wife, who sounded like a sensible person.

"Well, it's very generous of you to store them. I hope he appreciates that."

"I'm not going to be generous indefinitely."

He was glad to hear it. "Why doesn't he build a shed? He's got the same amount of ground as you have. Plenty of room to put a big shed back to back with his garage. He could sit down there with his fish, put in a little TV set and a kettle, and be out of her way completely."

"Oh dear," Lesley said. Her lips curved in a proper smile.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing." She stirred her tea. "Sometimes I think I'm a very bad person. I have very bad thoughts."

This he could not believe, but he kept silent. He had kept silent quite a lot recently in moments of female distress. He felt he was beginning to understand women.

"Talking of sheds," she began, "I meant to tell you, I asked Ryan Flaherty why he took refuge in yours that night. How is he, by the way?"

"He seems fine. He dropped in to tell me he passed that essay I helped him with. What did he say?"

"About the shed? He used to come to your house after school when Mrs Flaherty was cleaning. When he was little. Your gardener let him play in the shed when it was cold."

"Mr Mackenzie. Odd I never noticed him."

"Well, you would be at work. Your mother must have known."

He supposed so. Perhaps she had assumed that as long as the boy remained outside the house he was not a nuisance.

“How is she?”

“Fine. Well, a bit fragile. Mrs McKinnon comes round a lot. She said the strangest thing to me this morning. You know we put him in the back bedroom, downstairs. She told me she’d felt a lot safer, because he would hear anyone prowling around in the garden, or trying to break in. I’m going to ask Mrs Flaherty to come in more, more days to make up the same hours, just to keep an eye on her.”

“She’ll be happy to do that. She needs to be busy. Did he ever talk about his father?”

“Ryan? Not to me. Dr McKinnon spent a while with him, but I don’t know what was said.”

Dr McKinnon was extremely good at chatting without giving anything away. He must have known for a long time what the rest of the village was now coming to terms with. He himself didn’t want to know. Lesley had been incredulous at first, and she was still quite strange about the whole business. She would go to Dr Gordon’s funeral, she said, when there was one.

“You can’t possibly,” he’d told her. She would see sense and change her mind when the time came.

“I know why you wanted tea,” she said abruptly. “We only have instant. I’ll buy a percolator, if you tell me which one to get.”

“You don’t want a percolator. Coarse ground coffee and a cafetière would be your best idea. Or an Italian stove-top pot. A machine would take up too much room on your worktop. And it’s not “we” any more, Lesley,” he said. “It’s you.”

“Sorry?”

“The house is yours, Lesley.”

She picked up the tray and went to the kitchen. After a minute or two he followed. She was standing at the sink.

Was he in trouble? He had no right to tell her how to live her life, how to think, how to mourn. She would go to Gordon’s funeral. And he would have to go with her.

“Am I in trouble?” he asked.

“No.”

He put a brotherly arm across her shoulder. She turned, leaning her head on his chest. When he got over the first delight, he could hear his heart thumping. That was good. He was still breathing. Also good.

The following morning he was on the back doorstep at ten o’clock exactly, having promised to take her on a shopping-for-a-cafetière expedition.

“Lesley, do you trust me?”

“Why?”

“I would like to do something...rather ... odd.”

“Odd?”

She looked closely at the jute shopping bag he was carrying but there was no way she could tell what was in it. He'd laid yesterday's Herald on the top.

“A little... strange. But in a good way. If you'll let me.”

“Here?”

“Yes.”

“All right.”

“Stand well back. No, further than that. In the doorway.”

“Why?”

He didn't answer. He had difficulty getting the overalls over his shoes, but managed at last. He took off his glasses, tucked them into their hard case, and laid it on the work top. He brought out the safety goggles and put them on. They felt rather tighter than they had in the shop, but now was not the time to bother with petty adjustments. The hammer handle was slippery: he must hold it firmly. He had brought a cloth, the plan being to tape it over the tiles, but now it seemed unnecessary, almost cowardly. He chose a spot near the outside door, far enough away from the window and the electric switch, steadied his stance, counted to three, and swung.

## **Writing Hartsend**

## Preface

In *Hartsend* my intention is to explore the abuse and maltreatment of children, deliberate and inadvertent, in its various kinds and degrees and to consider possible responses both by the victim and by society at large. If one constructs abuse and maltreatment as a continuum, then child cruelty and paedophilia would be at one extreme end. What would be at the other? Overprotection? Unconscious neglect? Letting the child eat too much sugar?

I created characters who have been damaged, although in the novel they may or may not realise this. In the village of *Hartsend*, the different strata have differing values and expectations, but because it is a small community their lives are folded together in various ways despite the fact that they are divided by class, religion and income. Meantime, the larger world with its relative values intrudes and memories of past hurts disturb them from within.

I'm conscious that I'm writing if not unfashionably, then at least against the grain of contemporary critical and creative expectation. I do believe in what Milan Kundera calls the 'great illusion of the irreplaceable uniqueness of the individual'.<sup>1</sup> Kundera says that human beings want a world where good and evil are distinct and distinctive, because we cannot face 'the essential relativity of things human'. I've lived with this for a long time, and fundamentally question that relativity. For those like Kundera who 'look squarely at the absence of the Supreme Judge', however, it makes sense.

The situation is not new to our age. George Eliot experienced analogous tensions and explored them in her fiction: the underpinning metaphysical certainties are gone for the novelist though her characters still experience them in different degrees. But even for the narrator, in *Middlemarch* for example, somewhat illogically, the old moral imperatives remain stubbornly in place.

Contemporary writers who have themselves abandoned the idea of an objective meta-narrative generally create characters who behave as though a meta-narrative still held. The old fabric, i.e. belief in some kind of connection between microcosm and macrocosm, seems to fray, like the Phoenix's carpet, at different rates in different places.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> E. Nesbit, *The Story of The Treasure Seekers*, (London: Puffin Books, 1994).

## The source of the narrative

When I began to write *Hartsend*, I expected it would be a novella or short story. I thought it would be about two characters, Lesley and Duncan and how, when she is liberated by her mother's death, their lives would finally come together in middle age after they have known one another since childhood. The more I dwelt on the character of Lesley the more I realised that the core of the story was not about love in middle age, but about how individuals recover from the damage done to them by their parents.

This core began to gather around it stories and images from various directions, some public, some private. It became necessary to look at a whole community, with all of its relationships, from the family to larger units. As the community became increasingly complex and real in my imagination, actual events impinged upon it more. It became a space where matters of concern to me in the actual world past and present could be explored and expressed.

External events stirred up ideas that had preoccupied me for a very long time. The first event occurred in July 2000 when Sarah Payne, aged eight, disappeared from a field near her grandparents' home, in Kingston Gorse, West Sussex, where she had been playing with her brother and sister.<sup>3</sup> The case became headline news for more than a fortnight until her body was found, and interest continued for more than six months until Roy Whiting was arrested and charged with her murder in February 2001. He had been arrested and released on bail twice for lack of evidence before a car theft finally put him in jail, allowing the police to carry out forensic tests on his van. Fibres from the van were found on a shoe belonging to Sarah, and a hair matching hers was found in the van, on a sweat shirt belonging to Whiting. This forensic evidence proved sufficient to convict him and he was sentenced to a minimum of fifty years in prison.

The media had exerted themselves, building up suspense before the child was found, and now made use of every opportunity to emphasise the brutality of the murder, the innocence of the child and the agony her family experienced during the long wait for an arrest. When it was disclosed that Whiting was already a convicted paedophile, the media claimed the moral high ground once more, declaring that the nation felt they had been betrayed by the authorities, and finding a useful scapegoat in

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<sup>3</sup> 'Murder of Sarah Payne', [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder\\_of\\_Sarah\\_Payne](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_Sarah_Payne) [accessed 08.03.2010]

the psychiatrist who had, they said, declared five years earlier that Whiting was “not a paedophile”.<sup>4</sup>

Shortly after this, the News of The World decided to become involved in what they called a “Name and Shame” operation to make people aware of paedophiles in their area. According to the newspaper, ‘88% of us’ (that is, 88% of those questioned in the newspaper’s own poll,) said they wanted parents to be told if a paedophile moved into the area. At this time a doctor in Wales had her home covered in graffiti because people thought that paediatrician meant the same as paedophile<sup>5</sup>.

The James Bulger case in 1993<sup>6</sup>, and the Dunblane massacre in 1996 meant that primary schools came to resemble prisons.<sup>7</sup> At the same time it became problematical for someone to speak to another person's child or rebuke them. No-one could visit a school playground to speak to a bullying child without being reported to the police by the child’s parents. Has this made the world safer for our children? Susan Glickman thought not in this poem first published in 1994.

The little boy’s hand, his hand full of trust,  
trustingly offered to the bigger boy  
as, without looking back, he walked away  
from his mother to be beaten to death. Almost  
more than I could bear, seeing in that slight back  
turned forever, leaving forever, yours  
as you walk off innocently towards

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<sup>4</sup> Raj Persaud, ‘A Scapegoat for Sarah Payne’. On the 13 December, the Daily Mail pronounced psychiatrist Anthony Farrington guilty of a terrible mistake that led to Sarah Payne’s death. Five years earlier he had examined Whiting, and decided that he did not meet “the official diagnostic criteria” for paedophilia. Because Farrington for legal reasons could not quote this, or discuss his earlier report, the media published what Whiting’s defence barrister had said. He had misquoted Farrington, announcing that the psychiatrist did not think Whiting had paedophile tendencies. In fact Farrington had predicted that Whiting would re-offend.

*BMJ* 2002; 324 : 56 doi: 10.1136/bmj.324.7328.56 (Published 5 January 2002).  
<http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/324/7328/56> [accessed 23.04.2010]

<sup>5</sup> BBC News, Wednesday 30 August, 2000, *Paediatrician attacks ‘ignorant’ vandals*  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/901723.stm> [accessed 15.03.2010]

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/james-bulger-suffered-multiple-fractures-pathologist-reveals-two-year-old-had-42-injuries-including-fractured-skull-jonathan-foster-reports-1503297.html> [accessed 15.03.2010]

<sup>7</sup> ‘The Dunblane Massacre’, <http://www.crimeandinvestigation.co.uk/crime-files/dunblane-massacre/investigation.html> [accessed 05.08.2009]

some horror I will fail to expect  
or, worse, anticipate but not forestall.  
Whenever I'm not holding you I know  
nothing's *childproof*: no house, school, shopping mall,  
no car, no bicycle. Nowhere to go  
on God's green earth where children cannot fall  
from mothers' arms. No. Nowhere to go.<sup>8</sup>

The second factor influencing my thinking was that during the 1990s I was for several years an administrator in charge of a children's nursery in a very deprived area. I was struck by the fact that we often had three surnames listed for one child. The child would have one, the mother would have a different surname and the father or current partner had yet another. Of course, some of these children were well socialised and happy, but I met others whose lives lacked stability to the extent that they did not expect the world to make sense. As a result of this lack of stability, special consideration had to be given to which methods of teaching were best for them. A few were probably being physically abused by adults, but many were experiencing mental and emotional abuse that was impossible to quantify.

The third factor was the birth of my first grandchild in December 2005, a milestone which caused me to rethink my relationship with my parents who had died some years earlier. What kind of parents had they been? I had never considered myself to be damaged. Adopted at birth, I had a very stable, happy childhood. Now I began to wonder whether this was enough. There was no exposure to music, art or literature. For this, I now faulted my parents. Yet I had loved them. Was forgiveness necessary? How does one forgive the dead? What kind of parent had I been myself? Was there anything my children would have to forgive me for? The unexamined life may not be worth living, but the examined one often raises unanswerable questions. In *Hartsend* I could explore through my characters some of the matters that were troubling me.

Events that affected the whole nation, poverty and its effect on children, my own situation, all came together. I had written and published children's fiction, but those had been straightforward adventure stories. This would be something quite different. Could I create characters who would embody what I was exercised by, but still be perfectly credible, and interesting, in a plot that readers would find satisfying?

It may seem absurd that I debated whether I could write such a novel. However, a

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<sup>8</sup> Susan Glickman, 'But till that morning, ain't no one gonna harm you', in *Being Alive* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 2004.) p.162.

comparison with learning to ride, my other passion, and a brief account of English teaching in the late fifties and sixties may serve to illustrate why it was not.

First, all through my childhood I, like millions of other little girls, loved horses. I grew up in a town at a time when only the rich or country dwellers had access to ponies. At fifty I began to learn to ride, but still did not believe I had the right to do so. Horses were such beautiful animals that the idea of telling one what to do, when it was much bigger and more impressive than a small middle-aged woman, did not seem reasonable or right. Only gradually did the truth of the situation become clear. Horses are 'prey' animals. A horse wants to be told what to do. A horse wants to be told what to do by someone like me. I had to learn that novels are written by people like me, that I have the right to write<sup>9</sup>.

Carole Satyamurti says in her poem 'Between the Lines', 'Books let me move close to them,/breathe their scent of secret places.'<sup>10</sup> Here she expresses the intimacy that singletons like myself often find in books when parents are distant, physically or emotionally, or flesh and blood friends fail us. Fictional friends don't change or join up with more attractive newcomers. Children with siblings often seem to have secrets they won't share outside the family; story characters become the single child's family. They tell their secrets, don't bully or mock and never betray one's trust. When a child learns to read independently, a secure, exciting world opens up in a manner as mysterious as perfume, where parents don't intrude.

