Once Upon a Time:

How Stories Start, Narrative Theory and Practice

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1. Introduction

This study explores beginnings in fictional narratives, defining beginnings as the first words, sentences and paragraphs on the page. The specific focus is on the challenges and opportunities a writer faces when starting a story. The study is in two parts – theory and practice. The theory is examined through a review of the history of, and critical approaches to, openings across the centuries, the conventions that were developed then subverted or discarded. Based on this analysis, the options facing the author who is beginning to write a story are identified, and an approach to assessing these options, in the context of the author's intentions for the story's impact and the narrative arc, is developed. This framework is applied through an analysis of a range of short stories written in English since the beginning of the twentieth century. The practice is represented by a collection of short stories that have been created to demonstrate the range of choices available, and how these can be used in different types and length of short fiction. The short story form has been under-represented in previous critical studies. The thesis contributes to the field of literary studies and Creative Writing by studying the theory, as well as the craft and technique of beginnings in short stories. As practice-led research[1], the thesis adapts and converts the functional and typological narratological model of beginnings (del Lungo and Hescher) to a series of three questions to be applied in the initial creative act. The content and processes in my own creative practice, the short story collection, are informed by and experiment with these questions. Because the objective has been to concentrate on beginnings in short story, it has not been possible, within the scope of the exegesis, to explore the theory of short story writing. Equally, there has been space for only limited commentary on the influences past, current and emerging practice has had on my own collection.

Beginnings are vital, for the writer, being the process of moving the narrative forward - what Phelan calls the 'textual dynamics' – and also for the reader, as the initiation into the fictional world and the characters and action within it, which Phelan describes as the 'readerly dynamic'[2] . Yet there is little critical or literary theory around beginnings. After Horace had laid down a requirement to start in the middle, there seemed to be no more to be said.[3] The formula of appealing to the muse to support the artistic effort involved in bringing forth the tale gradually gave way to attempts to give the story verisimilitude; to the omniscient narrator leading the reader by the hand and telling her all she needed to know; to ways of involving the reader in the text. Consistency only exists for fairy stories, myths and legends traditionally introduced with the words that form the title of this study – 'once upon in time'. Although these narrative forms are traditionally short, the distinction between beginnings of shorter, as opposed to longer, pieces of prose has not been a focus for critical study. The shorter form is the basis on which beginnings are explored here because of the opportunity they afford to understand the practice part of the submission. A novel can have only one beginning (if beginnings are defined as the first paragraphs of the narrative). A short story collection provides multiple examples; a short story cycle, though these could be linked to form a novel, has individual

[1] R. Lyle Skains, 'Creative Practice as Research: Discourse on Methodology' in *Media Practice and Education,* 19.1 (2018), 82-97

[2] James Phelan, 'The Beginning of *Beloved*: A Rhetorical Approach' in *Narrative Beginnings, Theories and Practices,* ed. Brian Richardson, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 2008), 195-212 (p195).

[3] Horace, 'On the Art of Poetry' in *Classical Literary Criticism* trans. T. S. Dorsch (Baltimore: Penguin, 1965), 80-95 (p. 84).

beginnings and endings. The ways in which the short form differs from the novel, in terms of the significance of the first words, is not the primary focus but is explored in the course of this study.

Writers today, then, have a history to call upon, traditions to use or adapt. There is little option but to start in the middle because after *Genesis*, there is no scope to trace back to the beginning; every beginning has another behind it and the first origins of the characters or events to be described can never be recovered. Unless the author has it in mind to signal to the reader that this is a fairy story, or an epic, or to assume knowledge of these forms on the part of the reader and use this to add a layer of meaning to the text, then the decision on where to start means selecting the way in which the reader will be invited to enter the fictional world the author is creating.

The study concludes that there are three distinct but inter-related ways in which the beginning can influence the way the story is told and read and the writer needs to make a decision on how to approach of these. Firstly, the tone, the voice, the language and syntax, in short the narrative communication (Phelan), can be summed up as the 'codifying function'; that is, the implicit ways in which the reader will perceive what sort of story this is. Secondly, with the first words, the text supplies information; this information could be about the time, the place, the people, what is happening or what this is about, or a combination of these things. This can be described as the 'interest-bearing' function. The third element is the balance between the amount of action and the amount of information, between plunging into what is going on and providing background on one or more of the categories of information about the story world. This is a question of pace and tone. Whatever decisions are made on these three points, they must be in harmony with each other. They must also be coherent with the text as a whole. Such critical analysis as there is, around openings, cannot divorce itself from a consideration of the rest of the text; it is the context within which the beginning has to fit. For the writer, though, the first lines remain critical and have to be carefully chosen against her objectives for the piece of writing. Afterwards, they can be seen to be working with and for the text; first, they have to be chosen, considered and written down. To be informed by functional and typological models of beginnings (or to be precise, incipits) derived from narratology is useful .[4]

2. In the Beginning was the Word

In this section I consider the words that are used with relation to the first words of a text, with the intention of exploring the philosophical aspects of beginning, and to bring clarity to the purpose of the study.

There are a number of words I could (and will) use to describe the topic I am addressing in this thesis, all of them relating to the first lines of text - opening, beginning, starting, the first, the origin of, the original. These words and phrases can be interchangeable; in the context of a sentence, it will not necessarily make any difference to the reader's interpretation of that sentence whether it talks about 'when I began' or 'started' or 'opened' or 'when I first' or 'originally'. They do, however, have different connotations, a distinctive flavour if considered as separate terms, and by examining each, it is possible to narrow down and express the primary concerns of this study; to isolate what it is not about and therefore to bring clarity to its purpose. Not included in the list above are words

[4] [4] Paul McDonald, *Storytelling: Narratology for Critics and Creative Writers, (*London: Greenwich Exchange, 2014).

associated with exposition, with setting the scene. This can take place across chapters, in a novel, and even in a short story, information crucial to the sense of the narrative can be delayed for several pages. How the exposition is handled is part of the structure of the narrative; what to put first, on the page, is a separate decision.

I will begin by looking at the word 'origin' and its adjectival derivation 'original', as the word that is most problematic, and which has the greatest level of nuance. These are words which suggest something both true and at the same time, impossible. Everything – an idea, a story, a person, a style – has an origin. Nothing, therefore, is truly original. In which case it is never in fact possible to trace back to the origin of whatever is being studied because however far back the exploration goes, wherever it finishes will not be the beginning, but will have within it the seeds of some other 'original' act, thought, production, culture.

> The paradox of beginning is that one must have something solidly present and pre-existent, some generative source or authority, on which the development of a new story may be based. That antecedent foundation needs in its turn some prior foundation, in an infinite regress. [5]

This is a dichotomy beyond the scope of this study but it is relevant. It encapsulates precisely the problems which face the writer beginning to write. On the one hand, how can she unclasp herself from the influence of every writer who has gone before, and write something truly original? Even if the new piece of writing to be started is in direct response to something written in the past, how best to acknowledge that connection without creating a poor copy or a parody? On the other hand, whatever she writes down now, as the first words, sentences, paragraphs, pages will be the first time these words have been used in this order, formed into these sentences, these paragraphs. In other words, this piece of written work is original. It has never been written before. So the writer poised to start, which is exactly the focus of my analysis, can at once be burdened or buoyed up by an understanding that whatever story she is going to tell, and however she is going to tell it, cannot be original; and at the same time burdened with the knowledge that this is the first and only way she will have to tell the story. Once it is written, it is fixed, cannot be re-written, and is therefore, the original.

The word 'origin', in the context of beginning to write, can also be applied to another aspect of beginning, that is: the origin of the idea. This is something every writer struggles to articulate. Stephen King believes 'stories are found things, like fossils in the ground….relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world'. [6] Philip Pullman says he has to 'start with pictures, images, scenes, moods – like bits of dream or half-forgotten films.' [7] Both these ways of describing the inspiration for starting to write a particular story acknowledge that the beginning of the story, in the sense of the origin, grows out of what has gone before, but in a way that is impossible to track. In Section 9, the commentary on the short story collection that experiments and explores the ideas in this thesis creatively, I will, where relevant, cover the stimulus for the idea that triggered them, but this is not the main focus of this study. Where the idea came from is always a tangle, and even when articulated after the event, by the author, it will be a mediated truth; a story about how the story came about.

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[5] J Hillis Miller, *Reading Narrative* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), p.57.
[6] Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2000), p.188.
[7] Philip Pullman, *Daemon Voices: Essays on Storytelling* (Oxford: David Fickling Books, 2017), p.35.

'Beginning', which has the advantage of being both a verb and a noun, is the word most commonly used to define the subject of study, when it concerns the creation of texts. Flavio Gregori draws the distinction between this word and the concept of 'origin', in his study of *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767)*:*

> ..all beginnings can be beginnings, which self-validate in so far as they begin something. In this sense, one should distinguish the idea of beginning from the idea of the *origin.*[8]

Two definitions of beginnings point up the difference between what the writer is concerned with and what the reader encounters. David Lodge describes the beginning of a novel as '…a threshold separating the real world we inhabit from the world the novelist has imagined.'[9] This is the reader's experience. He is stepping out of reality into a fictional world which he must both believe in and know to be artificial. Opening the door does not reveal the landscape, the people who live in it, the time of day, the time in history or what is going on, all at a single glance. In fact the analogy of a threshold is inadequate in that it implies a physical space for the reader to enter, when what the novelist is creating is an internal as well as an external version of reality. But nevertheless this analogy is helpful, in deciding how best to prepare the path, the doorway, the hall to give the reader an impression which pulls off this trick of making the created world seem real, however fantastical it may be, while also revealing or implying something that will turn out to be relevant to his subsequent experience of this world.

In contrast, J. Hillis Miller describes the beginning as 'the mothering spider from whose belly the thread is spun'. [10] This is the part of the writer, taking the beginning in all its various definitions and applying it to all aspects of a story, and weaving these together into something which has a definite start, a place where all of the decisions have resulted in a particular pattern. In some of the stories in the collection, I have been most concerned to experiment with how the reader encounters the world he is entering; more often I am working on the best place to start, to create the story I want to tell. Edward Said describes this well: 'To begin to write is to work a set of instruments, to invent a field of play for them to enable performance.'[11] He also points out, which may be self-evident but which neatly sums up the paradox of a beginning as a starting point but also a point on a continuum: 'In retrospect we can regard a beginning as the point at which, in a given work, the writer departs from all other works.'[12]

Peter Childs separates the idea of 'opening' from that of 'beginning'. Opening, according to Childs, applies to the first printed lines. The 'linear arrangement of the text insists upon this'.[13] The beginning of the actual story, he argues, is harder to pinpoint. The first words written will rarely be the first words the reader encounters, when the book is finished; the characters and situation will have had their beginning before the book opens, the book will have begun with an idea ('the genesis, so to speak') which will be a long way back and hard to recover, at the point the book is finished. He concludes that we can begin only once, but open many times, which is true, of a book

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[8] Flavio Gregori, 'Homunculus Ab Ovo: Beginning As Continuity and Discontinuity in *"Tristram Shandy."*', *Études Anglaises,* 66 (2), (2013), 214–233 (p.221).
[9] David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Vintage, 2011), p.5.
[10] J. Hillis Miller, p.58.
[11] Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p.24.
[12] Edward W. Said, p.3.
[13] Peter Childs, *Reading Fiction: Opening the Text* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.1.

encountered as a reader – and Childs's book is aimed at the reader. It can be opened again and again, but beginning to read it for the first time, is an unrepeatable act.