When Satyamurti describes becoming a poet, at the age of forty-three, she says,

I thought that poetry was written by Real poets – people, men usually, who had English degrees and knew other Real poets. I subscribed to the *TLS* and to *PN Review*, and the literary world I perceived through their pages did not seem one that I could ever be a part of.<sup>11</sup>

She knew that world existed, but did not believe she could become part of it. I was unaware that there was such a world until I went to night school classes in creative writing at Glasgow University. The strength of this invisible barrier between Satyamurti and her heart's desire seems remarkable, when one considers that she was already a writer of academic sociology papers and what she refers to as 'a bit of journalism'. She had no personal contacts with poets or prose writers who could help

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<sup>9</sup> Ginny Wiehardt, 'Julia Cameron and the Happiness of Writing', Review of Julia Cameron's *The Right to Write*.

<http://fictionwriting.about.com/od/reviews/fr/Cameron.htm> [accessed 21.01.2006]

<sup>10</sup> Carole Satyamurti, 'Between the Lines' in *Stitching the Dark*, (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books Ltd., 2005) pp. 71-74 (p. 73).

<sup>11</sup> Carole Satyamurti, 'Lady Scribbler' in, *Delighting the Heart, a Notebook by Women Writers*, ed. S. Sellars, (London: The Women's Press, 1989, repr. 1994), pp.14-17 (p.16).

her overcome the fear of not being good enough. Women who wrote poetry were, in her words, ‘Lady Scribblers’, middle class women who wrote bad verse about their inner lives, and the thought of joining their ranks was anathema to her. It took the experience of an Arvon course in 1983 and the personal encouragement of professional writers to break down the barrier.

The Arvon Foundation<sup>12</sup> was created in Devon in 1968 by professional poets John Fairfax and John Moat, with the early involvement of their friend Ted Hughes who commented,

The hope was: to do something to salvage the actual art, the living skill, of writing, amidst a combination of forces in formal education that seemed bent on destroying it. [The idea was that] professional, experienced writers . . . would teach directly, by example and shared creative production, as masters and apprentices. (The Arvon Foundation: Development Appeal. Brochure sponsored by Faber and Faber Ltd, June 1995)<sup>13</sup>

The week-long courses, now held in four centres, provide beginners and more experienced writers with an opportunity to work alongside professional writers, and share ideas with other students in a quiet countryside environment. Grants, some provided by Arts Council England, allow people on low income to attend. The Scottish Centre at Moniack Mhor opened in 2000. Of course Scottish writers have established themselves without the assistance of courses and professionals, but the idea that everyone can attempt writing has only quite recently gained currency. Meeting writers of both prose and poetry on two Moniack Mhor courses enabled me to write more confidently.

Are women less confident than men? In the late 1980s, a group of American feminist educationalists set out to examine intellectual development in young American female students. One result was the book *Women’s Ways of Knowing*,<sup>14</sup> which explores the differences between women’s intellectual development and that of men. In the study the authors ‘grouped women’s perspectives on knowing into five major epistemological categories: silence, a position in which women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority’. (Belenky et al, p. 15)

When I read through these five epistemological categories, they appeared to

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<sup>12</sup> The Arvon Archive (MS 329), Jane Feaver, <http://centres.exeter.ac.uk/southwestwriting/arvon.shtml> [accessed 05.07.2010]

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, (New York: Basic Books, 1997). Further references to this source follow quotations in the text.

correspond closely with my own experience.

The first category, silence, described my childhood. In memory I see myself on visits to grandparents, under a table, or behind a couch, given adult books or magazines, including newspapers sent from relations in the USA, which I couldn't read, but which were intended to amuse me because they had coloured pictures. I recall a strong sense of being constantly baffled by these, but I didn't ever say so, or ask questions. Well brought up little girls in the early part of that decade were not expected to initiate conversations with adults.

In the mid-1950s in Paisley our Primary School teachers were middle-aged or elderly single women. Most girls in the school I attended in the 1950s and 1960s had stay-at-home mothers who, while expecting their daughters to 'do better' in terms of occupation or education, nevertheless assumed they would follow their pattern. We were encouraged at home and at school to go on to further education and the majority did, but it was assumed that marriage and children would be our ultimate career. Marriage, stable if not happy, was considered normal. The house where a "divorced" woman lived was pointed out to a ten-year old me as a curiosity. Our fathers ferried us, since few of our mothers drove cars. The reasons for this may have been social or economic, but certainly a woman driving a car was regarded as eccentric.

Their second epistemological category, 'received knowledge, a perspective from which women conceive of themselves as capable of receiving, even reproducing, knowledge from the all-knowing external authorities but not capable of creating knowledge on their own', (Belenky et al, p. 15) describes my Secondary School experience.

At Secondary School we encountered male teachers for the first time. Most were middle aged or old, some indeed having been called back from retirement. The young had not returned from the Second World War. Thus the education we received was largely based on the beliefs and theories of the generation which had taught our parents. In English, one learned to parse sentences, spell correctly, reduce five hundred word passages to a précis of one hundred, read Lamb's *Dissertation upon Roast Pig*, Scott's *Ivanhoe*, and Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey*. One did not question, or ask for something more modern which might have related to our own lives. We received knowledge: the brightest passed it on.

After leaving university I became a teacher (my father's suggestion: being a teacher was a respectable occupation and would allow me to have the same holidays as my future children). Because I always earned the same salary as men did, I had no personal reasons to feel undervalued as a woman.

I married, taught for a few more years, then began having babies. Motherhood proved to be very satisfying. Now I experienced the third and fourth categories of ‘subjective knowledge, a perspective from which truth and knowledge are conceived of as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited’ and ‘...procedural knowledge, a position in which women are invested in learning and applying objective procedures for obtaining knowledge’. (Belenky et al, p. 15).

The books I read at that time reinforced the belief that ‘emotional, intuitive and personalized’ child rearing was the best way. Dr Benjamin Spock’s *Baby and Child Care*, which had first challenged conventional wisdom in 1946, was published in its revised form in 1976, the year my first child was born. Dr Spock told me I was the expert. (The idea that women had to be told this by a man did not seem ironic at the time.) I breast fed on demand, to the dismay and astonishment of the nurses in the Queen Mother’s Hospital; I placed my babies on their backs, as Dr Spock recommended; I made infant food from scratch. I discretely breast fed in public, which was not against the law, although it would have been legal for anyone to stop me.

The final category, that of ‘constructed knowledge, a position in which women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge, and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing’. (Belenky et al, p. 15.) corresponds to the attempt to write. Studying English Literature in the late 1960s, which might have been thought to stimulate creativity, in effect widened the gulf by exposing me to great literature.

Belenky *et al* went on to argue,

It is likely that the commonly accepted stereotype of women’s thinking as emotional, intuitive, and personalized has contributed to the devaluation of women’s minds and contributions, particularly in Western technologically oriented cultures, which value rationalism and objectivity...(my edit). It is generally assumed that intuitive knowledge is more primitive, therefore less valuable, than so-called objective modes of knowing. Thus it appeared likely to us that traditional educational curricula and pedagogical standards have probably not escaped this bias. (Belenky et al, p. 15).

These points might seem almost old fashioned now but to me, reading them a decade after the book’s first publication, they were new and revelatory. I already knew that my thinking was, some or most of the time, “emotional, intuitive and personalized”. It had not occurred to me that I thought this way because I was female. I assumed that it was just one way of thinking, not a *female* way, because at other times,

in my different roles, as administrator, teacher, housewife, mother, college receptionist, I thought I was thinking logically, non-intuitively and impersonally. Possibly because I had remained within employment situations that were suited to women, and where I had never been regarded as unequal, it had never occurred to me that intuitive thinking might be considered less valuable than objective ways of knowing by whoever was running the world.

Thanks to further education many women of my generation reached the third and fourth stages of subjective and procedural knowledge, but the idea that we could create knowledge was never introduced to the majority of us.

Margaret Atwood's richly eccentric childhood predated a similar school experience in Canada in the decade before ours. In *Negotiating with the Dead*, she writes,

Teaching focused on the texts, and on the texts alone. We learned to memorize these texts, analyze their structure and style, and make précis of them, but none of them were placed in a historical or biographical context. I suppose this was the spillover from the New Criticism, although nobody mentioned that term; and nobody talked about writing as a career or a profession – as something real people actually did.<sup>15</sup>

Memorising, analysing and making précis were exactly what we practised on this side of the ocean. As she says, the problem one experienced was that those texts became a jumble in the mind. We had no sense of why they were written, where they fitted, or that they were written by real people. They might as well have emerged from the ground overnight like mushrooms. Criticism was rarely negative, which meant that writers were placed on a pedestal. Speaking as a teacher myself, I can appreciate that this must have been an easy and unproblematic way to get through a teaching day. It left little room for discussion or argument, and did not relate to daily life, or the individuality of pupils. Nor did it require alteration or improvement from year to year. The only benefit was that one left school writing in sentences, and spelling correctly.

Atwood, like Satyamurti, benefited from personal contact with other poets, although for her the experience came much earlier when she was still at University. She describes her entry into the literary world through the poetry circles and cafes of Toronto where students and staff of the University were sharing their work as something of an amazing occurrence. She wrote,

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<sup>15</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'Who do you think you are?' in *Negotiating with the Dead*, (London: Virago Press, 2003), pp. 1-24 (p. 12).

After a year or two of keeping my head down and trying to pass myself off as a normal person, I made contact with the five other people at my university who were interested in writing; and through them, and some of my teachers, I discovered that there was a whole subterranean Wonderland of Canadian writing that was going on just out of general earshot and sight...Once in -- that is, once published in a magazine -- it was as if you'd been given a Masonic handshake or a key to the underground railroad. All of a sudden you were part of a conspiracy.<sup>16</sup>

This experience involving fellow students and teachers meeting in Toronto's one coffee house resembles the Arvon courses which were to begin a decade later in England.

There have been other tutors. As Robie Macauley and George Lanning pointed out, 'As for teachers of writing, there are any number of fine ones available.'<sup>17</sup> They went on to list sixteen authors, beginning with Jane Austen, ending with Anne Tyler. Not all of the authors they listed have been my guides, but several have.

Dorothea Brande, the first key person whose work influenced me, was not on their list, and rightly so. I had given up all hope of being a writer after having a manuscript rejected when I came across her book *Becoming A Writer*.<sup>18</sup> Written in 1934, it is still in print. The rest of her work, although popular during her lifetime, is now largely ignored.

Brande was a writer, teacher of creative writing and from 1928 until it folded, the managing editor of *The American Review*. One of her books, *Wake Up and Live*, a self-help manual, was a best-seller during the Depression years, but *Becoming a Writer* is the only title with lasting success. Her husband, Seward Collins, founder of *The American Review* was a man of inherited wealth who was 'attracted to authoritarian solutions to protect his own position'<sup>19</sup>, in the euphemistic words of Michael Jay Tucker. By the mid 1940s Collins was regarded as 'an American Fascist intellectual' (Tucker, p. 2). There is some debate as to the nature and extent of this Fascism, and to what extent Dorothea shared it, but according to one contemporary, Fred B. Millett, 'her position is that of the complete reactionary. She displays all the earmarks of

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<sup>16</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'Waterstone's Poetry Lecture', 1995, *Canadian Poetry on Line*, <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/canpoetry/atwood/write.htm> [accessed 18.05.2010]

<sup>17</sup> Robie Macauley and George Lanning, *Technique in Fiction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Macmillan Reference Books, 1996), p. xi. Further references to this source follow quotations in the text.

<sup>18</sup> Dorothea Brande, *Becoming a Writer*, (London: Macmillan Reference Books, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Michael Jay Tucker, *And then they loved him: Seward Collins & the chimera of American fascism*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2006). p. 2. Further references to this source follow quotations in the text.

Toryism.<sup>20</sup> He added ‘she is a self-constituted Joan of Arc of the Yankee spirit, and is consequently on the defensive against aliens generally and Jews in particular.’ (Millett, p. 379). Certainly her book reviews in *The American Review* were invariably anti-modernist. For example, G.K Chesterton and Dorothy L Sayers were recommended but Dashiell Hammett was to be avoided because his world was morally ambiguous. (Tucker, p. 88).

Nothing of her political stance is apparent in *Becoming a Writer*. In his preface to the MacMillan (1996) edition Malcolm Bradbury called the book ‘a living classic among those who are interested in creative writing.’<sup>21</sup> Ten years earlier, John Braine credited the book with being ‘the only book about writing which has been of practical help to me.’<sup>22</sup> He wrote in his foreword for this edition, ‘She doesn’t dissect, she isn’t academic. She sees the creative process whole and sees it clear. She’s always lucid but always warmly human...’ (Braine, p.13).

Moreover, commenting on the origins of Free Writing in the 1960s, in the journal published by the American National Council of Teachers of English, Mark Reynolds pointed to Brande as the source of Ken Macrorie’s work popularising free writing in that decade and on into the 1970s.<sup>23</sup>

Brande says nothing about writing techniques but gives advice on how to approach the world as a writer. One of her basic ideas, following on from her acceptance of Freud’s teaching, is that when one writes it should be the “inner child” who is writing. In other words, the writing can be free, playful and uncontrolled. It can be poor, or indeed messy and apparently worthless. In giving herself permission to write badly the writer is liberated. All that matters in the beginning is that the adult/critical/editorial voice must be ignored. Brande points out that these two voices are in harmony; they both have work to do in creating the best possible text. Moreover, the editing part need not be hard labour. It may be time-consuming, and require concentration, but Brande describes how it too may be made enjoyable by ensuring that the editorial voice, while firm and honest must also be encouraging and kind.

My first novel was hand written, typed by a professional and rejected, as mentioned above, by one publisher who described it as well-written but not interesting. It was never sent to another, my assumption being that all publishers would recognise

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<sup>20</sup> Fred B. Millett, Review of ‘*Letters to Philippa*’, in *American Literature*, Vol 10, No 3 (Nov 1938), pp 378-379. Further references to this source follow quotations in the text.

<sup>21</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, preface to Dorothea Brande, *Becoming a Writer*, (London: Macmillan Reference Books, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> John Braine, preface to Dorothea Brande, *Becoming a Writer*, (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1983). Further references to this source follow quotations in the text.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Reynolds, Freewriting’s Origin, *The English Journal*, vol. 73, No. 3, 1984, pp.81-82.

what was publishable and what was not, much in the manner of tellers distinguishing genuine notes from counterfeit.

After reading *Becoming a Writer*, I tried again. Because I now had three small children, the second book was written in early mornings before anyone was awake, a practice of many aspiring writers, including, famously, Sylvia Plath who woke to write at four when her children were still asleep. It was exciting and new, indeed almost an illicit pleasure. Imagine a child playing football. The child does not understand the difference between his garden, the road, the neighbour's garden - he learns that later. He is not aware of rules. The instinct is simply to follow the ball, kick the ball, follow it further, all for pleasure. He is not even interested in scoring goals until he is instructed to do so.

Without the possibility of failure, there is the possibility of complete delight.

## Where do characters come from?

*People were difficult to read,  
foreign, with uncut pages.  
I could see their spines braced  
To support the weight of hidden words.  
Their covers carried all the information  
they thought necessary.<sup>24</sup>*

When I first began to write, the physical appearance of the characters was extremely important. Whether I was going to describe them in the story or not, I had to know what they looked like. Perhaps this was the equivalent of a child beginning to read, books with illustrations being much easier to cope with than pages of solid text, despite the fact that the child can read all the individual words.

A search through the articles and advertisements of various journals and magazines including the *National Geographic*, *BBC Music*, and *Life*, provided likenesses which were pinned to a board above the desk until the novel or short story was complete. Having an image before me made it easier to remain inside a particular character, to imagine what someone else in the novel was thinking and to write dialogue.

It is regularly pointed out that Jane Austen used dialogue more than her contemporaries and gives very little description of the characters in her novels. It is then assumed that this proves she was not interested in their appearance. It may be argued however that she saw everything that happened in her stories. For example, we read in *Emma*,

‘It is very kind of you, Mr Knightley, to come out at this late hour to call upon us. I am afraid you must have had a shocking walk.’  
‘Not at all, sir. It is a beautiful, moonlight night; and so mild that I must draw back from your great fire.’  
‘But you must have found it very damp and dirty. I wish you may not catch cold.’  
‘Dirty, sir! Look at my shoes. Not a speck on them.’<sup>25</sup>

Surely Austen was watching her characters as well as listening to them. What colour are Mr Knightley’s shoes? We are not told, but we can guess they are gleaming

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<sup>24</sup> Carole Satyamurti, ‘Between the Lines’ in *Stitching the Dark*, (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books Ltd., 2005) pp. 71-74 (p. 73).

<sup>25</sup> Jane Austen, *Emma*, (London: CRW Publishing Limited, 2003).

in the light of the fire. Does Mr Knightley look out at the moon, or are all the curtains tightly drawn? Does he move his chair back from the fire? Austen trusts the reader to imagine these details while listening attentively to what is more important - the conversation.

The questions of how much description to give and when to give it will always be debated. Abundant detail whether given all at once or seeded through a story obviously needs to be backed up consistently in other ways, such as manner, speech or gesture. One answer is “enough to be convincing”, which may be little better than no answer at all.

A reporter from *National Geographic* lent his face to a character in my young adult novel *Missing!* It was useful, a gift really, as the reporter had altered his appearance to go undercover for the journal, and his normal, benign appearance was printed in the magazine alongside the altered one. In the novel, he had to look like a villain to the rest of the characters, particularly to Peter, the young protagonist. When the boy met him, the “undercover” appearance fitted. (This was also used by the artist Linden Hamilton who designed the book cover). When other characters met him, I studied his “normal” face.

It soon became clear to me, however, that a character’s appearance was in some way secondary to an already existing concept in my mind. Where did the concept come from? I don’t know. I see and hear scenes in my imagination. Certainly I hear characters talking to one another before I see them, as if overhearing conversations.

Where do characters come from? In my current novel, more of the characters are based on the appearances of people round about me than in any other work. Lesley, Duncan, and Mrs Flaherty live nearby. Ryan Flaherty with his strange peaked hair passed me two years ago on a street in Glasgow. Dr Gordon looks like my son in law. Harriet’s features and dress sense are based on a friend’s daughter as she was at fifteen. In fact, no pictures were used for any of the characters, not even for minor characters. Why was this? Simply because they were all to hand, not because of an increased confidence on my part. Could it be that their faces were not as important as their behaviour or their words this time? Rather oddly, clothing has become more important in this novel. Walter’s cardigans are always to the fore when he is in a scene, but not his face. Hats are more often used to denote character than faces, not for any profound reason, but because the story takes place over the winter months.

Nadine Gordimer in addressing the relationship between people and characters recalls with some bewilderment how as a teenager she tried to work out which real-life people D H Lawrence had based his characters on. She suggests that she was trying to

find a methodology, ‘presupposing a general one distinct from the imaginings going on, distrusted, in my own head.’<sup>26</sup> As she began to trust her own voice, she realised that no such methodology existed. She added that while the relation of fiction to reality is a mystery to those who do not write, it is also, ‘part mystery to writers’. (Gordimer, p.3). Even those who have become masters of their craft are unable to explain precisely how the imagination works as the real world is transmuted into fiction.

Concerning one aspect of the creative process however Gordimer was quite adamant, declaring ‘I have always thought bunkum the coy romantic claim of some writers that their characters take over, write themselves, etcetera.’ (Gordimer, p. 11). Gordimer made this statement with reference to a book, not named, which she wrote in the 1970s using the persona of two real people, a father and daughter who were communist activists against the South African regime. She maintained that she had created fictional personae, whose lives merely “touched, here and there” on the real lives.

I have to disagree. Whether it is coy or romantic of me, I cannot be sure. I merely base it on what I have experienced. I had no idea that Dr McKinnon’s wife had taken up painting till he mentioned it to Duncan. I did not intend to have Lesley forget to change into her boots, although this certainly opened up the plot for me. I knew Harriet would be accosted by a group of boys. The dog came along by itself. Gordon’s intervention into the assault on Ryan’s father surprised me as I had planned to let the Reverend Smith do it, in order to show him as a man of action, not merely a man of words. Macauley and Lanning explain the phenomenon thus,

Many...writers will speak privately of characters taking command of the story at some point. When the story is advancing well, there is a sensation of one or more presences hovering nearby and dictating the events of the fiction. To put it another way, those are the times when intuition and imagination have been allowed to take over. The process is not quite so mysterious as writers have often made it sound. (Macauley and Lanning, p.13).

Macauley and Lanning may be missing the point a little here. Intuition and imagination are in themselves extremely mysterious. If it were not so, writing courses and “how to” books would wither and perish, writers would rejoice more and weep less, and there would be no such thing as writer’s block, that largely inexplicable failure of the imagination and the will.

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<sup>26</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *Writing and Being*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 2. Further references to this source follow quotations in the text.

Is it true that writers speak only ‘privately’? Perhaps those who do wish to avoid the charge of being romantic in a postmodern world. I suggest that the experience is so delightful it should be shared with anyone who will listen, and especially with beginning writers who need encouragement, because it suggests that we can achieve more than we think we can, which is very often true.

Regarding Dr Gordon’s rescue attempt, only afterwards did I realise how well it fitted on different levels. It fits first of all with his being a doctor who would want to help in an emergency, but it fits secondly with his deeper motivation, in that he is attempting to atone for what he has done. Third, there is an appealing irony in having Dr Gordon, the actual paedophile, save the life of the falsely accused Johnny Flaherty. Fourthly, the whole episode was in accord with my desire to show that someone on the continuum of paedophilia might still have recognisable virtues.

In this instance, the childlike part of my mind provided the material. The editorial part considered the material and found it both solid and workable. Whether science can explain the process or not, there is an exhilarating delight to be experienced when one’s characters seem to take on a life of their own. Even Hélène Cixous, who wrote that the concept of character was a question that cropped up, ‘from traditional discussions about literature, within a conception of literary creation that is today outmoded’,<sup>27</sup> which she elsewhere terms ‘a disintegrating system’ (Cixous and Cohen) nevertheless became very excited about her characters when she began writing for the theatre. ‘They are characters full of colour who tell me their lives. I note down everything they say.’ she wrote.<sup>28</sup>

Alice Walker goes further. In her account of how her characters behave when it is time to begin a new book she claims to be unable to write unless she is in a location her characters accept, so real are they to her.<sup>29</sup> Many writers need solitude, and find it by walking, or shutting themselves away in an attic or a borrowed house, but when Walker began writing *The Color Purple* she had to leave New York, a city she professes to love. San Francisco with its threat of earthquakes also made her characters feel unsafe. Finally she moved to Northern California where, she says, ‘Seeing the sheep, the cattle and the goats, smelling the apples and the hay, one of my characters, Celie, began, haltingly, to speak.’ (Sellers, p.7)

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<sup>27</sup> Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen, *The Character of “Character”*, *New Literary History*, Vol 5, No 2, Changing Views of Character (Winter, 1974), pp.383-402. Further references to this source follow quotations in the text.

<sup>28</sup> Hélène Cixous, ‘A Realm of Characters’ in Sellers, Susan, ed, *Delighting the Heart, a Notebook by Women Writers*, (London: The Women’s Press, 1989), pp.126-128 (p.126).

<sup>29</sup> Alice Walker, ‘Writing *The Colour Purple*’ in Sellers, Susan, ed, *Delighting the Heart, a Notebook by Women Writers*, (London: The Women’s Press, 1989) pp. 53-56 (p. 54).

Walker declared that she loved creating characters. ‘Because, like our children, they really create themselves.’<sup>30</sup> The process, she said, was “magical”. The comparison she makes with procreation is perhaps unfortunate in her own case. Her daughter Rebecca has written about being left with a neighbour when Walker went to feminist rallies and meetings, about not fitting in with her father or her mother in their shared parenting after divorce, and being unable to talk to either about this misery.<sup>31</sup> Alice Walker was reportedly furious when Rebecca made these revelations public and the two women no longer speak to one another.

No matter how characters initially come into being, the business of developing them will vary from writer to writer. I concur with P G Wodehouse who called it a ‘sort of moulding’.<sup>32</sup> One works, not with marble or some other stone, nor with plaster which quickly sets, but rather with a substance which stays malleable. The approximate shape is created, then the workman sets to with a knife, pulling pieces off, adding pieces on, altering the emphasis here and there, pressing with the fingers and thumbs. William Trevor worked for several years as a sculptor, and in discussing his writing technique with John Tusa references this at some length.<sup>33</sup> He carved in wood, clay and metal, stopping only after several years when his work became increasingly abstract, and he felt he was ‘losing people’. Trevor speaks of writing very fully then literally cutting out the parts he needs to discard. Indeed he writes down everything that happens to his story people when they are out of the sight of the reader. Where Alice Walker speaks of creating/receiving characters, Trevor describes, in the Tusa interview, his way of understanding them as ‘creeping’ into their skin. ‘I think one of the things which you do as a writer is you, you have to get into the, literally into the skin of your characters.’ The word he uses is perfectly apt. Understatement and quietness are key elements of his writing style.

Walker and Trevor could hardly be more different as writers, but both speak of their fondness for their characters, a fondness which continues well after the work is done. Trevor admitted to John Tusa, ‘I miss them like anything, and they are very real to me and real as people I meet at a dinner party.’ (Trevor quoted by Tusa).

Trevor’s dinner party or indeed any social gathering where it is possible to

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<sup>30</sup> Rudolph P. Byrd, ‘Everything & Nothing’, interview with Alice Walker, April 2010. [http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/1653/everything\\_and\\_nothing/](http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/1653/everything_and_nothing/) [accessed 21.05.2010]

<sup>31</sup> Margarette Driscoll, ‘The day feminist icon Alice Walker resigned as my mother’, Sunday Times, May 4, 2008. [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/article3866798.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article3866798.ece) [accessed 28.07.2009]

<sup>32</sup> PG Wodehouse, The Art of Fiction no 60, Interviewed by Gerald Clarke, *The Paris Review*, 64, 1975.

<sup>33</sup> John Tusa, ‘Interview with William Trevor’. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/trevor\\_transcript.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/trevor_transcript.shtml) [accessed 28.07.2009]. Further references to this source follow quotations in the text.

observe for a while without being observed oneself is an excellent opportunity for a writer who is trying to develop characters. Charles Baxter's warning to avoid having prose writers as friends<sup>34</sup> may be extended to include avoiding conversation with writers in public places, as they may smile and smile and be... not exactly villains but certainly listeners-in to any more interesting conversations within hearing distance. In other words, they are busy noticing, noting down what one of Carol Shields characters calls '.... "putty"'. By this she meant 'the arbitrary the odd, the ordinary, the mucilage of daily life that cements our genuine moments of being'<sup>35</sup> anything they can save to form and develop their characters or narratives.

In *How Fiction Works*, James Wood suggests that 'Literature makes us better noticers of life: we get to practise on life itself; which in turn makes us better readers of detail in literature; which in turn makes us better readers of life. And so on and so on.'<sup>36</sup> According to Wood life is full of disorganised detail. When we read literature we become more able to discern a pattern. This is rather a grand claim. Bad habits develop. Some of us become used to reading too quickly, reading to get to the conclusion, and some may not be noticers at all.

Elizabeth Bennett is one of life's noticers, like her creator. She notices how the faces of Darcy and Wickham change colour when they first meet.<sup>37</sup> Bingley and Jane notice nothing. Nothing is said, but she interprets the reaction of both men. Austen does not tell the reader that Darcy looked angry, while Wickham looked ashamed or afraid. Nor does she let us know which face looked red, and which white. She trusts the reader to know. In other words, she assumes that the reader is noticing, by reading attentively.