This journey round the subtleties of the words used leads Childs to conclude, and indeed include in the title of his book, that what a reader is doing is 'opening the text'. As this study is principally about how the story is told, using Childs's definitions it is therefore about beginning rather than opening. Specifically, how the writer starts the story; that is, at a point before the text is opened by its first readers. However, the writer can only make decisions about where to begin by reflecting on the impact, on the reader who opens the book, of reading these first words or pages. It is therefore impossible for a writer to isolate how she chooses to start the story from the impact on the reader of the way it begins.

The term 'incipit' is used by critics involved in a close analysis of the text that occurs at the start of a story (which is not necessarily the start of the work). Historically, this is a term applied to the opening words of a text or bars of a musical composition which act as an identifier, a label placing the work within a tradition. In his essay, 'Je n'ai jamais appris à écrire, ou les incipits', Louis Aragon uses the word to describe the writer's inability to decide where to start, never knowing in advance where the story will take him, all to be propelled by a first word.[14] The author is grappling with the beginning, but in relation to where the story is going to lead, rather than in terms of a choice of where first to enter it. Mazzoni describes Italo Calvino's novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979) as a 'structure formed of by an assemblage of ten *incipits';* it is 'an ingenious exploitation of conventions and potentiality', although used by the author, in this case, ironically, for 'as soon as the linguistic ambiguity of the story comes into play in the text the cards are reflexively reshuffled'[15]. Incipit is the word Hescher uses to describe a 'communicative approach', based on a study by del Lungo.[16] This typology is useful as a tool for analysis of a work already written, and I will be using this term, in this context.

The verb that is little used but which defines what I want to study most exactly, is to start. As I start to write, I start to tell a story, and both acts are significant in realising my intentions for the piece of writing and in producing the effect on the reader that I am aiming to achieve.

3. The History of Beginnings

This section explores what the earliest writers on writing said about beginnings, and how this reflects in early creative writing, that is, the epic poem before prose became the dominant mode of story-telling. It is not intended to be a comprehensive review; a narrow selection of poetic work has been chosen to illustrate the key relevant points. The early writers say very little on the subject of beginnings, and yet they cast a long shadow. Aristotle praises Homer for not attempting to cover

[14] Louis Aragon, quoted in Steven G. Kellman, 'Grand Openings and Plain: The Poetics of First lines', *Sub-Stance,* 17, (1977), 139-147 (p.139).

[15] Cristina Mazzoni, '(Re)constructing the Incipit: Narrative Beginnings in Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* and Freud's *Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis, Comparative Literature Studies,* 30 (1) (1993), 53-67

[16] Achim Hescher, 'A Typology for Teaching Novel Incipits', *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 34 (1) (2009), 103–124.

everything from the beginning to the end.[17] But Horace laid down the choice, between starting *in media res*, in the middle of things, or *ab ovo,* as a recognisable starting point.

> He [who makes no foolish undertakings] does not trace Diomede's return right back to the death of Meleager, or the Trojan War to the twin eggs of Leda. All the time he is hurrying on to the crisis, and he plunges his hearer into the middle of the story as if it were already familiar to him.[18]

There is a law laid down here: good authors start in the middle, bad ones go further back than the story momentum requires. It echoes down the ages. 'After Virgil….it became increasingly difficult for a literary work to 'sound professional' if it did not begin *in media res.'*[19] Horace's other advice was not to 'begin impressively' because it is unlikely the final work will justify the start: 'And you must not, like the cyclic poet of old, begin: 'Of Priam's fate I'll sing and war's renown'. What will emerge that can live up to such extravagant promises?'[20]

The influence of Virgil, Aristotle and Horace is plain to see in early poetic works, though also the personal aims, in his own historic context, of the poet. *The Divine Comedy (*1472) has what Nuttall describes as 'the greatest of all *in medias res* openings', and 'the canonical interventionist opening'.[21]

> In the midway of this our mortal life,
> I found me in a gloomy wood, astray
> Gone from the path direct.[22]

The poet is stating at once that he is starting in the middle; he is grappling with the forces of nature to bring forth his poem as the ancients grappled with the muse. But Dante is also signalling, in his first lines, his intention. This will be about Everyman ('our mortal life') with the poet/narrator as a guide through the allegorical wood.

Chaucer, writing from a different background with a different audience in mind, aiming to entertain as well as instruct, started his first major work in the middle, but in the middle of 'an informal, gossiping monologue', which he calls, as a classical poet might, a Proem.[23] The narrator tells stories from classical literature, but in a distinctive voice that is vernacular, not noble:

> I have gret wonder, be this lighte,
> How that I live, for day ne nighte
> I may nat slepe wel nigh noght,
> I have so many an ydel thought[24]

When the Proem ends and the account of the Dream begins, she is not in a forest or otherwise beset about by nature, but in bed, 'al naked'.

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[17] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. John Warrington (London: Dent, 1963), p.42.
[18] Horace, p. 84.
[19] A.D. Nuttall, *Narrative Beginnings from the Epic to the Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press,1992), p. 30.
[20] Horace, p.84
[21] A.D. Nuttall, p.17.
[22] Dante Aligheri, *The Divine Comedy,* trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin, 2012), p.4.
[23] A.D. Nuttall, p.60.
[24] Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Book of the Duchesse' in *Chaucer Complete Works,* ed. Walter W. Skeat (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.83.

In *Paradise Lost,* Milton is describing an end and a beginning: the loss of paradise, the start of the world of mortality. As Dante had 'midway' in his opening line, Milton has 'first' in his. But although the poem starts at the beginning, it invokes, as Virgil did, the Muse:

> Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
> Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
> Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
> With loss of Eden, till one greater man
> Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
> Sing heavenly muse.[25]

This epic beginning is hardly surprising, as in writing this poem, Milton was fulfilling his lifetime's ambition to produce a work which was both an imitation of the models of epic poetry but also a re-working of the genre to make it a suitable vehicle for the Christian story (although keeping the pre-Christian exhortation to the Muse); and thus, essentially, new.

The early poets laid down a framework for starting a piece of writing, in which the literature of the past is referenced but the intentions of the author towards the work are the key in dictating how it will begin; the poets wanted to signal intention.

There is one tradition which is at odds with almost everything I have said so far – about the impossibility of having a true beginning, and the prevalence of the tradition for *in medias res* openings, and that is the Biblical story. Genesis claims to be the beginning of the world, before which there was nothing. This is a strong and a satisfying way of approaching history, nothing blurred or random in connections going back and back. Before this, nothing existed; it is a point to hold on to and build forward from, and has been hard to dislodge for this very reason. In the Miracle Plays, the starting point is exactly this, the beginning. 'They exhibit a powerful impulse to begin from the "deep" beginning of all things. Such a beginning must be from that which has no prior beginning.'[26]

4. Critical Theory

In this section I will be reviewing critical theories for their relevance to deciding how to start a story. When a writer writes a text, certain structural and technical decisions have to be made, such as decisions about voice, language, point of view, setting, in short, about the 'narrative information' that is given to the reader[27]. Narratology allows the creative writer to organise and experiment with narrative, it allows the critic to understand the formal and rhetorical structure of narratives. When it comes to beginnings in narratology, as Richardson highlights, '[t]he full importance of beginnings, however, has long been neglected or misunderstood and is only recently becoming known.'[28] And this is certainly the case for beginnings of short stories. As I will show, Narratology is

[25] John Milton, 'Paradise Lost' in *Milton Poetical Works,* ed. Douglas Bush (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p.212.
[26] A.D. Nuttall, p.235.
[27] G Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method,* trans. Jane Lewin, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 41.
[28] Richardson, Brian (ed.), *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 2008), p1.

useful to make sense of and structure narrative information that is given to the reader at the beginning of the narrative. Reader-Response theory is relevant to identify the 'readerly dynamics' created by the text[29].

Narratology

In the theories of Narratology, the structure of a narrative is analysed as the structure of a sentence can be analysed, in blocks, comprised of words that have meaning syntagmatically, in relation to the other words in the sentence, but also paradigmatically, as choices made in relation to other words that might have been used. Monika Fludernik describes two influential writers in the field, Stanzel and Genette, as being 'in search of a descriptive model which would embrace the whole range of options available to the storyteller.'[30] The descriptive models developed do cover the range of options. In relation to first lines, which is the focus of this study, the decisions made by the author about where to start in terms of voice, language, viewpoint, point in time and so on are coded in lists and tables. Just on voice, for example, Genette has developed a table that allows an analysis of one text against another on the basis of who is telling the story. Is the voice authorial or neutral, speaking to himself or to an audience, external to the narrative (heterodiegetic) or a key part of the action (homodiegetic)? Genette uses the term 'focalisation', to avoid confusion between the narrator (who speaks?) and point of view (who sees?).

These distinctions offer a level of precision in defining what is happening in the text, what techniques the author has used, to what effect, and I will be using them later in this study when discussing short stories, my own and other. An author will need to know and understand that all these distinctions exist and choices have to be made. These choices, though, will not be made with reference only to the beginning, but are crucial to the author's vision and intentions for the whole work. In the context of starting to tell a story, the practice must be driven by concerns about what to communicate first. Nevertheless, the theories of Narratology that concentrate on narrative voice and point of view are informative in opening up an understanding of the options available. An opening can make especially subtle use of the complexity involved in understanding who is telling the story and where the author sits in relation to who is telling the story. Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, for example, is speaking directly to the reader, and the Reader ('il Lettore') and the Other Reader ('la Lettrice') are also characters in the novel.

This complexity is apparent in one of the most famous opening lines in English literature, the start of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). It opens with a third-person narrative voice, asking an apparent truism: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife'[31]. The first line echoes, in tone, what Said calls the 'impressive and noble' opening - it has a flavour of the epic, stating a 'truth' which is 'universal'.[32] It might appear to be a statement made by an omniscient and heterodiegetic narrator, but in fact introduces a 'voice', a point of view that is critical to the development of the novel – this is an opinion held by the society in which the family live, and it is the attitudes and opinions of that society that shape the way the story unfolds. It is an example of 'double-voiced discourse' because it is also Mrs Bennet's opinion, and these

[29] Phelan, in Richardson, p195.
[30] Monika Fludernik*, An Introduction to Narratology* (London: Routledge 2009), p.88.
[31] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: Penguin Classics 1996), p6
[32] Edward W. Said, p.43.

opening words reveal both her pride, in her daughters, and her prejudice, in favour of wealth; the first sentence has relevance backwards to the title and forward, to the themes and actions in the novel[33]. It is an introduction to Austen's narrative technique to establish tension between the third-person omniscient narrator and the different characters (in general, Elizabeth Bennet) through focalisation:

> What we read in it [the first sentence] is its opposite – a single woman must be in want of a man of good fortune – and at once we are inducted into the Austen language, the ironical Austen attack, and the energy, peculiar to an Austen novel, that arises from the compression between a barbaric subsurface marital warfare and a surface of polite manners and civilised conventions.[34]

Reader Response

If Narratology studies the way a story is told, reader response theories look at the way it is received. In the opening passage from *Pride and Prejudice* quoted above, for example, the irony and the tension that results from the double-voiced discourse in the novel does not simply cancel the 'universal truth' but prepares the reader for the themes to come.