Wood goes on to say that we become better noticers as we grow older; the talent of noticing develops as we read more literature, as we become 'better readers of detail in literature'. (Wood, p.53). His statement is perhaps a little sweeping. So much depends on the quality of the literature, the talent, instinct and curiosity of the reader, the time allowed for concentrating on a specific text. Can too much fine reading dull the sensibility as too much fine food dulls the palate? Abstinence from reading for a period may sometimes make us better noticers.

Wood examines what makes a detail arresting, what gives it 'thisness' (his term for immediacy, from the Latin *haecitas*, a term used by the medieval Scottish philosopher Duns Scotus to describe the very nature of a thing), which Wood describes

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<sup>34</sup> Charles Baxter, *Burning Down the House*, (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1997), p. 139.

<sup>35</sup> Carol Shields, 'A Scarf' in *The Collected Stories* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005). pp. 404-418 (p. 416).

<sup>36</sup> James Wood, *How Fiction Works*, (London: Vintage, 2009) p. 53. Further references to this text follow quotations in the text.

<sup>37</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: CRW Publishing, 2003), p. 97.

as ‘Any detail that draws abstraction towards itself and seems to kill that abstraction with a puff of palpability, and detail that centres our attention with its concretion.’ (Wood, p.54).

One is reminded of Anne Tyler’s Mr Maxwell in *Ladder of Years*. ‘...all she [Delia] saw of him was his outstretched trouser legs and his leather slippers, backless, exposing maroon silk socks with transparent heels.’<sup>38</sup>

These socks could hardly have more ‘concretion’. Maroon is a dark or dull shade of red. Young men wear red whereas old men tend to wear maroon. The fabric suggests his gentility, the transparency around the heels to his being in reduced circumstances, a fact pointed out earlier in the chapter. Possibly he is unwilling to throw away worn items, possibly he hasn’t noticed how threadbare they are. Why has his wife not noticed? She is even more frail than he is. The worn out socks become emblematic of the couple’s physical and economic decline.

If Wood is correct, reading passages like this will make those of us who do notice more aware of details when we meet people, whether they are strangers or members of our family, the assumption being that a greater awareness of detail is desirable. It may not always be so. One cannot notice life with the same intensity all the time. For writers the degree of attention required can be exhausting.

In *Middlemarch* Dorothea notices too much when honeymooning in Italy. Describing Dorothea’s confusion and misery when the ‘weight of unintelligible Rome’ overcomes her, George Eliot, quietly ironic, notes that such experiences are quite common, so that other people may not regard them as properly tragic, saying ‘We do not expect people to be moved by what is not unusual.’ She explains, ‘If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.’<sup>39</sup>

In the above excerpt, George Eliot does something quite strange and synaesthetic with her transference of the senses, when she writes, if we could *see*...it would be like *hearing*. One wonders what she would have made of today’s technology which breaks through the limitations of the senses, making it increasingly possible for us to see and hear what she imagined, but knew, correctly for her time, was impossible.

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<sup>38</sup> Anne Tyler, *Ladder of Years*, (London: Vintage, 1996) p. 36.

<sup>39</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2000) p. 162.

To take this well-known passage slightly out of context, and relate it to the concept of “noticing”, one might argue that it is not stupidity but its opposite, a sensible desire to protect oneself, that stops one from seeing too keenly, something the unfortunate Dorothea could not summon up. Writers may find themselves overwhelmed because of their own quickness, and in need of some wadding, a period of abstinence from noticing, an interval away from too much reality, equivalent perhaps to the time spent alone in one’s room so often practiced by Austen’s meditative heroines.

In my novel, I wanted Lesley to be a “noticing” character. For example, we see the assembled party guests through her eye, noticing the pattern on Mrs MacKinnon’s dress, and the colours Mrs Crawford is wearing this year. More importantly, she is the first to comment on the fact that Duncan has shaved off his moustache. She finds him more attractive, and he is drawn to her because she is the one person who pays attention. He becomes anxious to hear whether or not she approves.

Ryan too is a noticer, aware of colours and music, and perfumes: the smell of chips under the counter in the video shop, the smells of food cooking in Harriet’s kitchen, the scent of Duncan’s geranium pot plant. Unlike Lesley he is more easily troubled by the big questions triggered by what he experiences. Freed by her mother’s death Lesley reflects merely on her own situation, but Ryan wonders why objects are the way they are in the world.

Being inexperienced and new to the ministry after a career in Engineering, the Reverend Smith is still learning how to notice and understand his parishioners. He too quickly begins to reflect on his own success or failure. With his own family he is more successful, although even here he is inclined to count himself a failure, especially with Harriet. If his wife were at home, she would remind him that no-one has ever been able to understand teenagers.

As Flannery O’Connor usefully emphasised, in pursuit of realism this observing may employ all five senses. ‘The beginning of human knowledge is through the senses, and the fiction writer begins where human perception begins. He appeals through the senses, and you cannot appeal to the senses with abstractions.’<sup>40</sup> Hearing and seeing generally take care of themselves, but the remaining three, smell, touch and taste can easily be overlooked, especially in recall, because they are often momentary. Additionally, they may be too personal to evoke the required response in the reader.

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<sup>40</sup> Flannery O’Connor, ‘The Nature and Aim of Fiction’ in *Mystery and Manners, Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald and Robert Fitzgerald, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969). pp. 63-86. (p. 67).

Raymond Chandler made frequent use of the sense of smell. In a genre where plot and dramatic action were paramount, Chandler stands out because of the intensity of his descriptions. At the beginning of *The Big Sleep*, for example, there is the well-known passage where Marlowe enters a greenhouse.

The air was thick, wet, steamy and larded with the cloying smell of tropical orchids in bloom. The glass walls and roof were heavily misted and big drops of moisture splashed down on the plants. The light had an unreal greenish color, like light filtered through an aquarium tank. The plants filled the place, a forest of them, with nasty meaty leaves and stalks like the newly washed fingers of dead men. They smelled as overpowering as boiling alcohol under a blanket.<sup>41</sup>

Here the unpleasant air is described in four ways: thick, wet, steamy and larded - touch, touch, touch, smell. 'Larded' could so easily have been 'loaded', but now has the double meaning, 'loaded', or smeared with fat or lard. The last image seems to reference the remedy for treating a cold, by drinking a toddy, the smell of hot alcohol and damp wool blanket being unpleasant.

Are the 'fingers' too much? Perhaps. Comparing the plant stalks to "newly washed fingers" may seem apt when one recalls that Marlowe is familiar with the sight of bodies in the morgue.

Chandler was fond of this greenhouse. In his 1936 short story *The Curtain* the hero Carmady visits an orchid house belonging to General Dade Winslow, which looks very like the greenhouse in *The Big Sleep* which was published in 1939.

The air steamed. The walls and ceiling of the greenhouse dripped. In the half light enormous tropical plants spread their blooms and branches all over the place, and the smell of them was almost as overpowering as the smell of boiling alcohol.<sup>42</sup>

Good descriptive details, as far as Chandler was concerned, were worth re-using. Moose Malloy for example in *Farewell, My Lovely* resembles Steve Skalla in the short story *Try the Girl*. Here are some descriptive details about Moose Malloy, who is looking for his lost love Velma in 1940.

He was a big man but not more than six feet five inches tall and not wider than a beer truck.. he wore a shaggy borsalino hat, a rough gray sports coat with white

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<sup>41</sup> Raymond Chandler, 'The Big Sleep' in *The Big Sleep, Farewell My Lovely, The High Window*, (London: Everyman Publishers plc, 2002). pp.1-198 (p. 6).

<sup>42</sup> Raymond Chandler, 'The Curtain' in *Collected Stories*, (London: Everyman Publishers plc, 2002), pp. 523-569 (p. 531).

golf balls for buttons, a brown shirt, a yellow tie, pleated gray flannel slacks and alligator shoes with white explosions on the toes.<sup>43</sup>

And here is Steve Skalla, who is looking for his lost love Beula in 1937.

He wasn't just big. He was a giant. He looked seven feet high, and he wore the loudest clothes I ever saw on a really big man. Pleated maroon pants, a rough greyish coat with white billiard balls for buttons, brown suede shoes with explosions in white kid on them, a brown shirt, a yellow tie, a large red carnation...<sup>44</sup>

Margaret Atwood frequently details smells. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, when the narrator describes Serena Joy's sitting room, she says,

The room smells of lemon oil, heavy cloth, fading daffodils, the leftover smells of cooking that have made their way from the kitchen or the dining room, and of Serena Joy's perfume: Lily of the Valley... It's the scent of prepubescent girls, of the gifts young children used to give their mothers, for Mother's day; the smell of white cotton socks and white cotton petticoats, of dusting powder, of the innocence of female flesh not yet given over to hairiness and blood.<sup>45</sup>

Here, the handmaid Ofred compares the world that now imprisons her with the world that has gone. The first set of smells are ambivalent, the oil used to polish furniture, the smell of the heavy cloth curtains. She has already described the room as 'subdued', and herself as a piece of furniture, suggesting her own oppressed state. The daffodil smell is unpleasant, as are leftover food smells. The Commander's wife wears a perfume at odds with Ofred's present world, reminding the Handmaid of a lost existence, of innocence and childhood. The harsh present returns with the unpleasant juxtaposition of 'hairiness and blood', representing puberty and menstruation. When the handmaid is allowed to enter the kitchen, she says that it 'smells of yeast, a nostalgic smell. It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine. It smells of mothers, although my own mother did not make bread. It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother.' (Atwood, p.57). Sometimes a smell does double duty. The Commander's barren wife Serena smells of stale cigarettes, with the result that the scarves she is knitting for the troops at the front have the same "stench", a far more powerful word than "smell". (Atwood, p.109). One supposes that the front line already possesses other stenches, those of death and decay. The irony here of course is that the handmaid

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<sup>43</sup> Raymond Chandler, 'Farewell My Lovely in *The Big Sleep, Farewell My Lovely, The High Window*, (London: Everyman Publishers plc, 2002). pp. 199-442 (p. 201).

<sup>44</sup> Raymond Chandler, 'Try the Girl' in *Collected Stories*, (London: Everyman Publishers plc, 2002), pp. 571-619 (p. 573).

<sup>45</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, (London: Virago Press Ltd, 1987). p 90. Further references to this source follow quotations in the text.

frequently longs for a fresh cigarette, forbidden because she is a potential child bearer and must remain as healthy as possible.

Smells became important in *Hartsend* in those scenes which involved Mrs Flaherty and Ruby: for example, when Harriet goes to Ryan's house, she is overwhelmed by the pungency of Mrs Flaherty's cleaning chemicals. In the Hospice shop, she observes that Ruby prefers cleaning to listening. The two women, so different in other ways, are both dedicated cleaners of surfaces. Mrs Flaherty cleans to forget the unhappiness of her failed marriage. Ruby cleans her house and the Hospice Shop to maintain control over her life and avoid learning about the problems of others. Both women owe something to my memories of Muriel Spark's heroine Lorna Merrifield in *You Should Have Seen The Mess*, the young girl who wondered how Doctor Jim could allow his old mother to live in a fourteenth-century cottage, 'as he was so good to everyone else.'<sup>46</sup>

Most writers neglect touch and taste. A notable exception is Vladimir Nabokov. Two short examples must suffice here. In the opening paragraph of *Wingstroke* he describes a skier named Kern falling into some snow.

The scalding snow goes up your sleeves, and it is very hard to get back on your feet. Kern, who had not skied for a long time, rapidly worked up a sweat. Feeling slightly dizzy, he yanked off the woolen cap that had been tickling his ears, and brushed the moist sparks from his eyelashes.<sup>47</sup>

The paragraph is replete with sensation, from the burning snow, through sweat, dizziness, tickling wool to the wet, hot snowflakes.

In another short story, *The Seaport*, Nikitin visits a barber 'to have a haircut and to refresh his head.' Here we have the same multiplicity of sensations.

The barber filled his palm with lather. A delicious chill ran through the crown of his head as the barber's fingers firmly rubbed in the thick foam. Then an icy gush made his heart jump, and fluffy towel went to work on his face and his wet hair.<sup>48</sup>

Carol Shields also uses the sense of touch, but more sparingly, without Nabokov's enthusiastic superabundance. In *The Republic of Love* for example, touch is used in the description of how Fay McLeod discovers that she is no longer in love with Peter Knightly, who is lying in bed beside her. Although Shields does not say so, the final

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<sup>46</sup> Muriel Spark, 'You Should Have Seen the Mess' in *Open to the Public: New & Collected Stories*, (New York: New Directions, 1985) pp. 141-146. (p. 144).

<sup>47</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, 'Wingstroke' in *Collected Stories*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2010) pp. 29-50 (p. 29).

<sup>48</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, 'The Seaport' in *Collected Stories*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2010) pp. 69-76 (p.69).

five words of the passage seem to sum up their relationship, and metaphorically announce its end.

Now Peter's mouth has fixed itself on her left nipple, whispering and sliding, a suave licking. Oh, this is very familiar. He's learned after all this time how to please...Her hand comes to rest on his back, where she discovers an appalling patch of dry skin.<sup>49</sup>

Taste is the least commonly used of the five senses. Interestingly, when Margaret Atwood uses it to describe a cup of chamomile tea given to Iris in *The Blind Assassin*, she invokes smell, a favourite sense of hers. 'She made me a cup of chamomile tea, which tasted the way lettuce smelled; also a hot water bottle for the cramps. Neither one helped.'<sup>50</sup> The narrator describes some of the food at a dinner party. 'There was a tinny taste to the bisque, a floury taste to the chicken, which had been treated too roughly and had shrunk and toughened.' (Atwood, p. 224).

However, if one turns to James Joyce, master of other sense images, one finds that he largely ignores taste in a story which provides a clear opportunity to use it, namely, *The Dead*.<sup>51</sup> There is the 'wheezy doorbell', the 'cold fragrant air', the 'shrivelled red apple' of Aunt Kate's healthy face and Gabriel's 'warm trembling fingers' tapping the 'cold pane of the window' but the fat brown goose, the great ham on its bed of creased paper, the raisins and almonds, the celery and the bottled drinks remain untasted. All we know of taste is that the punch is 'hot, strong and sweet'. In making these observations, one would not want to imply that the absence of gustatory images in any way diminishes the story, merely that even a writer of Joyce's standing did not readily use them.

Thomas Hardy, Duncan Crawford's favourite poet, was a practiced observer.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, in his fiction, characters have to observe closely before they can understand what they see, and only when this happens is there a chance for happiness. Duncan regards Hardy as a kindred spirit, because he knows that as a child Hardy spent a great deal of his time by himself, walking through the local countryside, experiencing a strong connection with the natural world, as he himself does.

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<sup>49</sup> Carol Shields, *The Republic of Love*, (London: Flamingo, 1993) p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, (London: Virago Press, 2001) p. 104. Further references to this source follow quotations in the text.

<sup>51</sup> James Joyce, 'The Dead' in *Dubliners*, (London: Penguin Books, 1966). pp173-220.

<sup>52</sup> 'From the archive, 2 June 1920: Thomas Hardy: An appreciation.'

Originally published in the Manchester Guardian on 2 June 1920, Prof CH Herford described him as, 'the lonely prophet who keeps us in mind of what we would willingly forget, and remorselessly saps the illusions which habitually disguise it.' <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2010/jun/03/archive-thomas-hardy-appreciation> [accessed 26.08.2010]

In the poem *Afterwards*, the speaker, whom we may reasonably assume to be the poet himself, wonders if after his death, those who knew him will say, ‘He was a man who used to notice such things.’

When the Present has latched its postern behind my tremulous stay,  
And the May month flaps its glad green leaves like wings,  
Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk, will the neighbours say,  
‘He was a man who used to notice such things?’<sup>53</sup>

The details of the “things” Hardy observes have the ‘thisness’ that James Wood speaks of. The word ‘tremulous’ suggests a sensitivity to the natural world so profound as to affect the poet physically.<sup>54</sup> His life ends, but the natural world renews itself, with leaves resembling the quivering wings of butterflies or moths. Since the poem is framed in the form of unanswered questions, the implication is that those who speak of the deceased may well not remember his noticing of the world but will merely go on with their own lives.

Unlike his poet hero, Duncan Crawford is merely an observer of the bird world. Human beings confuse him. His observations of other people are of interest only as they relate directly to himself. He never speculates about Mrs Fleming’s life, or ponders the relationship between the Minister’s daughter and Mrs Flaherty’s son. Faced with a problem, he will assume that the first solution he thinks of is the right one. In a Hardy novel he would have no chance of happiness.

The business of noticing can be innocuous when it takes place amongst strangers, in a queue, or a restaurant, or a doctor’s waiting room. However it can be more problematic when writers make use of those close to them. The advantage of being able to view one’s character regularly at close range is balanced by the danger of being discovered and giving offence. As Margaret Atwood asks, ‘But was it really your right as an artist to purloin Aunt Lila’s wardrobe? Are you entitled to make off with the conversations you overhear in bus stations and stick them into some recondite construction of your own? Can everything and everyone be used by you.....?’<sup>55</sup>

As an extreme example of the dangers of borrowing from life, in 2006 Joyce Carol Oates had to apologize publicly for distress caused by her story *Landfill*, published in the *New Yorker* in October of that year. According to Brett Amelkin,

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas Hardy, ‘Afterwards’, in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2006). p. 511.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Margaret Atwood, ‘Temptation: Prospero, The Wizard of Oz, Mephisto & Co.’, in *Negotiating with the Dead, a Writer on Writing*, (London: Virago Press, 2003). pp. 81-109 (p. 93).

senior writer at *The Daily Princetonian*<sup>56</sup> a report on John Fiocco, a young student at The College of New Jersey whose body had been found in a Michigan landfill site, gave Oates the initial inspiration for the story. A retired Professor named Regina Kennen read the *New Yorker* story and sent an angry email to Oates and copies to the Dean, President and Provost of the College, in which she accused the writer of having “used (her) imagination so cruelly”, to hurt the Fiocco family.

Oates was initially surprised by the hostile criticism, comparing it to the reaction against Salman Rushdie and the *Satanic Verses*. In both instances she blamed those who ‘do not ‘read’ fiction as symbolic or representational, but literal.’ She continued, ‘Where I had hoped to evoke sympathy for a young man trapped in a nightmare situation with symbolic resonance (I had thought) for all of us, I had succeeded, in some quarters at least, in arousing only great anger.’<sup>57</sup>

There may be some equivocation on Oates’ part here. Did she write the story purely to ‘evoke sympathy’? Her *oeuvre* often seems designed to provoke many reactions rather remote from sympathy. The noticeable point here is that Oates conceded very little, despite saying, ‘A literary principle is not a justification for upsetting anyone, even unintentionally.’ She was happy to apologise for hurting people ‘in some quarters’, but the weight of her words elevates the primacy of the literary principle. This is further evidenced by her rather curiously adding that no-one would have made a fuss if the story had been published in a small journal. In Amelkin’s article, Deborah Treisman, editor at the *New Yorker*, is quoted as saying that the magazine knew nothing of the connection between Fiocco’s death and Oates’ story. There was, she declared, a long history of fiction being based on real events, but that they were sorry if some people had been distressed. This was a carefully worded statement again upholding the literary principle, denying complicity and apologising *if* distress had been caused.

Certainly for some writers, being a thief results in a degree of guilt. In her first published novel, *Small Ceremonies*,<sup>58</sup> Carol Shields has narrator Judith Gill express terrible guilt about stealing from living people to create a novel. Judith has written biographies of historical characters but when she tries to base a novel on the family whose house in England the Gills have borrowed, she feels like a criminal. Did Shields in this first published novel have to explore this question before her writing career

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<sup>56</sup>Brett Amelkin, ‘Oates Story Draws Ire from TCNJ’, *The Daily Princetonian*, <http://www.dailyprincetonian.com/2006/10/12/16167/> [accessed 22.03.2010]

<sup>57</sup> Associated Press, ‘Joyce Carol Oates criticised over story’, <http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/15228015> [accessed 28.07.2010]

<sup>58</sup> Carol Shields, *Small Ceremonies*, (London: Fourth Estate Limited, 1995). Further references to this source follow quotations in the text.

could go forward? The comedy of the novel centres on the confusion that arises when another writer ‘steals’ Judith’s manuscript and writes the book she tried to write. Judith is indignant, but Furlong Eberhardt is a professional fiction writer and unrepentant. He tells Judith, ‘...writers are no more than scavengers and assemblers of lies.’ (Shields, p.144).

Shields had more (or perhaps one should say different) scruples than her fictional creatures, confessing that she was unable to write about her family when they were alive. She says,

I was always careful not to write about family or friends because I wanted them to remain my family and friends. I believe the old myth about people not wanting their photographs taken because it’s a form of stealing their soul. I think there’s something in that. So I always try to be very careful.<sup>59</sup>

There is no assumption here that the writing will focus on what is negative about family or friends: it is the mere fact of taking something from them while they are alive that seems illicit.

Living or dead, my own close family and friends have never figured in my writing, although the original subject for my thesis was an exploration of fictional treatments of eating disorders, my interest having been triggered by a young friend’s anorexia. Her mother’s immediate reaction was, “You realise you can’t write that book.” At the time I felt she was being unreasonable. With hindsight I have concluded that she was correct and that Carole Shield’s position is also mine.

Often, however, my theft is minor. The ears of an acquaintance were used to describe one of the minor characters of my first novel. Joanne, the heroine, witnesses a murder. She is not impressed by a policeman who questions her, and sees him as a little ridiculous. ‘The police sergeant tapped his pencil thoughtfully against his lips in between questions, and played with his ear lobes a lot. They jutted forward, as if some long-ago criminal had grabbed them and hung on.’<sup>60</sup>

I decided that as a teenager on her own in a part of the country she didn’t know, she wouldn’t dare be rude, but would find some way of belittling him in her own mind.

Sometimes my theft has been more malign. In *Missing!*<sup>61</sup> I used the appearance of a colleague who caused problems among the staff in my then workplace; in the present novel, Ruby’s appearance is that of a teacher who treated one of my children badly.

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<sup>59</sup> Carol Shields, ‘Interview Pulitzer Prize for Fiction’, *The Academy of Achievement*. May 23, 1998. Page revised 05 May 2008 <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/shilint-1> [Accessed 05/01/2009]

<sup>60</sup> Janice Brown, *Sweet ‘n’ Sour Summer*, (Tring: Lion Publishing plc, 1988).

<sup>61</sup> Janice Brown, *Missing!*, (Oxford: Lion Publishing plc, 1990).

However, one may also pay homage to one's friends. Duncan's gardener Mr Mackenzie is based on a local "worthy" who did some gardening work for me and regaled me with stories of the village's past.

From outward appearances, one comes to the fashioning of characters' inner lives.

According to William Trevor,

All fiction has its autobiographical roots in the sense that as a person you are your characters' litmus paper, their single link with reality. They taste as you taste, they hear as you hear. The blue they see is your blue, the pain they experience is your pain, their physical pleasure is what you know yourself.<sup>62</sup>

Is this true? All sorts of settings and times can be imagined or researched, and described in a believable way, but can writers convincingly convey only those emotions they have experienced? Certainly I could not have written about Lesley's reaction to her mother's death without having experienced bereavement, or about father-daughter relationships without having been the parent of teenagers. However, it is disturbing to accept that to write about a paedophile one would have to experience how they feel about children, if that is what Trevor meant by describing writers as litmus paper for characters. Dr Gordon's other emotions, his feelings of sympathy for Lesley, his sense of guilt, his need to atone, these I can readily identify with. Dostoevsky recalls how in 1862 Dickens told him that the good people in his novels were what he wanted to have been,

.....and his villains were what he was (or rather what he found in himself), his cruelty, his attacks of ceaseless enmity towards those who were helpless and looked to him for comfort... There were two people in him, he told me, one who feels as he ought to feel and one who feels the opposite.<sup>63</sup>

Entering into the minds of his creatures was a process Dickens found very exciting, not merely on the page but even more in the theatre where he could act them out before audiences who felt to him like gatherings of family and friends.

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<sup>62</sup> William Trevor, *Excursions in the Real World*, (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. xii.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009). p. 502.

## Imagery and Theme

In the writing of any work of fiction choices are continuously being made, consciously or unconsciously, with regard to imagery. Possibly because the theme of maltreatment had been pondered long and deeply, much of Hartsend's imagery, although consciously selected, seems on reflection to hold a deeper resonance than I had earlier imagined.

For example, when the child meets the paedophile for the first time, she is holding a "long white feather", which is described as "smooth and clean", an image which was chosen deliberately to suggest her beauty, innocence and purity.

However, this is a single, lost feather, caught in the grass. The child is alone, separated from the rest of the travellers, and unwanted by her older sisters. Later in the novel we find the paedophile musing on the fact that he has always been drawn to lonely children.

My intention was to create a sense of unease from the beginning. Other images in this section allude to the possibility of danger. The "big black umbrella", is presently "closed up", because the rain has stopped. This is a tiny detail. Does it have connotations or not? Closed, it does not offer shelter. Instead, it represents a stick, or possibly a weapon. Black as a symbol of evil is so much of a cliché that perhaps the sensible reader may decide to ignore it. Perhaps the twisting movement should similarly be taken at face value? Is this movement morally neutral or not? Perhaps the action may imply some unnamed reaction in the paedophile on seeing the child alone, sad and apparently unloved. Or does it prefigure a physical interference which may occur later in the novel? His declaration at this first meeting that it would be wrong to "upset the mother bird" is a little ominous since we already know that this child's mother is preoccupied with the new baby, too tired to care for her older children. Certainly, the paedophile's final words "Can I touch it? I promise not to hurt it" are intended to resonate.

Lesley Crosthwaite is to some extent at least the adult incarnation of the lost child. She refers to herself as a "lost individual". Again the colour white is used, but now it describes the snow falling outside and symbolises the numbness she is experiencing. She pursues the image, imagining herself as one of the corpses on Mount Everest, which every climber, on every attempt, sees but cannot rescue. Her mother's death has made her focus on her own spiritual "shivering hypothermia". Again a small detail, the cooked meat in the teeth was deliberately chosen to illustrate how uncontroversial and bland her eating habits, and by implication her life, has been up to this point. The adult

cold bird is the ultimate fate of the egg mentioned by the paedophile, but this allusion or the idea that Lesley is herself a “cold chicken” never occurred consciously to me.

Lesley’s recovery is triggered by her discovery of the letters kept from her by her mother. She feels herself becoming “perverse” and enjoys for the first time the sensation of champagne, “bright and cold but somehow warming”. Obviously champagne symbolises excitement, celebration, and the casting off of inhibitions. For the previously teetotal Lesley, as she continues drinking this “insipid lemonade”, the result is dramatic. She is rescued by Dr Gordon to whom she reveals her deep unhappiness. He responds by warning her not to let her mother ruin the remainder of her life. These words stay with her and provide a more positive foundation for her regeneration than her initial perversity. The champagne therefore works not only on a symbolic level, but also in terms of plot. Its consumption leads to a kind of half-relationship with Gordon which benefits her. Hence her determination at the close of the novel to go to his funeral when no-one else will, a decision which indicates her final recovery from dependency, and, incidentally, the depth of Duncan’s affection for her when he acknowledges that he will go with her.