Critics considering this method of analysis separate the text and the response to the text: 'the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader', in Wolfgang Iser's terms. [35] Barthes makes the same distinction between 'the writerly and its counterbalance the readerly'.[36] The reader is essential to the creation of meaning in a text; the completion of the creative work that is a piece of narrative fiction is not possible without the reader. But for the writer, the reader's reaction is not within her control. All she can do is to harness the techniques available to her to manipulate the words on a page towards the desired effect.

In this, the work of the classical writers is likely to be more helpful than that of modern literary theorists. Jane P. Tompkins makes this distinction between what Aristotle, Horace and Longinus were looking to achieve through their writings on writing, and what Iser and his colleagues intend. Audience reaction is important to both, but modern critics, she suggest, search for meaning; the classical writers were interested in the effect the words had on the audience. 'For Longinus, language is a form of power and the purpose of studying texts from the past is to acquire skills that enable one to wield that power'.[37] This is in contrast to modern critics who 'equate language not with action but with signification'. In this respect, Longinus has more useful advice for a writer than Wolfgang Iser. But 'the skills that enable one to wield' the power of affecting a reader include the ability to understand how that affect is achieved, including the study of texts already written.

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[33] Anne Waldron Neumann, 'Characterization and Comment in *Pride and Prejudice*: Free Indirect Discourse and 'Double-Voiced' Verbs of Speaking, Thinking, and Feeling.', *Style*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1986, pp. 364–394. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/42945613, accessed 25 June 2021.

[34] Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p.265.

[35] Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: a Phenomenological Approach' in *Reader Response Criticism*, Jane P. Tompkins ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 50-69 (p.50).

[36] Roland Barthes, *S/Z,* trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p.4.

[37] Jane P. Tompkins, 'The Reader in History' in *Reader Response Criticism*, Jane P. Tompkins ed (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 201-226 (p.203).

If the text is being created for the affect is will have on a reader, then, as Stanley E. Fish asks, 'What reader, when every response is an individual one?', although he acknowledges that 'if the speakers of a language share a system of rules that each of them has somehow internalized, understanding will, in some sense, be uniform.'[38] So the writer can choose the syntax, semantics, the precise words used in a precise order, with some hope that these will have a similar effect on some, if not all, readers. The writer cannot guess against what personal, emotional, physical, economic or social background the individual reader will be responding to the text. She cannot, it is obvious to state, appeal to everyone. But she can at least assume a level of understanding, an 'informed reader', usefully described by Fish as someone who:

1. 'is a competent speaker of the language'
2. 'is in full possession of' the semantic knowledge necessary to understand the textual constructs
3. 'has *literary* competence'

While the reader may create the text as she reads, the experience of reading has to have coherence, from first to last, that allows the transference of her own subjective identity into the work she is reading. This means that the beginning cannot only be something used to 'hook' the reader, as the Self-Help handbooks of writing tend to suggest. It has to be part of the whole. But also, it has to take into account what immediate response the words used may provoke, based on the reader's foreknowledge of the use of language in this context and against her own experience and values. That this is not easy to predict is self-evident. Norman Holland[39] recounts listening to readers' taped remarks on a story by William Faulkner, 'A Rose for Emily', (1930) that included a phrase describing one of the characters as 'he who fathered the edict that no Negro woman should appear in the streets without an apron'. Three readers picked out the word 'fathered', with three different readings: one thought it was a touch of ironic humour, one thought it implied paternalism, one thought it had a suggestion of sexual exploitation of black women by the man described.

This supremacy of individual response in the interpretation of the novel, which is the foundation of modern fiction, according to Ian Watt, is beyond the scope of a writer of fiction to predict.[40] It argues, however, for a careful choice of words because, though, as Holland points out, there can be no guarantee that the same word will carry the same weight and sub-text to every reader, there is a vocabulary for the age in which the text is written that has social and contextual significance which the writer can be sure will be detected by anyone reading it. Because the reading process is cumulative, one word after another, it is particularly important to lay the foundations in the first lines because even if she does not remember them, the reader will be influenced by them. Fish describes his approach:

> The concept is simply the rigorous and disinterested asking of the question, what does this word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, chapter, novel, play, poem *do?* ; and the execution

[38] Stanley E. Fish, 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics' in *Reader Response Criticism*, Jane P. Tompkins ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 70-100 (pp.82-83).
[39] Norman Holland, 'Unity Identity Text Self', included in *Reader-Responsive Criticism,* ed. Jane P Tompkins (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 118-133 (pp.123-124).
[40] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London: Penguin Books, 1966), p.14.

> involves *an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time.*[41]

Narratology and Reader-Response Theory are useful, particularly in retrospect, for critical analyses of texts on different levels. These critical frameworks also allow creative writers to make conscious technical decisions about the stories they want to tell and how they want to tell them, indeed how they want to begin them. Paul McDonald and Jeremy Scott's work highlight that Stylistics and Narratology are useful to aid writers with composition. [4243] The critical theories cannot tell the writer how to execute a beginning that builds the framework for the story the writer wants to tell, and which will affect the reader in the way she intends. But they can help the writer identify the intended audience, and understand the ways in which narrative can be constructed.

5. Practical Problems

This section covers the decisions the writer has to make at the highest level, in the context of prose narrative fiction and in the context of the short form in particular.

Where to Begin?

With the growth of prose fiction since the eighteenth century, came the opportunity to play with the convention of starting in the middle. In *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) Sterne 'wants to start *ab Ovo* regardless of what Horace and literary rules prescribe'. [44] In doing so, he demonstrates the impossibility of beginning at the beginning, that is at the origin of the subject, because there will always be the need for going back, and back in time, which delays the story. In this case, fatally so, as despite the title's claim that this is Tristram's life and opinions, it only manages to cover those of his father and uncle. The pursuit of an origin, a point at which something truly began, means the beginning ends up by being the story. As Said points out, a work following this convention, of starting *in media res,* 'burdens the beginning with the pretence it is not one'.[45]

In starting before Tristram's life has even begun, and then digressing immediately into further details, Sterne claims he is recognising what readers want: 'I know there are readers in the world, as well as many other good people in it, who are no readers at all, - who find themselves ill at ease, unless they are let into the whole secret from first to last'.[46] But this, as *Tristram Shandy* demonstrates, is not possible. Balancing what readers might want with the practicalities of providing enough information at the start of a story is always going to be difficult, as Anthony Trollope recognised:

> Perhaps the method of rushing at once 'in media res' is, of all the ways of beginning a story, or a separate branch of a story, the least objectionable. The reader is made to think that the gold lies so near the surface that he will be required to take very little trouble in digging for it……I have always found that by rushing 'in media res' I was simply presenting the cart

[41] Stanley E. Fish, p.73.
[42] Paul McDonald, *Storytelling: Narratology for Critics and Creative Writers, (*London: Greenwich Exchange, 2014).
[43] Jeremy Scott, *Creative Writing and Stylistics: Creative and Critical Approaches,* (London: Red Globe Press, 2013).
[44] Flavio Gregori, p.214.
[45] Edward W. Said, p.43.
[46] Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (London: Penguin, 1967), p.37-38.

> before the horse. But, as readers like the cart best, I will do it once again…and endeavour to let as little as possible of the horse be seen afterwards. [47]

In *Tristram Shandy,* Sterne is continually breaking off from presenting the cart, that is the story, to fill in the outline of the horse. As A. D. Nuttall says, 'In this novel, the serial order of *narration* is continually invaded by the order of *explanation.'*[48] Every writer of narrative has to understand and cope with the fact that something must come first.

> Any worker in discursive language (novelist, philosopher, critic or historian) must use language to delimit the linguistic object he studies and deals with. During this preliminary delimitation the object is created and its future extension in meaningful discourse is assumed.[49]

This again is something that Sterne is exploring in *Tristram Shandy.* As in the beginning, so throughout the work, Sterne is concerned with what Dorothy Van Ghent describes as the 'operative character of consciousness', that is, how in life one thought leads to another which might be back in time, in the present or forward in time'. [50] He is concerned with 'the antagonism between the time sequences which the novel imposes, and the instantaneous wholeness of the image of complex human experience which the novel attempts to present'[51]. This inflexibility of time, which marches on like the clock being wound by Tristram's father the night he is conceived, is likely to weigh heavily on every writer's decision of where to begin a story. Every writer would want the beginning to capture 'complex human experience', yet it must start at a point in time. There have been attempts to challenge this: Marc Saporta, avoided fixing the starting point by producing, unpaginated, *Composition No. 1* (1963) which came in a box with instructions on the cover: 'The pages of this book may be read in any order. The reader is requested to shuffle them like a deck of cards.' [52] Ali Smith avoids prescription in the order in which the two halves of *How to be Both* (2014) are read, seeking to deny the linearity of time and text, which dictates that things happen in order, and a) must inevitably come before b), precluding simultaneity. But language, the main tool in the writer's box, is linear; one word must always be written and read before another. Something must come first.

This, then, is the writer's task, to pick a point of departure within the constraints of language and time. To 'construct his presentational sequence (and the reader to re-construct that sequence, however chronologically deformed) according to the logic of progression inherent in the line or chain of events itself, from earlier to later and from cause to effect.'[53]

How to Begin?

The beginning of a narrative text is the beginning of a story. But as well as choosing the point in time, in relation to the narrative time-line, at which the story begins, the writer also has to decide what purpose she wishes to achieve; as well as the words on the page that convey conventional

[47] Anthony Trollope, *The Duke's Children* (St Albans: Panther Books, 1973), p.80.
[48] A. D. Nuttall, p.158.
[49] Edward W. Said, p.36.
[50] Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p.83.
[51] IBID, p.88.
[52] Marc Saporta, *Composition No.1* (London: Visual Editions, 2011).
[53] Meir Sternberg, 'Ordering the unordered: Time, Space, and Descriptive Coherence' in *Yale French Studies,* 61(1981), 60-88 (p.60). URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2929877 accessed 13-03-2019.

meaning, there is a metanarrative aspect to an incipit. Edward Said reflects that 'the point of departure…has two aspects that animate one another. One leads to the project being realised: this is the transitive aspect of the beginning – that is beginning with (or for) an anticipated end, or at least an expected continuity.' Set against this is 'the intransitive and conceptual aspect, that which has no object but its own constant clarification.' [54] This is to say that, on beginning a novel, the novelist will have in mind the trajectory of the story being told, but also the task of using the words on the page to mine the creative idea from which the novel grew – or grows in the writing process. What is the information to be given in the first sentences that when taken with the work as a whole can be seen to have relevance and resonance to the theme of the piece? This is even more important in the writing of short stories, where the memory of the beginning will hardly have faded from the reader's mind at the point the end is reached.

The question on how to begin is more than just what information to convey, however. It is also about how to convey it. In what voice, using what language, what words, even. The narrative voice and style of narration will have been chosen with the whole work in view, but the point of entry to the story needs to assert that choice. The pace of the beginning – slow and full of information or rapid and full of action – is also open for the writer to select.

Before outlining a framework for how these choices should be made, there is also the question of whether a short story is in some fundamental way (other than length) different to the novel as far as questions of opening are concerned.