A new warmth in her inner life is symbolised by her decision to wear an amber necklace, which though cool to the touch is valuable and described as “gorgeous” by the envious women in the staff. The necklace leads to thoughts about the rightness or wrongness of being attractive to men, and the wistful hope of being a wife.

In contrast to Lesley, when Harriet cooks chicken it is Chicken Forestiere, a rather rich dish containing mushrooms, garlic, double cream, white wine and possibly cognac. Ryan, normally a devotee of fish and chips is captivated by it and especially by his first taste of roast parsnips. The nutritious but somewhat exotic flavour of the meal may allude to the vision of Harriet that presents itself to Ryan. She is beautiful in face and dress. She is different from the girls he has been with in the past. However the delicious food served in the manse was chosen initially to point to the harmony of the family’s life. Not a perfect harmony. Brother and sister squabble more than they agree. Father tries his hardest most of the time, but says the wrong thing as often as he says the right. Harriet grows weary of her role as mother, and craves junk food: crisps, chocolate biscuits and cola.

In the last part of the novel, Ryan flees the attacks on his home and finds refuge of a kind in Duncan’s garden shed, a place of security known to him in his childhood, where Mr Mackenzie the gardener allowed him to wait for his mother who was cleaning the Crawford house. The garden shed offered itself as a natural shelter in terms of the plot but also as a potent symbol. The shed is never locked. Nothing is thrown away.

The runaway/discarded son is accepted. Until this point, Duncan has used the shed to store bird food. When he discovers the severely chilled Ryan, he finds himself able to care for a human whom he has previously disliked. This is a step further than caring for Lesley, which was his first immense step up from caring for wild birds. He exerts himself, making phone calls to people who can influence the Flahertys' situation. His compassion has emboldened him to the extent that he kisses Lesley. Without knowing it, he has become a Good Samaritan and, in Lesley's eyes at least, a romantic hero.

While the relationship between Duncan and Ryan remains tentative in the novel - as Ryan says, he doesn't "completely get Crawford" - the implication is that both will benefit. Both of them appreciate beauty. Duncan is surrounded by it. Ryan hates the poverty and ugliness of his own home, dreams of material wealth and despises the rich. Is there irony in his declaration that he will have to make Harriet less materialistic? Or is he learning from Duncan who, despite his many flaws, is beginning to learn that even the Crawhall original, a symbol of wealth, Victorian standards at their noblest and great artistry is no substitute for the warmth of human relationships "when the cold wind blows".

## The Enneagram as a trigger for personality typology

Because my instinct is to avoid that self examination, or over-examination, I had to find other ways of entering my characters' minds. Here the Enneagram system proved useful.

There are many schools of the Enneagram, each with slightly different claims and emphases, making it rather like a religious system.

I do not subscribe to what I consider to be the fanciful and pseudo-mystical approach of the originators of the Enneagram, nor to the more recent claims for its usefulness as self-help tool. Rather, I have used it as a means of ensuring that my characters' development is consistent with the "psychological" typology of my creations; there has to be a continuity in characterisation which is based on reality, and the descriptors of the Enneagram typology enable me to see various traits which may appear, and appear consistently, in individuals.

The term "Enneagram" is derived from the Greek *ennea* – nine, and *grammos* – a drawing, and describes a nine-sided geometric figure in the form of a polygonal star.

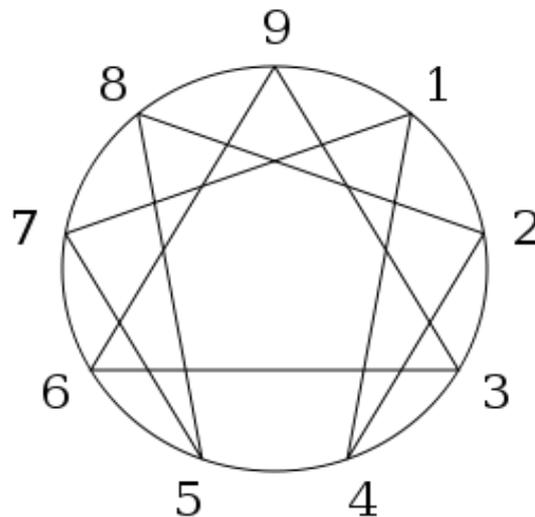


Figure 1. The Enneagram ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enneagram\\_of\\_Personality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enneagram_of_Personality), [accessed 3/5/10])

Within the “Enneagram of Personality” various schools of personality typology have developed in which the numbers associated with the apices are ascribed to the differing personality traits. These are then referred to as “Enneatypes”.

The development of this psycho-social theory was first published in 1947 by Ouspensky<sup>64</sup>, a student of George Gurdjieff (1866?-1949),<sup>65</sup> a Greek-Armenian mystic philosopher. Gurdjieff was interested in the occult from an early age, practising astrology, spiritism and fortune telling in the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>66</sup> In 1897 Gurdjieff brought back certain teachings from his travels in Central Asia and Egypt. The belief system he developed was an esoteric mixture of Numerology, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Buddhist, Hindu and Sufi traditions, directed at achieving raising levels of consciousness. His followers regarded him with awe; his detractors saw him as a powerful charlatan.

In his book, *In Search of the Miraculous*, Ouspensky describes his relationship with his teacher and the evolution of his psychological theories into what he termed the “Fourth Way”. Higher levels of consciousness could be achieved through study and be experienced through “sacred dances” or “Gurdjieff Movements”.<sup>67</sup> According to the Enneagram Institute, Gurdjieff made use of the symbol (Fig 1) primarily in this sacred dancing which he claimed he had learned from Sufi monks of the Sarmouni sect in Afghanistan.

Further development of this esoteric theorising came in 1954 when Oscar Ichazo, a Bolivian psychologist, identified nine ways in which the ego becomes fixated in the psyche.<sup>68</sup> This early childhood fixation process evolves into the individual’s psychological personality traits. Ichazo travelled to Asia to develop his ideas, returning to Argentina, then moving to the United States where these esoteric ideas began to be developed into an academic view of personality typology.

In 1968 Ichazo began using Gurdjieff’s ideas, (although he later denied the connection) to clarify the link between what he called the Essence of Man and his Personality or Ego, which was a ‘Distortion’ of the pure Essence. He created a system

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<sup>64</sup> P.D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: The Definitive Exploration of G.I. Gurdjieff’s Mystical Thought and Universal View*, (New York: A Harvest Book, 2001).

<sup>65</sup> George Gurdjieff, [http://www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=George\\_Gurdjieff](http://www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=George_Gurdjieff) [accessed 04.06.2010]

<sup>66</sup> Robert Innes, *Personality Indicators and the Spiritual Life*. (London: Grove Books Limited, 1996).

<sup>67</sup> Jacob Needleman, *G.I. Gurdjieff and His School*, in Jacob Needleman and George Baker, eds. *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and his Teachings*, (New York: Continuum, 1996). Source accessed via <http://r.hodges.home.comcast.net/~r.hodges/G/html/School.html> [accessed 18.07.2010]

<sup>68</sup> The Traditional Enneagram, <http://www.Enneagraminstitute.com/history.asp> [accessed 04.06.2010]

of 108 types which he termed “Enneagons”. This theorising led to the development of the “Arica School”.<sup>69</sup>

However, this did not fit well into Western psychological theory until Claudio Naranjo, an American psychiatrist, after working with Ichazo, developed the Enneagram, matching it to nine of Freud’s ten personality defence mechanisms. Once again there was controversy. Ichazo’s followers believed him when he claimed he had been given instruction by a secret Higher Entity, while his detractors regarded his teaching as a dangerous mixture of the occult and inter-faith syncretism. Various western authors including Don Riso went on to produce popular self-help texts based on the use of the Enneagram of Personality which is today the basis of many self-help manuals, spiritual awareness courses and psychological support systems.<sup>70</sup>

There is some academic research into the validity of the Enneagram typology which supports its usefulness as a study tool for personality structure.<sup>71</sup> In this research paper the authors used the Enneagram to test 390 subjects who had been trained to type themselves using the Enneagram. Two other personality inventories were administered and the results showed that the Enneagram had diagnostic and prognostic value for the study of personality types and dynamics.

My own use of the Enneagram is limited to the lists of traits attributed to the various Types. It was a useful short cut, a painting by numbers. In the following section I will describe the 9 types of one school of the Enneagram of personality and illustrate how some of them are determinants of aspects of my characters.

There are nine different types:

- 1 The Reformer
- 2 The Helper
- 3 The Achiever
- 4 The Individualist
- 5 The Investigator
- 6 The Loyalist
- 7 The Enthusiast
- 8 The Challenger
- 9 The Peacemaker

Each type may borrow features from the “wings”, that is, the numbers on either

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<sup>69</sup> Overview, The Arica School, <http://www.arica.org/overview/arica.cfm> [accessed 07.07.2009]

<sup>70</sup> Richard Don Riso and Russ Hudson, *The Wisdom of the Enneagram. The complete Guide to Psychological and Spiritual Growth for the Nine Personality Types*, (New York: Random House USA Inc, 1999). Further references to this source follow quotations in the text.

<sup>71</sup> Jerome P. Wagner and Ronald E. Walker, ‘Reliability and validity study of a Sufi personality typology: The enneagram’, *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 39, 712-717, 1983.

side. Many disciples of the movement believe that these types are present at birth. Individuals will vary within each type depending on their level of mental health. No one type is more desirable than any other. Individuals also borrow traits from the neighbouring type. Harriet may serve as an illustration.

Harriet began as a One. Ones try to gain love by being as good as possible; they suppress their anger and become frustrated; they are very industrious. These characteristics were set down and corresponding activities put alongside them. For example, Ones are active and compassionate: she volunteered to work in the Hospice shop to help others, rather than taking part in Saturday sports at school. This aided the plot, because it brought her into natural and repeated contact with characters she would not otherwise have met. Ones are often motivated by anger: this suggested to me that she would take Duncan's book to him, when she is angered by Ruby's mistake. Ones typically rein in their anger: Harriet lets Ryan swear at first, till she can bear it no longer. Ones resent reality, and hanker after a perfect world: this suggested that Harriet, translated from a prosperous life in Aberdeen, where her father worked in the oil industry before training for the ministry, cannot bear living in reduced circumstances in Hartsend. In this way, the Enneagram provided a ready-made list of integrated characteristics which I could match to each character's behaviour.

Duncan and Lesley have a threefold origin. They each borrow from an Enneagram type, Lesley as a Two: The Helper, and Duncan as a Five: The Investigator, along with a Six "wing". There is also something autobiographical in Lesley, something of who I might have been if I had not married, or if I had had to nurse a parent on my own.

In developing Lesley I also made use of conversations with friends who spoke about the frustrations of being unmarried, of being childless. When I became a grandmother, a friend who is childless asked not to be shown photographs of the baby. This vulnerability surprised me because she was someone I revered and respected for her strength, intelligence, wisdom. She was very successful in her chosen academic field. I used her vulnerability when I wanted to be inside Lesley, who never speaks of her desire to have children, but cares for the children she knows through her work at school, and is pleased when they remember her. This theme is only touched on in the novel, but while I was writing it was often present in my thoughts about her.

Duncan began as a Five, someone who is according to Don Riso and Russ Hudson 'Perceptive, Innovative, Secretive, and Isolated' (Riso and Hudson, p.208). His appearance is borrowed from life, but I gave him a different personality. Beginning with the various traits suggested by Riso and Hudson, I imagined what had made him

the person he is. Boarding school, a distant father, a dominant mother, sufficient wealth to allow him to do as he pleases, all these factors combined to prevent him from maturing or coming to grips with the modern world. He mastered computing only because it was necessary in his work. When Riso and Hudson say, 'Thus, for their own security and self-esteem, Fives need to have at least one area in which they have a degree of expertise that will allow them to feel capable and connected with the world.' (Riso and Hudson, p. 209). Duncan's knowledge of birds allowed him to be solitary and somewhat isolated, as well as confusing the trail leading to the real paedophile, who of course discusses birds and feathers with the traveller's child at their first meeting.

His mother is an example of a rather flat character, who mysteriously insisted on becoming an individual. I did not consider her worth exploring or allocate her a type when I began. She was a function rather than a person, a "thumb" holding Duncan in place. Towards the close of the book when her childhood in Burmah emerged in my imagination I began to feel sorry for her. It became clear that her Father hardly spoke to her, while Mother was too busy flirting and going to parties at the Club to pay attention to her.

In much the same way, I did not consult the Enneagram lists for Walter Robertson and his wife Ruby. They were meant to be likeable but little more than comic foils to the principal characters. However as the novel developed, they too began to change. Walter became irritating. I saw that his desire for an easy life bordered on selfishness, and that his relationship with Ruby was marred by deceit and moral cowardice. I saw that he was at the root of Ruby's unhappiness. If Walter had been a more active husband and father from the beginning of his marriage, perhaps Walter Junior would have visited instead of avoiding his mother entirely. Ruby still thinks him handsome, hence her jealousy of Lesley. Would she have welcomed more romance? An open question. Walter's lethargy extends to the marital bed. He would rather breed guppies than sons.

Ruby Robertson changed too, but stayed more two dimensional than her husband, probably because she was based on someone I find hard to forgive, a primary teacher who held my daughter up to ridicule in front of the class for going one page too far in the arithmetic workbook, with the result that the child stopped listening. Weeks later we found out about this and had to find a tutor to help her catch up. Ruby reveals more of herself as the novel continues, but she learns nothing. She refuses to see beyond the surfaces of life. She avoids reality. Routine protects her, and from her sparse noticing of life she makes assumptions which are usually wrong. She is greedy for gossip, and

becomes part of the rumour mill that damages the village. Her life will become narrower and less contented as Walter spends more and more of his time in his new shed with the guppies.