Short Story Beginnings

The short story is a slippery beast. The place of the short form in the history of fiction has been driven by cultural or economic forces as much as by creative developments. The oral tradition dictated, especially when verse, with its memorable rhythms, was replaced by prose, that stories would be short, and so the myths, legends and fairy stories are the earliest examples of the form. Printing enabled the distribution of stories written down, but to be cheap enough to be accessible, the early pamphlets had to be short. The association of brevity, in the fictional form, and plot driven, sensational or moral tales persisted through the Victorian era, when tales of the supernatural pre-dominated, although the mass diaspora from the countryside to the town meant the genre of rural tales was also popular, feeding an urban population's nostalgia for a pastoral past.

Towards the end of the Victorian age magazines dedicated to the short story (*Household Words, The Yellow Book)* meant that writers of long fiction could generate an income by producing shorter fiction alongside their longer, serialised works. Many of these were stories of the supernatural, and were framed in the tradition of a story being told to an audience in the narrator's presence, often round a fireside. It is this tradition that Conrad uses in *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and Henry James in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), two novellas that begin by conjuring up the image of a chat by a fireside before exploring psychological themes.

There was some interest in defining the form at the time and since, including the perennial question of how long should it be. A question mark has hovered over the status of short stories, whether they are not just an entertainment for those unable or unwilling to dedicate time and mental energy into

[54] Edward W. Said, p.72.

reading the longer form, rather than having the equivalent value, in literary terms, to a longer narrative. With a few notable exceptions (Katherine Mansfield, Alice Munro) a writer's reputation is founded on novels. Studies of short stories make a distinction between the lyrical, literary kind and those that fit more obviously into a lineage of popular fiction – stories, in other words, that are 'plot-driven, conclusive and realistic'.[55]

Angela Carter, writing about why she used the short story form, said: 'The limited trajectory of the short narrative concentrates its meaning. Sign and sense can fuse to an extent impossible to achieve among the multiplying ambiguities of an extended narrative.' [56] This, as well as defining the short story to the extent that any definition is necessary, contains the key as to the greater burden carried by the beginning in the short form. Incipits are about signs and signals, and in a short story, these have to be consistent with the work as a whole. Well-chosen opening signals carry more weight in the concentrated form.

It is these two aspects of short stories – their 'mutability' as March-Russell calls it, evading definition and stretching from popular entertainment to lyricism, and the importance of the early signals – that make short stories so apt a basis for the analytical and creative parts of this study.[57]

6. Typologies

This section begins to break down the broad categories of decision covered in the previous section, into their constituent parts. The evaluation by Achim Hescher of typologies of incipits, based on a proposal by Andrea del Lungo, is helpful in understanding and analysing in detail how to begin any piece of prose fiction, long or short. There are, del Lungo proposes, four types of incipit. Hescher's paper is aimed at finding a way to teach the study of incipits, avoiding 'aporias from hitherto existing approaches'.[58] This has equal relevance for the writer considering how to launch into a narrative. The four functions are a) the codifying function, b) the interest-stirring function, c) the informing function and d) the dramatizing function.

The codifying function is the narrative voice but also the unavoidable or deliberate links back to past works - the signals that inform the reader of a genre, or allude to an antecedent text. '…an incipit [..] is doubly connective in that it is linked with other incipits and in that it links the work with other works of literature'.[59] This function, which Hescher also refers to as 'framing', sets a context. It provides information that is implicit not explicit. Every opening will have a codifying function, even if the language is bland and nothing is said to indicate that what follows will be, for example, an epic or a fantasy. It is inescapable that the register of the narrative voice will lead to assumptions being made; the reader will respond to it.

The interest-stirring function uses strategies to draw the reader in, to intrigue her. No writer deliberately pens a dull beginning, but the anticipation of the reader can be enhanced by creating uncertainty through an unexpected conjunction of ideas. The informing and dramatizing functions,

[55] Paul March-Russell, *The Short Story: An Introduction*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p25
[56] Angela Carter, 'Afterword to Fireworks', included in *Collected Short Stories, (*London: Vintage 1996), p459
[57] Paul March-Russell, pp. xviii,11,22,28
[58]Achim Hescher, 'A Typology for Teaching Novel Incipits', *AAA: Arbeiten Aus Anglistik Und Amerikanistik*, 34 (1), (2009), pp. 103–124.
[59] Hescher, p108.

Hescher suggests, are interrelated and from these he draws a chart which maps incipits as static against progressive and suspensive against dynamic, based on the level of action presented or promised (from delayed to immediate), and the level of information provided (from scarcity to saturation). While mapping one of these functions against another is a tool for analysis, not creation, the functions themselves provide a useful insight into what a writer can achieve in the opening lines, and particularly the writer of short stories, where the urgency to establish context and content is driven by the limited number of words available.

The Codifying Function

The formulaic start of fairy stories and myths: 'Once Upon a Time' is a code. In writing about 'The Surface of Narrative', Monika Fludernik[60] draws a formula for the opening passage of traditional tales:

[PP time] [PP place] Verb [Adjective] [NP]

PP = prepositional phrase; NP = nominal phrase

This is the formula used in the beginning of the *Æneid,* when the story, as opposed to the proem, begins, but is also seen in Folk tales. In his Morphology of the Folktale, V.A. Propp underscores the simplistic structure of folktales that not only have a predictable set of characters and narrative progression but begin with a practical device. 'Once upon a time' functions as a chronotope (Bakhtin), it determines time (the past), space (a past world), and is spoken by a third-person, seemingly omniscient narrator. It is a formula to indicate genre and, according to Propp, narrative progression[61]. Because the phrase 'Once upon a time' is formulaic, it can be subverted and create a tension between text and reader's expectation. In James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), the third-person narrator trope is replaced by a specific focalisation:

> Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo…[62]

This opening places the reader firmly in the position of seeing through Stephen's eyes. He is the 'nicens' little boy who is looking at the cow. 'The world's form, then, is apparently shaped toward him and out from him as its center.'[63] Like Sterne, subverting the idea of starting at the beginning, Joyce is playing with the reader's expectations in locating his beginning in a tradition which he is using for the purposes of establishing where the reader needs to sit in relation to the novel, rather than with an intention of telling that type of story. The tension is set up between narration and focalisation.

Catherine Romagnolo has made a special study of beginnings in feminist fiction, exploring how writers from marginalised groups use beginnings to signal their intent to challenge the mainstream by subverting the conventions. If Jane Austen's famous opening of Pride and Prejudice creates a double-voiced discourse, postmodern and feminist fiction also use similar strategies to, as Phelan

[60] Monika Fludernik*, An Introduction to Narratology* (London: Routledge 2009), p. 42.
[61] V. A. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale,* (Austin: University of Texas Press 2003)
[62] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.3.
[63] Dorothy Van Ghent, p.265.

argues, create 'unstable relationships between character (instabilities) or between implied author and reader or narrator and reader.'[64] She notes that feminist writers tend to signal exclusion, and as an example quotes the invocation to silence, at the beginning of *The Colour Purple* (1982) and *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Both of these are not only written by women, but by American women of colour, so doubly marginalised, and the need to hold up a hand at the start and signal a mood, an expectation, a protest must be much greater than for writers writing out of a long, well-established tradition. [6566]

In *The Bluest Eye,* Toni Morrison has three openings, first subverting the traditions of children's literature, then invoking a sense of gossip and secrets shared, then finally launching with a first line which has a feel of the epic: 'Nuns go by as quiet as lust, and drunken men and sober eyes sing in the lobby of the Greek hotel.' [67] Morrison herself quotes the first line of the preceding section as the opening: 'Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941.'[68] These words, Morrison says, were selected for their simplicity yet were not 'simply-minded, but devious, even loaded.' She wants the reader to notice the gossipy, speakerly nature of the phrases, the hint of secrets to be told, the 'intimacy between the reader and the page' (which has an echo of Chaucer's Duchess). [69]

The actual first page of the book is a succession of sentences that could have been taken from a reading primer: 'Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty.'[70] And so on, introducing a family of mother, father, two children, their dog and their cat. This paragraph is repeated three times – once with punctuation, once without punctuation and again without either punctuation or spaces between words. This first part of the text has a codifying purpose; it is there to establish an apparently 'simply-minded but devious' frame for the rest of the work.

The choice of language in the first sentences is part of the codifying function. It sets a register which can reinforce the identification of a genre that other signals have established. In longer fiction, the register can change throughout the work, but within the scope of the short form, it will not be easy to deviate from the position it establishes between the formal and the informal, between the literary and the vernacular. It sets expectations. Take the example of two modern short stories in which the opening involves the eating of food:

> 'All crap', said Gerard, through a mouthful of hamburger, 'utter shite.'[71]
>
> They had dined well at 261 Landstrasse, and now passed eagerly into the music room.[72]

[64](cited by Romagnolo, p. 151).
[65] Catherine Romagnolo, *Opening Acts: narrative beginnings in feminist fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), p.xvii.
[66] Rocio G Davis makes the same point about short story cycles, a form used by the marginalised to allow independent, yet linked, snapshots of people's lives. Rocio G. Davis, 'Identity in Community in Ethnic Short Story Cycles' in *Ethnicity and the American Short Story* (New York: Garland 1997), pp2-23
[67] Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Vintage 1999), p.7.
[68] *The Bluest Eye,* p.3.
[69] Toni Morrison, 'The Afro-American Presence in American Literature' in *Toni Morrison Modern Critical Views,* ed. Harold Bloom, (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990), 218-230 (p.218).
[70] *The Bluest Eye,* p.1
[71] Will Self, 'A Short History of the English Novel' in *Grey Area* (London: Penguin, 1996), 35-52 (p.35).
[72] Julian Barnes, 'Harmony' in *Pulse (*London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), 158-184 (p.158).

If, after these opening sentences, Gerard passed eagerly into a music room, or the diners at Landstrasse used vulgar language, it would be a shock that the story would have to work hard to justify.

The Interest-stirring function

This is more than just grabbing the reader's attention with a 'killer first line'. There has to be something in the opening sentences that intrigues. One strategy is to create anticipation; by making the *res* into the middle of which the reader is being plunged, dramatic, as Alan Warner does at the start of *Morvern Callar* (1995): 'He'd cut his throat with the knife. He'd near chopped off his hand with the meat cleaver. He couldn't object so I lit a Silk Cut.' [73]

The incipit, Hescher points out, 'represents the moment of establishing contact between an author and readers', and another 'interest-stirring' strategy is to make this relationship appear real from the beginning by establishing intimacy, as Italo Calvino does[74], or by creating tension, like J.D. Salinger.[75]

Given the importance of economy in the use of language to frame the idea, which the short form dictates, it is particularly important to the writer of short stories to avoid a first sentence that communicates nothing to engage the interest of the reader.

The Informing Function

From Aristotle onwards there is consistent agreement on what are the elements of a story. In *Poetics*, Aristotle identifies these as necessary for a tragedy: plot, character, thought, diction, music and spectacle. Said says: 'A beginning suggests either a) a time, b) a place, c) an object, d) a principle or e) an act.'[76] Translating these into the questions a reader can be expected to ask, as she crosses over the threshold into the fictional world yields the following list:

When is this? (time)
Where am I and what can I see? (place, object)
Who am I meeting? (character)
What is going on? (act, plot)
What am I expected to feel, think, learn? (theme)

The unsophisticated reader might be expected to want to know all, or almost all, of this as early as possible, and this need is met by the formulaic introduction to fairy stories.

Hescher describes the different ways in which an author can approach the information-giving function of the beginning. She may 'take the readers by the hand and arrange or design the key information'; or 'may decide not to give the key information away from the start'.[77] It is noteworthy that Dickens' short stories dispense with the often lengthy expositions and scene setting of his longer fiction and jump straight in.

[73] Alan Warner, *Morvern Callar* (London: Vintage, 1996), p.1.
[74] Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller'* (London: Vintage Classics, 1992), p.3.
[75] J.D. Salinger, *Catcher in the Rye* (London: Penguin, 2010), p.1.
[76] Edward W. Said, p.42.
[77] Hescher, p.106.

> 'Mugby Junction' opens in the least leisurely style possible: there are no novelistic introductions of scene or description. Instead there are staccato phrases as a man with a through ticket decides, on a random and sudden whim, to halt his journey at Mugby.[78]

In the context of a short story, it may never become necessary to give information that, in a longer piece of prose, would eventually become essential to complete the picture.

He had been reading to her from Rilke, a poet he admired, when she fell asleep with her head on his pillow.[79]

This story, by Raymond Carver, is confined to a night, when first the husband then the wife cannot go to sleep, and the chafing of their personalities, one against the other, is apparent in the way they remember the same events in the past, in the way they react to the other's wakefulness. Everything that Trollope categorised as 'the horse', - who they were, what they looked like, where they came from - which he believed it necessary to share before moving on to 'the cart' – is never specified.[80] It is worth noting, though, that the title of the story, 'The Student's Wife', is relevant to a hermeneutic reading of the text – this is a young couple, not affluent. Peritexts also provide information.

The critical decision for a short story writer is not just where to place the level of information on Hescher's axis from saturation to scarcity, but which of the questions to begin answering.

The Dramatizing Function

This function, 'sets the story off', as Hescher, borrowing from Del Lungo, describes it.[81] It is the 'point where the action sets in'.[82] Phelan and Romagnolo both describe this point, even if it is not at the start of a narrative, as a beginning. They pinpoint, though using different terms, the beginning of the narrative, that is, of the story, as distinct, potentially, from the beginning of the text. Romagnolo describes a causal beginning, the first plot action or 'catalytic narrative moment'.[83] Phelan talks about initiation as the first instabilities and tensions which will drive the plot forward. [84]

Here is a clear choice for the writer of fiction, whether to put the 'catalytic narrative moment' in the first few lines. Lydia Davis writes stories that are often no more than a paragraph in length. This is the first sentence of a story which is four, short paragraphs long:

> Mir the Hessian regretted killing his dog, he wept even as he forced its head from its body, yet what had he to eat but the dog?[85]

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[78] Sophie Gilmartin, 'The Victorian Potboiler: Novelists writing Short Stories', in *The Cambridge History of the English Short Story,* ed. Dominic Head (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 67-83 (p.70).
[79] Raymond Carver, 'The Student's Wife' in *Where I'm Calling From: The Selected Stories* (London: The Harvill Press, 1993), 26-33 (p.26).
[80] Anthony Trollope, *The Duke's Children* (St. Albans: Panther Books, 1973), p.80
[81] Hescher, p.107.
[82] Hescher, p.111.
[83] Romagnolo, p.27.
[84] James Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression and the Interpretation of Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p.15.
[85] Lydia Davis, 'Mir the Hessian' in *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (London: Penguin, 2011), 423 (p.423).

This sentence is composed of three clauses, and each contains an idea that shocks: that a man kills a dog; that he beheads its body; that he eats it. But at the same time, the tensions that will drive the story forward are evident between the man's actions and his emotions. The finite verbs in the first two clauses ('regretted…..wept') set up a conflict between the brutal act of killing and eating the dog and the feelings of the man as he does so. The interrogative at the end of the sentence is a plea for compassion, creating another level of tension; if the reader is taken in by the plea, will it turn out that Mir is in fact guilty of a barbaric act that was not justified? In this shortest of short stories, Davis captures the cycle of action (abandoned by war on a mountainside in winter with nothing to eat, Mir prays to God - 'it was the only thing left to do'), outcome ('the wolves had scattered the bones of Mir the Hessian') and repetition, (another soldier abandoned on the same hillside -'For the war was not yet over.')

This beginning, in Hescher's analysis, would be immediate, as opposed to postponed, dramatization, with a scarcity of information. Contrast this with the opening of Anthony Trollope's novels – for example *Doctor Thorne* (1858) where 'Before the reader is introduced to the modest country medical practitioner who is to be the chief personage of the following tale' she has to get through two pages of description of the place and the political landscape. [86]

Whilst the novelist has room to let the reader understand the fictional universe before the narrative commences, it is rare to find a short story that postpones the drama in favour of a saturation of information. Where this happens, it is often because the codifying function is being used to signal a story in a particular genre or with deliberate echoes of previous texts. So, for example, in a story by Agatha Christie, 'The Lamp' (1941), two paragraphs of description of the house ('It was undoubtedly an old house.') and its situation precede any mention of what is about to happen, signalling a story of the supernatural.[87]

Hescher suggests that the codifying function and interest-stirring functions are not connected, but the dramatizing and informing functions act together; every incipit has information and, at the least, hints at or suggests drama to come. For the writer, though, the four represent, as it were, four flavourings available to a cook. None will be absent; how strongly each of them is present is a choice to be made.

7. A Practical Theory

The analysis in the previous section is here developed into a proposal of how the writer can create an incipit that works with the subsequent text to achieve the effect intended for the work as a whole. This theory can be applied in developing the first draft but also, and probably more appropriately, in re-writing. It is both a tool to help with writing and with the critical editing.

The form I have chosen to explore, creatively, the issues and opportunities in beginning the text, is the short story form, a sub-set of narrative fiction that has not been closely examined in this respect. In order to develop a coherent theory as the basis of analysing short story beginnings – my own and other writers' – I first need to define the scope; what I believe falls legitimately and usefully into the category of beginning. For the purposes of this study, that is, for a definition to be useful to a writer

[86] Anthony Trollope, *Doctor Thorne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.5.
[87] Agatha Christie, 'The Lamp' in *The Hound of Death* (London: Pan Books, 1960), p.78.

starting to formulate a text, the definition needs to be inclusive. It therefore has to include peritexts:

- Titles and subtitles
- Epigraphs
- Dedications

This is, using Lodge's analogy of a threshold, the path up to the doorway. Although irrelevant to the initial comprehension of the story, it allows the reader to make assumptions, to be intrigued, to re-visit at the end of the story something that perhaps adds a layer of substance to what she has read. These initial parts of the text can be ignored and the text itself is not diminished. If they are read thoughtfully before, during and after a first reading, they can strengthen and inform the text.

If this study were about novels, I would include the subsequent chapter headings in this category; they are, in effect, the doors into the next room where some further aspect of the world that the writer has invented and the reader is inhabiting will be illuminated. Charlotte Brontë said that opening a new chapter was like raising the curtain on the next act, and some novelists take the opportunity to guide the reader into it. Morrison, for example, begins each chapter of *Beloved* (1987) with '124 was….' indicating the way the mood of the book is developing. However, in short stories, although there might be significant movements forward during the course of the text, these are not normally given titles, which would interrupt the flow.

In Gerard Genette's study into paratexts, of which peritexts (liminal information contained within the covers of the book) is a subset, he considers titles as having four functions – designation, descriptive, connotative and temptation.[88] His discussion of these covers short stories only in terms of the titles of collections, not individual stories. In a crowded market for new fiction, the publisher is likely to dictate or at the least put pressure on the writer over the choice of book title, with concern only for the designation – something that is distinctive and easily pronounced – and the temptation – something that will encourage a prospective reader to pick up the volume. For the short story writer, the descriptive and the connotative are the main concerns. In the short form, where every word counts, it is obvious that the title can be deployed to give an additional layer of meaning, after if not before the text has been read. In the analysis of my own and others' work in the next sections, I look at how the title has been used in this respect.

The next issue is – for how long can the story be termed to be 'beginning' rather than to have actually 'begun'. In his study *Reading Fiction: Opening the Text,* Peter Childs quotes 30 to 50 lines of the works he selects for detailed analysis. But in a short story, this is likely to carry the reader past the point where it feels the text is still 'beginning'. The answer is likely to lie somewhere between the first sentence, which carries the greatest weight, and the end of the introductory paragraphs.

So having selected as the basis of a theory the entire first words of a story, including peritexts, up to the end of the opening paragraphs, what is there to look for and analyse, to take into consideration,

[88] Genette, G., & Macksey, R., *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997) pp.55-103.

as a writer and reader, in this matter? If the peritexts are the path up to the doorway, then the first lines go over the threshold into the new world. How?

Writers need to make decisions on composing the narrative situation.[89] There are three considerations for the writer, which can be broadly aligned with the typologies discussed in the previous section. First, the writing has to be done, and the first decision is how to represent the codifying function. The story must be narrated, but by whom? As well as the choice of first, second or third person narrator, there is the question of the distance of the narrator to the text and the reader. Will he be heterodiegetic, an omniscient voice observing and recording, a homodiegetic, reflecting the emotions and actions taking place in the fictional world. Or an autodiegetic narrator who is a protagonist of the narration. Is the narrator overt or covert? How is narrative perspective constructed (focalisation)? Do we have an external focalizer (narrator-focalizer) or an internal focalizer (character-focalizer)? Is the perspective going to be stable? There is also a decision to be made on whether to signal a genre, to make connections to antecedent texts, deliberately setting the piece in a historical context which will have resonance for the reader.

Secondly there is the question of which information to provide first – whether to focus on who, what, where or when. For this, the heading of 'interest-stirring' is helpful, but might lead the writer to choose an introduction designed to intrigue. Given the need for coherence in a short story, it is a risky strategy for the writer of short fiction, to include something subversive in order to excite, if this is not directly relevant within the context of the whole. If I re-name this function 'interest-bearing', it leads to a consideration of what matters, in the story, and how to convey this significance to the reader, starting from the first lines. The short story form dictates that the opening is crucial to the whole. Robert Louis Stevenson, writing to a friend, summed up the importance, in short fiction as distinct from long fiction, of making the end and the beginning tie up together to create a unified whole:

> The denouement of a long story is nothing, it is just 'a full close', which you may approach and accompany as you please – it is a coda, not an essential member in the rhythm; but the body and end of a short-story is bone of the bone and blood of the blood of the beginning.[90]

To begin with information that does not seem, in retrospect, important, is to overlook the reader's experience. As Fish says: 'A reader's response to the fifth word in a line or sentence is to a large extent the product of his responses to words one, two, three and four.'[91] It also makes choosing an opening that is intriguing but could be seen as misleading, is a risk.