## Expert advice

The familiar advice, write about what you know, is not always helpful. Arguably it is true in so far as being able to write convincingly about what one knows emotionally, and if the novel is set in a location that can be experienced first hand, so much the better, but necessary details can be acquired from in other ways.

By speaking to an expert one can find what is needed, sometimes very quickly, provided one asks the right questions in the right way. This may involve little more than sharing the context and letting the expert into the character far enough for her to imagine what it would be like to be the character in the circumstances you have devised. To ensure that the scenes which involved the police were correct in my novel, I gave the pages to a Police Inspector, who made the necessary changes. He was particularly helpful when I found myself in difficulty writing about the finding of Dr Gordon's body. He described the order in which information would be passed on, but in further discussion he suggested that one officer should lightly touch the computer screen, so that pornography, specifically pictures of children, would appear. I trusted the reader to guess from the uniformed officer's reaction that something of this nature appeared on screen. The correct procedure would then be to stop the search at once and notify the CID. This suggestion meant that I could provide a significant clue to Gordon's secret paedophilia. A manual on police procedure would not have opened up the same possibilities as our discussions did.

When writing about Ryan's New Year outing, I asked my son for information because he is an expert on being a young man. He wrote back, and most of that chapter is taken word for word from his reply. When it became clear that Ryan needed to be rougher, I consulted him again. He described some possible characteristics from memories of individuals he had learned to avoid in his youth.

The late William F Buckley Jnr, a distinctive individual admired or loathed depending on one's political position, was once asked how he managed with technical information, since he confessed to being 'unmechanical' by nature. He admitted that he used experts. In one instance, when he was writing '*Marco Polo. If You Can*', he was introduced to a physicist named Alfred Aya, who gave him what he needed to write about nuclear bombs.

Here's the problem—there's one nuclear weapon left in Cuba, and I have to know what it looks like. I must know what is needed to fire it, what is needed to redirect it to a target other than the one prescribed for it. And twenty-four hours

later, I had a twenty-nine thousand word reply from him. Absolutely astonishing. Which made me, temporarily, one of the world's foremost authorities on how to handle a single nuclear bomb.<sup>72</sup>

Experts are much more useful than manuals for many reasons. They can preselect information, answer questions the writer has not yet thought of, and have individual voices. Experts also know when the manuals are in error.

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<sup>72</sup> William F. Buckley Jr, interviewed by Sam Vaughan, The Art of Fiction No. 146, in The Paris Review, No. 139, 1996. <http://www.parisreview.com/viewinterview.php/prmMID/1395> [accessed 16.05.2010]

## **Language and location**

One area which concerned me was how to write down the appropriate speech of the characters in my novel. I am not able to enter the dialect debate, despite being a Scottish writer. I can understand dialect words when people here in the central belt use them, but I don't use many myself and in other areas of Scotland I might be as bewildered as any non-Scottish person. In real life some of the characters would speak with far more in the way of dialect words than they do in the book, so the language of the dialogue has been simplified at certain points in the interests of comprehension. In a film or play, this could be reproduced exactly. In a novel, one risks incomprehension or distraction. The provision of footnotes brings the narrative to a halt.

Within these limits I tried to differentiate between characters. The older doctor, McKinnon and the minister are very similar in their speech, both coming from lower middle class backgrounds in the central belt of Scotland, both university educated. Harriet speaks as her father does, a standard Scottish English. She has grown up in Aberdeenshire, a place with a different dialect, one she understands but does not use. Her brother uses Doric (the dialect of the north east of Scotland) occasionally to tease her. She is conscious of sounding 'posh' when talking to Ryan. To be perfectly authentic his speech would have needed to be written phonetically, and Harriet would have found him hard to understand.

## The narrator

Having condemned Ruby to an unhappy ending, and others to a happier one, I cannot claim as I originally intended to that as a narrator I am disinterested. However I have no desire to be omniscient and I like the flexibility afforded by free indirect style. There is a writerly curiosity which needs to know more than we ever can in life. In fiction one can learn what people meant by what they said, what they left unsaid, how they felt about what they said. As Carole Shields's character Judith Gill declared, 'My own life will never be enough for me.'<sup>73</sup>

Narrative decisions are made for many different reasons, such as the need to vary the pace, to pass from something solemn to something frivolous, for example. To give relief from too much introspection by introducing action. To not lose track of characters.

The location was important in shaping the narrative. Hartsend combines the features of two particular villages where small distances involve distinct differences in social strata, and newcomers pose a threat. A newcomer is someone not born in village. The stratification of Hartsend may appear surprising to those who have little experience of Scottish village life. It is particular to these villages because they were farming communities (mostly working rented land), which were extended in the nineteenth century by the opening of coal mines and the introduction of workers from elsewhere, particularly Ireland. The descendents of these groups have mingled only to a certain extent. The narrative required, physical points where individual characters would meet and one main street where shopping was done. A river was invented to separate them. The Crawfurds, historically the wealthiest family, have a house high on the hillside surrounded by sloping fields where Clydesdale horses once grazed. Thanks to modern building techniques, this ground is now being built on to provide new housing for the incomers. Mrs Crawford in particular resents this. Class distinctions are becoming irrelevant. There is irony in the fact that as a child she picked gooseberries (an old fashioned fruit hardly grown in modern domestic gardens) while now the only children who pick berries are the Travellers' children.

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<sup>73</sup> Carol Shields, *Small Ceremonies*, (London: Fourth Estate Ltd, 1995), p. 179.

## The narrative takes over

Somewhere towards the end of the middle of my novel, the plot started to spread out like a river delta. As it began to involve more characters and more storylines, I stopped using a linear approach, that is, developing each character on a separate plot line, and began to use a working method adapted from the Mindmap, invented or reinvented by Tony Buzan.<sup>74</sup> One begins with a large piece of paper, in my case a table-sized piece of wallpaper, with each of the main characters in a different, separate place. Coloured lines curved from each to whomever they must encounter. Along the lines details were added, reminding one of the problem or the desired outcome, or the basic emotion. Sometimes there were multiple lines to a certain character. It became a simple way of trying out possibilities.

Asked about his approach to writing, Michael Ondaattje commented, ‘Some writers know what the last sentence is going to be before they begin—I don’t even know what the second sentence is going to be.’<sup>75</sup>

I knew from the beginning of the story that my paedophile, Dr Gordon, would be dead by the end, but not how or when he would die. I knew that the boy’s father would be mistaken for the villain. I knew that the child would die. Most of the rest of the plot I didn’t know. If I am asked why the travellers’ child had to die, I admit that the irony of the situation appealed to me. Her death by drowning is accidental, and not directly the fault of the paedophile. The child swallows the ring, the twins tell the mother that she let a ‘bad man’ touch her; the father yells at the child. She runs away to find the man who had been nice to her. The golf course is a favourite place of hers. In the darkness she trips, falls and drowns, something one can easily do in an inch and a half of water. Her death leads to anger in the village. The book closes with that anger becoming directed towards the parents.

There are a few taboos left in our society. Of these bestiality, cannibalism and paedophilia make sensationalist headlines. Although this novel is not about paedophilia, there is at its heart a character who happens to be a paedophile. I deliberately avoided portraying his interactions with the child nor did I wish to be inside his head. When I was writing about him, the need to be as objective as possible

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<sup>74</sup>Tony Buzan, *Use Your Head*, (Harlow: BBC Active, 2009), p. 96.

<sup>75</sup>Alexandra Alter, ‘How to write a great novel’, *The Wall Street Journal*, Nov 13, 2009, [http://online.wsj.com/article/NA\\_WSJ\\_PUB:SB10001424052748703740004574513463106012106.html](http://online.wsj.com/article/NA_WSJ_PUB:SB10001424052748703740004574513463106012106.html) [accessed 23/07/2010]

was paramount. The simple device of italicising his thoughts and keeping them apart from the rest of the action made it possible to keep his identity concealed.

If I was confronted by someone who had harmed a child I would not be objective at all. Whenever he was the focus, I made an effort to keep the narrator/narrative voice separate from myself and dispassionate. Indeed one of my continuing concerns is that I have not been fierce enough in dealing with paedophilia in the novel.

Debate about cause and cure of the psychopathy still flourishes in scientific journals, although opinion has changed greatly over the last 30 or so years, to the extent that some psychotherapists believe the behaviour of paedophiles might one day be controllable, akin to the way that alcoholism is controlled. However, public opinion is regularly typified by those who in *The Herald* in February 2010<sup>76</sup> reportedly wanted to brand paedophiles so everyone knew what they were. The announcement by the Home Office that the scheme known as Sarah's Law, which allows parents to check whether someone has a history of child sex offences, will be extended to the whole of England and Wales in 2011, has met with mixed responses from parents, the NSPCC, and the Association of Chief Police Officers in England and Wales.<sup>77</sup>

Two books, *The Mind of the Paedophile: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*,<sup>78</sup> and *The Personality of a Child Molester*<sup>79</sup> were particularly helpful to me. In the first book, a collection of different papers on the mind of the paedophile, psychologists give details of case histories. From these I found aspects of the behaviour of my particular character. Some seemed appropriate, while others did not. The second book provided examples of dreams experienced by one convicted child molester. Bell and Hall analyse these dreams, but for my purpose these analyses were not important.

From my research, it appeared feasible that I could depict Dr Gordon as a man trying not to be what he is. He has a genuinely charming and attractive side. According to Gunter Schmidt,

Many are considerate in their behavior toward children; others use force... a group whose number is unknown but which may actually include a large proportion of pedophiles, remain abstinent for extended periods of time, many even throughout their lifetimes, expressing their desires in fantasy and leading a life of self-denial at a significant emotional cost.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>Herald Scotland, Monday 8 February 2010, *Family call for "branding" of paedophiles*, <http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/crime-courts/family-call-for-branding-of-paedophiles-1.1004237> [accessed 10.02.2010]

<sup>77</sup>Alastair Jamieson, 'Sarah's Law could lead to vigilante attacks.' *The Telegraph*, 02 August, 2010.

<sup>78</sup>Charles W. Socarides and Loretta R. Loeb, *The Mind of the Paedophile: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, (London: H. Karnak Books Ltd, 2004).

<sup>79</sup>Alan P. Bell and Calvin S. Hall, *The Personality of a Child Molester*, (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton Inc., 1971).

<sup>80</sup>Gunter Schmidt, *The Dilemma of the Male Pedophile*, *Archive of Sexual Behaviour*, Volume 31 No 6 December 2002, pp. 473-477.

I saw Dr Gordon as a man who became a doctor to help others while attempting to find some kind of cure for his own psychopathy.

There are several hints in the text which might lead the reader to suspect him. Whether they were sufficient is for the reader to judge. One clue is that much of his life is hidden. We are never inside his home until after the child is dead, whereas we see all the other major characters in their home settings. Second, he is the only newcomer. Third, his attempt at marriage failed and we are not told why. Fourthly, although when he is on duty he saves a child, he does not like to be in the swimming pool with children. Finally, he warns the Reverend that he is a play actor, a final irony, as one might expect the minister/priest to have been more observant.

William Trevor, a master of the art of observation, considers the tragic consequences of paedophilia in his novel, *Death in Summer*.<sup>81</sup> His maltreated character Pettie is, ‘...small, just into her twenties but seeming younger, seeming to be hardly passed out of her childhood’. (Trevor, p. 28). She abducts the baby of widowed Thaddeus Davenant to show him that his mother in law is not a reliable carer for the child. The baby is eventually found, but Pettie dies. Trevor unsettles the reader by his characterisation of Pettie, who is a regular thief, a smoker, a liar, but at the same time a girl who is desperate for affection, having been abused for years in a children’s home, named with dreadful irony, the Morning Star. At the close of the novel, Thaddeus has to face his failings. ‘...he knew (that Pettie was attracted to him) and didn’t want to know, darkening a truth that came from outside his life, hurrying on, away from it.’ (Trevor, p. 208). Pettie’s only friend Albert explains to Thaddeus what Pettie’s childhood was like. The normally unfeeling Thaddeus, also unloved in childhood, tries to imagine the Home, wondering if offices or a supermarket might be built on the now derelict site. ‘Will checkout chatter silence the fearful whispering in grubby hideaways, the soft enticements? Has defilement left no trace?’ (Trevor, p. 211). He was unable to love his wife, embarrassed and ashamed of his affair with Mrs Ferry. When he considers Pettie, he experiences genuine emotion for the first time. ‘Tonight he pities and is angry.’ (Trevor, p. 212).

Trevor has written many stories where parents or substitute parents neglect children. One of the most angry is *O Fat White Woman*<sup>82</sup> where Wragget, a child at boarding school, dies (possibly of meningitis) while the Headmaster’s wife eats All

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<sup>81</sup>William Trevor, *Death in Summer*, (London: Penguin Books, 1998). Further references to this source appear after quotations in the text.

<sup>82</sup>William Trevor, ‘O Fat White Woman’ in *The Collected Stories*, (London: Penguin Books, 1993).

Gold chocolates. The school is a place of physical maltreatment, the masters are sadists.

Their punishment is mild compared to that meted out in *Miss Smith*<sup>83</sup> in which a young school teacher ridicules a young boy named James. In this horrifying tale James takes revenge by murdering the baby of his teacher Miss Smith.

Part of the power of Trevor's 'anger tales' comes from the quietness of his style, and part from leaving horrors undescribed. This is not at all easy to do. Perhaps it can be compared to the performance of a singer who after years of practise gives the impression that he never pauses to breathe.