Thirdly, there is the question posed by Hescher's juxtaposition of dramatization and information. What could be categorised as at what pace to start – slowly, with the introduction of whatever facts relevant to the story the writer deems it important that the reader should know from the beginning; or moving swiftly into action, or a combination of the two. The mapping of these functions, as

[89] Suzanne Keen, 'Narrative Situation: Who's Who and What's its Function', In: *Narrative Form*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003),. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230503489, pp 30-54.
[90] Robert Louis Stevenson and Sidney Colvin, *Vailima Letters: Being Correspondence Addressed by Robert Louis Stevenson to Sidney Colvin, November 1890-October 1894* (London: Methuen, 1901), p. 147.
[91] Stanley E. Fish, p.73.

proposed by Hescher, is useful in understanding this.

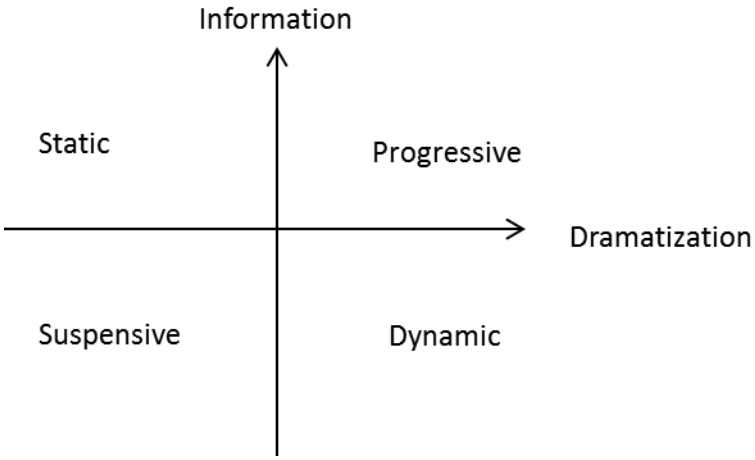

Figure 1: Hescher's Mapping of Del Lungo's Functions

Amanda Boulter suggests beginning, for a writer, comes in three phases: pre-writing, that is, the planning phase when everything is informal and remains possible; writing, which is the formulated idea realised in text; and re-writing when the text is manipulated to meet the expectations of the reader and realise the writer's ambitions for the theme and the plot.[92] At this point, the beginning will have to be revisited and fixed. Of the three types of decision discussed above – voice, interest-bearing information, pace – only the voice has to made in the pre-writing and writing phase. The final choice on balance of information (and what information) over dramatic action, of creating tension over providing metanarrative codes can only be made when the written work is complete; at re-writing.

In the next section, I review the work of a range of different writers, in order to establish how they have addressed these three questions.

8. Application of Theory

This section moves from the aspect of composition to the aspect of textual analysis. The critical analysis of texts, in this case, short story beginnings, complements the theoretical and historical lens on narrative beginnings. I have chosen eight stories all written in English since the beginning of the twentieth century which, as I will demonstrate, cover the four quadrants of the 'Outcome' analysis, but which also make distinct choices on how to signal the type of world (codifying, voice), and what information to share in the incipit. These stories have been chosen because they demonstrate the scope for experimentation within the incipit, but they have also been selected to cover writers at different periods writing in different contexts.

'By The Burn' – James Kelman (1991)

This story is an example of a progressive incipit, where both information and dramatization are present. The unnamed, third person narrator is walking to a job interview across some waste ground. It starts:

[92] Amanda Boulter, *Writing Fiction, Creative and Critical Approaches* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p.119-124.

> Fucking bogging mud man a swamp, an actual swamp, it was fucking a joke. He pulled his foot clear but the boot was still lodged there like it was quicksand and it was going to get sucked off and vanish down into it forever. He felt the suction hard on his foot but when he pulled, curling his toes as firm as possible, out it came with a loud squelching sound. Thank Christ for that. He shook his head, studying the immediate area, these marshy stalks of grass were everywhere; fucking hopeless. He glanced back across the wide expanse of waste ground and up to where the blocks of flats were. But he had to go this way and go this way right now, he was late enough as it was, he just couldn't afford to waste any time.[93]

The immediate impact comes from the language and the intimate relationship between the narrator and the reader through Kelman's use of the vernacular and a complex narrative structure that is moving from an external focaliser to an interior monologue to free indirect thought. The effect goes beyond the simple use of a form of language to signal a story told in the vernacular. The way the man's thoughts are articulated is both an introduction to his character and an evocation of the situation.

> Kelman's use of register is consistent with the idea of the failure of language, its misuse and its acting as a barrier to communication. It is certainly true, however, that register is exploited by Kelman particularly well to set the atmosphere of certain environments.[94]

The first line has the rhythm of the man's voice: he might be uttering these words aloud, repeating himself in frustration. It is an awkward sentence, in the punctuation and in the way it is structured – the second 'fucking' is out of place. Just reading this sentence takes the reader to the bog, into what might be the sort of dream where there is an urgency to be somewhere but an impossibility to move in that direction. In his essay on James Kelman, Stephen Bernstein says of this story that 'half the pathos emerges from the character's inarticulateness.'[95] The repetition of phrases and words and particularly of swear words for no purpose Bernstein sees as markers of a failure to be able to articulate emotion. Macarthur, though, suggests that 'inarticulacy does not necessarily reside in the use of taboo words *per se;* it resides in language generally. The use of taboo language has a great deal to do with self-assertion and denial of imposed hierarchies'. [96] This comes closer to the mood evoked by this incipit; it is not a man looking for words to express himself but someone trying to impose his will on the landscape that is impeding him.

In its mix of action and information, this story is progressive; it sits in the upper right hand quadrant, with both significant amounts of information and an immediate dramatization. The opening, for all its sparseness, provides enough information to create the framework for a story. It introduces the narrator, not by name or with any physical details, but as a consciousness. The information about the man's character is not given through description but through the use of language. This is a 'man' wearing a 'boot', walking through 'marshy stalks of grass' across 'waste ground' and he is in a hurry – 'couldn't afford to waste any time.' But this information is contained within an action sequence already begun and continuing, throughout the story, step by painful step.

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[93] James Kelman, *'*By the Burn' in *The Burn* (London: Vintage, 1999), 239-244 (p.239).
[94] J.D. Macarthur, Claiming Your Portion of Space: A Study of the Short Stories of James Kelman (Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press, 2007), p.85.
[95] S. Bernstein *James Kelman* in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 20, Part 3, (2000), 42-80 (p.42)
[96] J.D.Macarthur, p.78.

The title adds resonance, to the story and to the significance of the language in which it is written. 'Burn' is a dialect word, so signals this story will be told about or by someone whose dialect includes this word for stream. A stream is constantly running, and the fluidity of flowing water is exactly how the story, as told by Kelman, works. And it is the roar of the water that accompanies the narrator as he struggles onward through the mud. The word burn in its more usual, non-dialect meaning represents the pain the man feels as the tragedy of his daughter is brought suddenly to the forefront of his mind.

It is hard to know, with reference to this story, where the incipit ends. There are no paragraphs and there is no catch of breath, for the man or the reader, until he reaches a point where he can see the sandpit that collapsed on and killed his daughter. From the moment when he thinks of his daughter's death he is overcome with grief. He stumbles on thinking now not about the interview but of his own death, which his despair and the difficulty of moving, make it possible is the real destination, what is waiting at the end of the walk. The last lines read: '..he was going to be fucking alone, that was the way he was going to die, he fucking knew it, it was a fucking racing certainty.' [97]

As Macarthur says:

> Kelman starts with the rhythms and power of everyday speech and transforms them through art to create something which transcends simple fidelity to life.[98]

'Zagrowsky Tells' by Grace Paley (1985)

This story is narrated by a man with racial prejudices who finds himself, in old age, caring for a black grandson. He is both narrator and focaliser. It begins:

> I was standing in the park under that tree. They call it the Hanging Elm. Once upon a time it made a big improvement on all kinds of hooligans. Nowadays if, once in a while…….No. So this woman comes up to me, a woman minus a smile. I said to my grandson, Uh oh, Emanuel. Here comes a lady, she was once a beautiful customer of mine in the pharmacy I showed you.
>
> Emanuel says, Grandpa, who?
>
> She looks O.K. now, but not so hot. Well, what can you do, time takes a terrible toll of the ladies.
>
> This is her idea of a hello: Iz? What are you doing with that black child? Then she says, Who is he? Why are you holding on to him like that? She gives me a look like God in judgment. You could see it in famous paintings. Then she says, Why are you yelling at that poor kid?
>
> What yelling? A history lesson about the park. This is a tree in guidebooks. How are you by the way, Miss…..Miss…..I was embarrassed. I forgot her name absolutely.[99]

This is a progressive incipit. The opening is saturated with information, about place but also about character, as revealed in the thoughts or words of the narrator. The story is about a man who once kept a pharmacy, in a park with his grandson who is black (by implication, the man is not). The drama, though, is immediate, not through specific action but through the man's suppressed anger. When a woman comes up to him 'minus a smile' it is an unfolding incident. Like Kelman, Paley uses non-literary language and phrases and idioms specific to the character and the place. Unlike 'By the

[97] James Kelman, p.244
[98] J.D. Macarthur, p.85.
[99] Grace Paley, 'Zagrowsky Tells' in *The Collected Stories* (London: Virago Press 2018) 359-376 (p.359).

Burn', this is a first person narrative, told through Zagrowsky's perspective. The title is a literal description of the narrative technique. While it was not clear who the intended listener/reader was for the previous story – it might have been going on in the protagonist's head for no other purpose than his own clarification – the Paley story, the first line suggests, has an extradiegetic audience. It is a conventional introduction to a story told to a third person: 'I was standing under that tree'. But almost at once, there is confusion as to whether Zagrowsky is speaking to a hypothetical audience, himself or his grandson. It is what Noelle Batt calls 'dialogue-on-the-side':

> We don't know who the addressee of [..] these remarks is. Himself? An imaginary addressee? The implied narratee representing the reader?... God?[100]

The codifying feature of this incipit is the narrative voice. The idea of 'voice' is central to the literary theory of Narrativity and has been analysed in depth by critics expert in the field of deconstructing narrative. Amongst scholars in the field, considering voice is answering two possible questions: 'who speaks?' and 'Who sees?'. For the author, though, voice is about how, not who. The way the person narrating the story speaks, albeit through the medium of text, is a critical part of what the story is. Whether it is a carefully constructed external narrator's voice or a first person narrator with a distinctive use of language, the voice creates the story, makes it distinctive, gives it meaning beyond the simple meaning embodied in the structure of the sentences and the words used. A strong and distinctive narrative voice will impact on the way the reader 'hears' the story, from the first line. In his introduction to *The Collected Stories* by Grace Paley, George Saunders describes her as 'one of the great writers of voice of the last century'.[101] Paley herself, in her own introduction to the collection, says that when she started writing stories, she found she needed two ears, one for literature, one for home, because she needed to capture 'the street language and the home language with its Russian and Yiddish accents, a language my early characters knew well, the only language I spoke.' [102] Every story in this collection starts with startlingly unexpected phrases, images, voices.

Tension is apparent in this incipit between what Zagrowsky thinks and says, what he is prepared to 'tell' as he tries to reconcile his prejudices with his love for his black grandson. The person he addresses directly within the story, the woman Faith, is also conflicted between her need to justify her actions against this man in the past and her perception that his family has suffered as a result. The last line of the story is: 'And the women walk away from us. Talking. Talking.'[103] This reflects the story's theme: spilling out speech and failing to communicate.

This is what much of Paley's fiction is about, speaking to and for and with others. There is often a dialogue, there is never any resolution. 'Individual stories [..] stage arguments, not just between men and women, fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, friends, but also between comedy and

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[100] Noëlle Batt, 'The *becoming-black* of a Jewish pharmacist: "Zagrowsky tells" by Grace Paley, in *Journal of the Short Story in English (on line) 32, 1999*, URL: https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/186, accessed 29 June 2021, p6.

[101] George Saunders, 'Introduction: "The Saint of Seeing'' in *Grace Paley*, *The Collected Stories* (London: Virago Press 2018), xi-xx (p.xi).

[102] Grace Paley, 'Two Ears, Three Lucks' in *Grace Paley*, *The Collected Stories* (London: Virago Press 2018),xxiii-xxv (p.xxiv).

[103] Grace Paley, .p376.

tragedy, open form and closure.'[104] 'Zagrowsky Tells' is a good example of the staged argument, comic and tragic, that reaches no conclusion, because 'life has no opinion'[105].

'Angel's Laundromat' by Lucia Berlin (1981)

Hescher's label of 'static' applies to a story with a saturation of information but postponed dramatization. Such a story is 'Angel's Laundromat', delivered through indirect speech, first-person narration, with the narrator as focaliser.

> A tall old Indian in faded Levi's and a fine Zuni belt. His hair white and long, knotted with raspberry yarn at his neck. The strange thing was that for a year or two we were always at Angel's at the same times. I mean some days I'd go at seven on a Monday or maybe at six-thirty on a Friday evening and he would already be there.
>
> Mrs Armitage had been different, although she was old too. That was in New York at the San Juan Laundry on Fifteenth Street. Puerto Rican, suds overflowing onto the floor. I was a young mother then and washed diapers on a Thursday morning. She lived above me, in 4-C. One morning at the laundry she gave me a key and I took it. She said that if I didn't see her on Thursdays it meant she was dead and would I please go find her body. That was a terrible thing to ask of someone; also then I had to do my laundry on Thursdays.[106]

The information here is mainly about character, in this case the Indian and Mrs Armitage, the two customers of two different laundromats, separated by both physical distance and time. Although there is action in this incipit, it is not in progress as we meet the Indian, the narrator and learn about Mrs Armitage. The first two sentences even lack a verb. It is not clear until the third sentence whether this will be a story in the present or past tense, whether it will be a first or third person narration, nor where the narrator sits in relation to the story, inside, as a participant or outside as an observer. That this is a homodiegetic, narrator as focaliser becomes apparent from the musing tone ('The strange thing was…'). But for all the lack of action and the conversational, almost inconsequential nature of the incipit, it is not without the power to engage the reader. The text gives just enough information about the Indian to intrigue; and a question is raised about the eventual fate of Mrs Armitage – did she fail to turn up on a Thursday? Did the narrator discover her body?

In her foreword to this collection, Lydia Davis describes Berlin as 'always listening, hearing', and it is this close observation of other people, the way they look, speak, act and interact that is at the heart of this story.[107] She is precise in her descriptions of objects and places and times but she specifies them not because they are important in themselves, but because they colour in a community or an individual.

> Travelling people go to Angel's. Dirty mattresses, rusty high chairs tied to the roofs of dented Buicks. Leaky oil pans, leaky canvas water bags. Leaky washing machines. The men sit in the cars, shirtless, crush Hamm's cans when they are empty.[108]

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[104] Kasia Boddy, *The American Short Story since 1950* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p.134.
[105] Grace Paley, p.364
[106] Lucia Berlin, 'Angel's Laundromat' in *A Manual for Cleaning Women* (New York: Picador, 2016), 3-8 (p.3).
[107] Lydia Davis, 'Foreword: 'The Story is the Thing'' in *A Manual for Cleaning Women* (New York: Picador, 2016), x-xx (p.ix).
[108] Lucia Berlin, p.5

In this passage, as in the opening paragraph, Berlin is inviting the reader to observe as she does; she lists what she sees without circumscribing it with the use of verbs. 'Look', she seems to be saying in the first sentence. She is not saying anything about the man she describes, she is placing him in front of the reader. Only when she is sure the man has been seen and understood, does she begin to talk about meeting him in Angel's. In the description of the travelling people, any verbs are in the present tense. This is how it is, in this community, this is how the reader can recognise what sort of people she means.

Like Mrs Armitage, there will be no happy ending for the Indian and, like her, his end in prospect becomes a burden the narrator does not want to share. When he becomes 'very drunk, mean drunk'[109], she leaves. The last line is: 'I can't remember when it was that I realized I never did see that old Indian again.'[110]

The imagery in this story is rooted in ordinariness, but transcends it. The narrator looks at her hands and 'could see children and men and gardens' in them. The setting is what gives the story its title and the laundry cycle is described throughout – 'I was folding', 'his clothes were starting to fall limp and dry', 'no sound but the sloshy water, rhythmic as ocean waves' – and in the setting and the actions the rhythm of life and its inevitable ending are continually reinforced. But this is above all a story about people, and that is the weight that Berlin gives it in the incipit.

'Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest' by Angela Carter (1974)

In Carter's re-telling of the story of Genesis, the first two paragraphs only provide detailed information about the place; they answer the question 'where is this'.

> The whole region was like an abandoned flower bowl, filled to overflowing with green, living things; and, protected on all sides by the ferocious barricades of the mountains, those lovely reaches of forest lay so far inland the inhabitants believed the name, Ocean, that of a man in another country, and would have taken an oar, had they ever seen one, to be a winnowing fan. They built neither roads nor towns; in every respect like Candide, especially that of past ill-fortune, all they did now was to cultivate their gardens.
>
> They were the descendants of slaves who, many years before, ran away from plantations in distant plains, in pain and hardship crossed the arid neck of the continent, and endured an infinity of desert and tundra, before they clambered the rugged foothills to scale at last the heights themselves and so arrive in a region that offered them in plentiful fulfilment all their dreams of a promised land. Now, the groves that skirted those forests of pine in the central valley formed for them all of the world they wished to know and nothing their self-contained quietude concerned them but the satisfaction of simple pleasures. Not a single exploring spirit had ever been curious enough to search to its source the great river that watered their plots, or to penetrate to the heart of the forest itself. They had grown far too contented in their lost fastness to care for anything but the joys of idleness.[111]

This is a static incipit with all drama postponed. The narrator is established as heterodiegetic, an external focaliser; the subject matter, the language and the cadence of the prose create a biblical or even epic tone. Both the choice of introductory information and the language and syntax signal a

[109] Lucia Berlin, p.7
[110] Lucia Berlin, p.8
[111] Angela Carter, 'Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest' in *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories* (London: Vintage, 1996), 58-67 (p.58).

story that is designed for a congregation rather than an individual. The language used is both simple and formal. The first sentence of the second paragraph is long and complex but the verbs and adjectives are not: 'ran away', 'crossed', 'clambered', 'arid', 'rugged'. Throughout the second paragraph there are echoes of biblical stories in the choice of words –'pain and hardship', 'promised land'. But also there is a reference to the title, with the difference that here it is in the infinitive, and a negative – 'Not a single exploring spirit had ever been curious enough to [.....] penetrate to the heart of the forest'. The title is the gerund; it has become an action that will be taken during the course of the novel. This is the only indication in the incipit as to what is going to happen.

This story is concerned with landscape and sexual awakening. The opening paragraph lays out the Garden of Eden, into which come two children, Madeleine and Emile, twins, with their father Dubois, a parent so remote he 'seemed to them more an emanation of their surroundings than an actual father.' He tells them they are '*homo silvester,* men of the woods', and thus superior to *'homo sapiens* – knowing man.'[112] He prohibits nothing except an escape from the paradise of the valley into the heart of the wood. At the age of thirteen, the twins defy him and set out to find a 'wicked tree' that the villagers, 'even if they did not believe in it' saw as 'a metaphor for something unfamiliar they prefer to ignore.'[113] The story ends: 'He took the apple; ate; and, after that, they kissed.'[114] They have travelled out of a narrowly defined paradise to a place where 'endless vistas of love' are possible.

The title of the story has a neat double meaning being literally what the story is about but having an obvious alternative reading as pre-figuring the sexual act between the two children. It also makes it clear that this is about a journey through a landscape, and from start to finish, Carter makes the reader experience this.

'Escape From Spiderhead' by George Saunders (2013)

As an example of a dynamic incipit, that is, one with a scarcity of information but immediate action, I have chosen this science fiction story by George Saunders:

> "Drip on?" said Abnesti over the PA.
>
> "What's in it?" I said.
>
> "Hilarious," he said.
>
> "Acknowledge," I said.
>
> Abnesti used his remote. My MobiPak™ whirred. Soon the Interior Garden looked really nice. Everything seemed super-clear.
>
> I said out loud, as I was supposed to, what I was feeling.
>
> "Garden looks nice," I said. "Super-clear."
>
> Abnesti said, "Jeff, how about we pep up those language centers?"
>
> "Sure," I said.
>
> "Drip on?" he said.
>
> "Acknowledge," I said.
>
> He added some Verbaluce™ to the drip and soon I was feeling the same things but saying them better. The garden still looked nice. It was like the bushes were so tight-seeming and the sun made everything stand out? It was like any moment you expected

[112] Angela Carter, p.61
[113] Angela Carter. p.62
[114] Angela Carter, p.67

> some Victorians to wander in with their cups of tea. It was as if the garden had become a sort of embodiment of the domestic dreams forever intrinsic to human consciousness. It was as if I could suddenly discern, in this contemporary vignette, the ancient corollary through which Plato and some of his contemporaries might have strolled; to wit, I was sensing the eternal in the ephemeral.[115]

This story is set in a laboratory where criminals are used as guinea pigs for drugs designed to manipulate the brain. It opens with the sort of dialogue that would suggest an action story, beginning in media res without contextualising or setting the scene, which is a typical method of estrangement for a sci-fi or fantasy. The first exchange between Jeff and Abnesti has ontological echoes of a wartime or space drama – the remote voice asking for confirmation that something is 'on' and receiving an acknowledgement. This impression is immediately subverted by the reference to an Interior Garden, but the dialogue continues in the same tone until Jeff is given a drug that enhances his ability to use language, when the register changes. In the space of two sentences, Jeff's syntactical constructions move from 'It was like…' to 'It was as if…', the cadence of his speech moves from the interrogative lift at the end of a simple sentence, signalled by the use of a question mark, to a more complex, literary, less verbal construction. The sentence ends with the phrase: 'to wit, I was sensing the eternal in the ephemeral'. This phrase, at the end of the incipit, expresses the conflict within Jeff that drives the story. The last line, as he chooses to kill himself to avoid giving pain to others, is 'for the first time in years and for evermore, I had not killed and never would.'[116]

The only information in this incipit is about what is going on – the answer the 'what?' question. The word 'MobiPak' with the trade mark symbol attached signifies a story with a level of fantasy, an invented world, but there is no information on what this world is like, whether the Interior Garden is an actual garden within a building or something Jeff is seeing inside his head. Who Jeff and Abnesti are is not specified, though the phrase 'as I was supposed to' indicates that one is in a position of power over the other. Jeff is a homodiegetic narrator, speaking in his own voice, unless distorted by the drugs he is being given. There is drama throughout the story, with Jeff being given drugs to make him attracted by and attractive to successive women, then asked to choose which of them is given a drug that induces morbidity.