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<sup>83</sup>William Trevor, 'Miss Smith' in *The Collected Stories*, (London: Penguin Books, 1993).

## Tradition and the tortoise

According to Carol Shields,

All of us in recent years have been inhaling the pollen of contemporary literary theory. It tends to alter our thinking about which stories are admissible to our culture; it catches in the throat, and the layers of the brain where the drifted texts and discourses and deliberate misreadings and discontinuities are privileged over the linear, the didactic, the epiphanic.<sup>84</sup>

The tradition of what Shields calls “the linear, the didactic, the epiphanic” is the one I grew up with. Apart from the quality of her fiction, what attracted me to Shields was her argument that this old realism, as she termed it, was not real enough. It restricted itself by adherence to genres, and large themes. Characters were, according to Shields, seldom allowed to be ordinary or banal, or to react to what was ordinary and banal in their lives. There was too much stress on the individual isolated from the rest of the world, and no sense of our connectedness with one another.

She may have been rather overstating the case. Many writers past and present choose to begin with ordinary and banal characters who are then transformed by the writing. Austen’s people are extremely ordinary to begin with. A synopsis of any of her novels might risk dismissal by today’s literary agents. As to a lack of connectedness with one another, any novel by Charles Dickens demonstrates an immense degree of connectedness, constructed with extreme care so as not to appear incredible. However, Carol Shields’s fiction with its concentration on domestic lives and relationships, appealed greatly to me when I was looking for role models, partly because the domestic world was the one with which I was most familiar, and partly because the intricacies of human nature have always intrigued me.

Shields also argued that postmodernism made a new freedom and a greater realism possible. I have not yet attempted the kind of narrative play or experimentation that she used, but I wanted to attempt the kind of realism she suggested. ‘Try and catch the colour of life itself’, was the advice of Henry James.<sup>85</sup> He acknowledged the difficulty involved, the ‘despair’ and ‘torment’ which balance ‘inspiration’, ‘reward’ and ‘delight.’ Carol Shields wrote rather more pessimistically, that words would always

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<sup>84</sup>Carol Shields, ‘Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard’ in *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction*, ed. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 28. Further references to this source appear after the quotation in the text.

<sup>85</sup>Henry James, *The Art of Fiction*, Longmans Magazine, no. 4, September, 1884.

fail in this attempt. Language, she said, ‘plods behind [reality], a rational or irrational tortoise.’ (Shields, p. 23).

Shields continued to write, to make the attempt at catching life that Henry James advocated, in part because she wanted to write the kind of book she wanted to read, and because she was ‘compelled and comforted, too, by the idea of the transcendental moment, that each of us is allotted a few random instances in which we are able to glimpse a kind of pattern in the universe.’ She added, ‘All my books, I think, even the early books of poetry, try to isolate and examine those odd, inexplicable moments.’<sup>86</sup>

Edward Eden maintains that ‘Shields places a high priority on the interior life, especially the subtleties of how language both separates and unites people in their everyday experience.’<sup>87</sup> He places her in a tradition that follows Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot and Henry James, and in contemporary American fiction includes Anne Tyler, Alice Munro and John Updike.

I am fascinated by how language separates us. We utter words which seem to us clear and intelligible, but which, as if by some invisible process in the air between us and the listener become opaque, twisted and ambiguous. In Shields’s *Larry’s Party* the two main characters, Larry and Dorrie divorce then come together several years later towards the end of the novel. Larry asks her if their first marriage failed because they could not communicate their feelings. Dorrie was poorly educated, and Larry felt superior because of his ‘college words’<sup>88</sup>. Larry speaks first:

“Was that our problem? That we didn’t know enough words?”

“Or what we were allowed to say.”

“We could have said anything. We should have learned.”

“Learning to talk can be taken two ways. There are the words themselves and - ”

“ - and what’s behind the words.” (Shields, p. 336).

Shields illustrates their newfound understanding by having them complete one another’s sentences/thoughts here and once in another paragraph as the chapter ends.

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<sup>86</sup>Harvey de Roo, *A Little like Flying*, West Coast Review, 1988, 23, 3 pp. 38-56 (p. 46).

<sup>87</sup>Edward Eden, *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction*, eds. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 10. Further references to this source appear after the quotation in the text.

<sup>88</sup>Carol Shields, *Larry’s Party*, (London: First Estate, 1998) p. 10. Further references to this source appear after the quotation in the text.

*The world of dew - -  
A world of dew it is indeed,  
And yet, and yet...*<sup>89</sup>

Great claims are sometimes made for the writer's place and purpose. According to Edward Eden,

...the reader suffers an incompleteness that can only be fulfilled by ingesting a narrative... The writer's responsibility...is to help readers realize their incomplete selves, to help them to relate to a world that is incomprehensible, alienating, exhilarating and strange. (Eden, p. 7).

Once upon a time perhaps all that was required of narrative was that it should hold and entertain the listeners round the fire. Gradually the insistence grew that it hold up a mirror that would come as close as possible to reality. Eventually authoritative voices began to declare that realistic fiction was impossible because essentially there was no longer a cave or a fire to sit around. The listeners were left with nothing but the beat of their own hearts, that sound Kundera hated because it reminded him that the minutes of his life were numbered. (Kundera, p.150).

Can literature be the cure for incompleteness? If so, the responsibility of the writer is far more weighty than in centuries previous to our own, when life was considered strange but not completely irrational, or further back when the Mediaeval world view offered a synthesized meaningful image of the universe and humankind's place in it.

Has there ever been a period in the history of the western world when more concern has been devoted to self-examination than ours? The quest for self knowledge may be traced back to St Augustine of Hippo who believed that the pursuit of God required as its beginning an inward inquiry. The monastic tradition adopted and sustained this belief. Protestantism signalled its continuation when Calvin declared that there could be no knowledge of God without a knowledge of self. Faith in the natural self birthed Montaigne's secular journey, prefiguring Jung and the Self with a capital S, and modern humanistic psychology. Literature's focus on the inexplicability of the human personality may indeed make it a serious option for those in search of completion, and a comprehensible universe. Nadine Gordimer certainly seemed to think so. She declared, in her Nobel Prize Lecture of 1991, 'Any writer of any worth at

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<sup>89</sup> Issa Kobayashi, *A World of Dew*, Penguin Book of Japanese Verse, (London: Penguin Classic, 2009), p. 115. As a Buddhist, Kobayashi was committed to belief in *dukkha*, impermanence, but this brought little comfort when his first two children died.

all hopes to play only a pocket-torch of light - and rarely, through genius, a sudden flambeau - into the bloody yet beautiful labyrinth of human experience, of being.<sup>90</sup>

In a similar vein, she said, ‘...what a writer does is to try to make sense of life. I think that’s what writing is, I think that’s what painting is. It’s seeking that thread of order and logic in the disorder, and the incredible waste and marvellous profligate character of life.’<sup>91</sup>

In her Nobel Lecture she spoke of ontogenesis, relating the beginning of writing to the beginning of the world. For her, writers have a grand purpose, to try to understand, to explore and interpret the world through the word as, in the same way, the first story tellers ‘began to feel out and formulate these mysteries, using the elements of daily life.’ She held that while a few parts of the world retained the old myths, the rest, the so-called “international mega-culture” countries had created new myths in comic book and movie escapism. These are successful, she said, because they distract those of us who prefer not to think about why we exist. Possibly they also reassure us that if the unspeakable happens, be it drought, famine, flood, fire, invasion from outer space or whatever apocalyptic event, human beings will still go forth and multiply.

Other writers respond on a more personal level. Russell Hoban, creator of *The Mouse and His Child*, and *Riddley Walker* spoke thus of his writing, ‘I find myself wondering what it is that looks out through my eyeholes, and I really don’t know. And it’s this strangeness that I’m always pursuing in my writing and it’s this sorrow in each of us that I’m trying to get to, and depict as accurately as I can.’<sup>92</sup>

For Hoban, the strangeness of life results in sorrow. Hartsend originated in a personal desire to consider how individuals recover from the sorrow of maltreatment and how one may find ‘a true way out’, to adopt the phrase used by Isaac Bashevis Singer when referring to a far greater maltreatment, the ‘worst blows that human madness can inflict’.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>Nadine Gordimer, [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1991/gordimer-lecture.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1991/gordimer-lecture.html) [accessed 13.04.2010]

<sup>91</sup>Nadine Gordimer interviewed by Jannika Hurwitt, *The Art of Fiction no 77* in *The Paris Review*, 88, 1983, p. 19.

<sup>92</sup>Tom Martin, ‘Russell Hoban: Odd, and getting odder’, *The Independent*, January 22, 2006.

<sup>93</sup>‘As the son of a people who received the worst blows that human madness can inflict, I must brood about the forthcoming dangers. I have many times resigned myself to never finding a true way out. But a new hope always emerges telling me that it is not yet too late for all of us to take stock and make a decision. I was brought up to believe in free will. Although I came to doubt all revelation, I can never accept the idea that the Universe is a physical or chemical accident, a result of blind evolution.’ Isaac Bashevis Singer, [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1978/singer-lecture.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1978/singer-lecture.html) [accessed 13.04.2010]

Singer was of course referring to the Holocaust, the attempted destruction of an entire people. Scale too often dulls one's sense of individuality, and the righteous accusation of dullness is too often indignantly refuted.

Talking about his own field of study, historian Richard J Evans said,

...just because we can never attain the whole or absolute truth, just because we make mistakes in our search for truth about the past, just because there will always be something new to say about any historical subject, it does not follow that there is no such thing as truth at all.<sup>94</sup>

We can never wholly understand the mystery of personality, we make mistakes in our search and there is always something new, but it is not unreasonable to believe that individuals exist and must be regarded with respect. Borrowing his title from the last line of Hardy's *Oxen*<sup>95</sup>, in the poem *Hoping It Might Be So*, Kit Wright brings together the maltreated individual, the murdered race, and 'everything horrible ever'.

There must be a place where the whole of it all comes right,  
Where the little boy buggered and strangled in the wood  
Is comforted by his parents and comforts his parents,  
And everything horrible ever is understood

I say;

For at least six million reasons or else no light  
*No light in the day.*<sup>96</sup>

Can we assume that Wright is positioning himself as a spiritual descendant of Hardy? Certainly Wright is not able to locate his intense longing for justice, for everything to be put right, under the heading of 'belief,' but only under 'hope,' despite his conviction at the close of the poem that life cannot exist/should not exist unless there is not merely an explanation but restitution and redemption.

'The mind,' according to Seamus Heaney 'still longs to repose in what Samuel Johnson once called with superb confidence "the stability of truth", even as it recognizes the destabilizing nature of its own operations and enquiries.'<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, (London: Granta Books, 2000), p. 312.

<sup>95</sup> Thomas Hardy, 'The Oxen', in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2006). p. 428.

<sup>96</sup> Kit Wright, 'Hoping It Might Be So', in *Staying Alive, real poems for unreal times*, ed Neil Astley, (Tarsset, Bloodaxe Books Ltd., 2002) p. 104.

<sup>97</sup> Seamus Heaney, [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1995/heaney-lecture.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1995/heaney-lecture.html) [accessed 25.04.2010]

I admit to that longing. I have already stated my faith in the uniqueness of the individual, and again must disagree with Milan Kundera whose opinion was that ‘All rectification (both vengeance and forgiveness) will be taken over by oblivion. No one will rectify wrongs; all wrongs will be forgotten.’<sup>98</sup> Although the paedophile in Hartsend is neither forgiven nor punished within the novel, unless his suicide be regarded as punishment, in creating him it was not my intention to portray wrongs that would be forgotten but merely to make an attempt to understand them.

In his Nobel Lecture forty years ago Solzhenitsyn references art as Art, an entity independent of man.

So also we, holding Art in our hands, confidently consider ourselves to be its masters; boldly we direct it, we renew, reform and manifest it; we sell it for money, use it to please those in power; turn to it at one moment for amusement - right down to popular songs and night-clubs, and at another - grabbing the nearest weapon, cork or cudgel - for the passing needs of politics and for narrow-minded social ends.<sup>99</sup>

Where Gordimer speaks of the artist as one who provides a pocket torch or through genius a flambeau, Solzhenitsyn declares that Art itself possesses a ‘secret inner light’, the whole of which is beyond human grasp. He conjectures thus,

Perhaps once upon a time someone understood and told us, but we could not remain satisfied with that for long; we listened, and neglected, and threw it out there and then, hurrying as always to exchange even the very best - if only for something new! And when we are told again the old truth, we shall not even remember that we once possessed it.<sup>100</sup>

Perhaps my own journey would have been more straightforward if I had believed in the light he describes, but I am as yet not able to commit to any great claims for Art in general and literature in particular as the last and best answer to humankind’s sense of incompleteness.

In the BBC interview with Tusa, William Trevor said, ‘I just tell stories and, and hope for the best’. Perhaps with his customary modesty, he was deliberately minimising his philosophy of writing. Even coming from a writer of his stature, ‘the

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<sup>98</sup> Mark Weeks, ‘Milan Kundera; A Modern History of Humor Amid the Comedy of History’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 28, No.3, 2005, pp.130-148, p. 138.

<sup>99</sup> Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1970/solzhenitsyn-lecture.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1970/solzhenitsyn-lecture.html) [accessed 25.04.2010]

<sup>100</sup> *ibid*

most astute observer of the human condition currently writing in fiction.’<sup>101</sup> his statement may be regarded as inadequate. Nevertheless, I am more than ready, as he is my most respected teacher, to adopt it as a description of my own condition.

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<sup>101</sup> Tim Adams, ‘William Trevor: the keen eyed chronicler’  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2009/aug/02/tim-adams-william-trevor> [accessed 24.08.2010]

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