The choice of a dynamic incipit is appropriate; this is a narrative building expectations through pace, to a point where it becomes clear that Jeff is facing a moral dilemma; how far will he go in obeying, in doing what he was supposed to. His choices are limited by the drugs he is given, but he does have a choice. The title reinforces the idea of an action story, with its echoes of famous real life stories about escapes - from Alcatraz, from Colditz, from Camp 14 (North Korea). The first lines are what a reader would be led to expect, by the title. The story is about an escape from inner torment.

'Everything in This Country Must' by Colum McCann (1998)

McCann's story of a man grieving for his wife and son, who have been killed in an accident, opens with a horse trapped in a river. Like the Saunders story, this is also a dynamic incipit but it demonstrates how the technique can be used to a different effect. There is a stillness about the opening:

[115] George Saunders, 'Escape from Spiderhead' in *Tenth of December* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 45-81 (p.45).
[116] George Saunders, p.81

> A summer flood came and our draft horse got caught in the river. The river smashed against stones and the sound of it to me was like the turning of locks. It was silage time and the water smelled of grass. The draft horse, Father's favourite, had stepped in the river for a sniff maybe and she was caught, couldn't move, her foreleg trapped between rocks. Father found her and called *Katie!* above the wailing of the rain. I was in the barn waiting for drips on my tongue from the ceiling hole. I ran out past the farmhouse into the field. At the river the horse stared wild through the rain maybe she remembered me. Father moved slow and scared like someone travelling deep through snow except there was no snow, just flood, and Father was frightened of water, always frightened. Father told me *Out on the rock there girl.* He gave me the length of rope with the harness clip and I knew what to do. I am taller than Father since my last birthday, fifteen. I stretched wide like love and put one foot on the rock in the river middle and one hand on the tree branch above it and swung out over the flood.[117]

This is an internal, homodiegetic narrative, the narrator giving few clues to her identity, using description and free indirect speech. The dramatic mood of this incipit is heightened by repetition – 'got caught', 'was caught', 'frightened of water, always frightened'. The word 'river' is repeated four times in this short passage, the word 'flood' three times. There is more information in this incipit than in the George Saunders' example of a dynamic opening, but it is still dynamic rather than progressive; the place, the time and any information about the girl and her father are implied; the reader has to look for clues.

An army truck drives up and the soldiers wade in to help, eventually rescuing the animal. But the story is not about saving a horse but about the despair and anger of Katie's father, whose wife and son have been killed by just such an army truck, driven by just such soldiers. The title of the story is taken from the girl's observation, when the soldier is under the water and horse is still trapped, that they 'were going to die, since everything in this country must.'[118] This is a story about emotional rather than physical conflict; the dynamic incipit reports on events in the course of happening, but the drama is not in the horse trapped in the water but in the locked-in grief of the father.

The narrator's voice is distinctive, curiously simple yet knowing. She sits catching drips on her tongue like a child, yet thinks of the act of love as she spreads her legs to reach the next rock. Although a homodiegetic narrator, with internal focalisation, she is avoiding describing her own or others' psychological states. She concentrates on what she sees: 'the truck lights made a painting of the rain'[119]; her father was 'a big tree all alone and desperate for forest'[120]; when they go into the kitchen she is fascinated by the colours, 'the green of the uniforms and even the red of Stevie's blood.'[121] She understands the connection between what her father is feeling and the fate of her brother and mother but she makes no comment. In the last line she tells us what she is thinking, but even then, it is the reflection of a child, without connection to the drama: 'still the rain kept coming down outside one two three and I was thinking oh what a small sky for so much rain'.[122]

'Double Birthday' by Willa Cather (1929)

[117] Colum McCann 'Everything in this Country Must' in *Everything in this Country Must* (London: Phoenix Publishing, 2001), 3-15 (p.3).
[118] Colum McCann, p.10.
[119] Colum McCann, p.5.
[120] Colum McCann, p.6
[121] Colum McCann, p.11.
[122] Colum McCann, p.15

A suspensive incipit for a short story might seem like a risky strategy. If neither information nor dramatic action is conveyed in the first lines, with limited space available, can the choice be justified? Willa Cather's story 'Double Birthday', is a rare example of an opening that does this, introducing a theme in the first paragraph, rather than any information about the fictional world, that is fully explored in the narrative that follows:

> Even in American cities, which seem so much alike, where people seem all to be living the same lives, striving for the same things, thinking the same thoughts, there are still some individuals a little out of tune with the times – there are still survivals of a past more loosely woven, there are disconcerting beginnings of a future yet unseen.
>
> Coming out of the grey stone Court House in Pittsburgh on a dark November afternoon, Judge Hammersley encountered one of these men whom one does not readily place, whom one is, indeed, a little embarrassed to meet, because they have not got on as they should. The Judge saw him mounting the steps outside, leaning against the wind, holding his soft, felt hat on with his hand, his head thrust forward – hurrying with a light, quick step, and so intent upon his purposes that the Judge could have gone out by a side door and avoided the meeting. But that was against his principles.[123]

It is only in the opening paragraph that this incipit fits into the suspensive category. By the second paragraph, there is both information and action which pushes it towards progressive. The opening, like the start of *Pride and Prejudice*, is a clever use of a narrator's voice without information on the status of the narrator. It might appear to be spoken by a heterodiegetic, omniscient narrator stating a 'universal truth'. But it becomes apparent that it is the Judge, as a representative of a class of society, who is the focaliser, the person who sees the people unlike him as being 'out of tune with the times'.

Set in Pittsburgh after the end of the First World War, the story has four main characters, each acting as focaliser, in turn, though their point of view continues to be expressed through the words of the heterodiegetic narrator. As well as Hammersley, there is his daughter and the man he meets in the incipit, Englehardt (both 'disconcerting beginnings of a future yet unseen') and Englehardt's uncle, a doctor – with a 'past more loosely woven'. Judge Hammersley is the establishment figure whose point of view is the one expressed in the beginning. He expects everyone to be like him, and is surprised when they are not. Hammersley's view of the world, in which 'next to a charge of dishonesty'[124] the worst that could be said of a man was that he had to rely on the goodwill of others to make a living, is contrasted with Engelhardt, who 'thought he had the best of it; he had gone a-Maying while it was May'. [125] This solid comfort, this iron-bound security, didn't appeal to him much.'

The title refers to the celebrations for Englehardt's and his uncle's birthday, the same day though they are twenty-five years apart in age. It is descriptive only of the event that drives the story forward. A birthday celebration, though, is simultaneously about time passing and time present, and the theme of time and how we are fixed at any moment by our past experiences and our time of life as regards our manners and our attitudes runs through this story. The past is toasted by both uncle

[123] Willa Cather, 'Double Birthday' in *Uncle Valentine and Other Stories,* ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), 39-63 (p.39).
[124] Willa Cather, p.43.
[125] Willa Cather, p.55.

and nephew on their birthday but that there is a present or even a future for them both is suggested in the ending:

> The Doctor passed his flexible, nervous hand lightly over the thick bristles of his French hair-cut. "*Even in our Ashes,"* he muttered, haughtily.[126]

The subtlety of the opening, in which the Judge is speaking without being introduced, only becomes apparent as the story unfolds. By introducing the other characters, the author explores both the diversity within a society and the ways in which those who are not in tune with the society in which they live understand their own position.

'The Garden Party' by Katherine Mansfield (1922)

This example of a suspensive story is set on the day of a garden party at the Sheridans':

> And after all the weather was ideal. They could not have had a more perfect day for a garden party if they had ordered it. Windless, warm, the sky without a cloud. Only the blue was veiled with a haze of light gold, as it is sometimes in early summer. The gardener had been up since dawn, mowing the lawns and sweeping them, until the grass and the dark flat rosettes where the daisy plants had been seemed to shine. As for the roses, you could not help feeling they understood that roses are the only flowers that impress people at garden parties; the only flowers that everybody is certain of knowing. Hundreds, yes, literally hundreds, had come out in a single night; the green bushes bowed down as though they had been visited by archangels.[127]

This opening is a pause before the start of the action. Although it appears to start in the middle, with the first word 'And', nothing is occurring and no information is given. It would be possible to omit it, beginning with the next line: 'Breakfast was not yet over before the men came to put up the marquee.' Delaying the introduction of either dramatization or information enables Mansfield to set the mood and draw the reader in to the sense of entitlement the family feels, and their anxiety that everything must be right. This, like the Cather story, is an example of a third person narrator but with internal focalisation. In the opening paragraph, it is the family that is the focaliser. What Mansfield has achieved with this incipit is not just the view of a fine day and the roses in bloom, but a sense of the way in which the Sheridan family is experiencing this view.

The story records the simultaneous triumph of the garden party ('Ah, what happiness it is to be with people who all are happy, to press hands, press cheeks, smile into eyes'[128]) and the tragedy of a young man's death and the grief of his widow ('Her face, puffed up, red, with swollen eyes and swollen lips'[129]). The youngest Sheridan, Laura, is unable to reconcile the two: ' "Isn't life," she stammered, "isn't life –". But what life was she couldn't explain.'[130] The focalisation switches between Laura, whose point of view is expressed through direct and free indirect speech, and the covert focaliser of the first paragraph, not identified as a character but speaking from the collective point of view of the family.

[126] Willa Cather, p.63.
[127] Katherine Mansfield, 'The Garden Party', *The Garden Party* (London: Penguin, 1984),65-87 (p.65).
[128] Katherine Mansfield, p.81
[129] Katherine Mansfield, p.85.
[130] Katherine Mansfield, p.87.

The title is again a label describing the event at the centre of the story. Like 'Double Birthday', it suggests a celebration; the tensions and dichotomies in the story are not made explicit, are left to the reader to discover as the text unfolds.

Conclusion

By applying narratological analysis and the approach derived from Hescher's work, however briefly, to a few short stories, identifies the range of composition choices writers make. Roy Summers argues that 'it seems likely that similar, though not identical, mental schemata are at work in the processes of creating and interpreting narrative worlds'.[131] So the critical theory developed to analyse the text can have relevance in writing the text. The former focuses on composition, the latter on analysis. However, as I indicated, a creative writer can profit from understanding the structures of narrative situations and narrative modes, which will inform the narrative design of the story, particularly incipits. The creative writer also benefits from a historical and generic understanding of prose narratives to understand traditions and experiments (modernist, postmodernist) with narrative situations. As I have shown, incipits play a significant part in this process of critical composition.

9. *How Can You Possibly Think…?* Commentary

The selection of short stories that complete this submission has been created alongside the analysis of the history and theory of beginnings, and the creation of a framework for the decision-making a writer is required to do in order to start writing. The analytical and creative processes have worked together and informed each other. The stories have been written in order to explore the use of different decisions on each aspect of the beginning – the voice, or codifying function; the category or categories of information first introduced , or interest-bearing function; the balance between dramatization and information-giving, or the pace at which the story starts.

March-Russell uses the word 'mutability' in describing the development of short stories through the centuries and across genres, and it is this that has made them appropriate, in experimenting with beginnings.[132] To understand the difference between genres and types of story, this collection deliberately covers a range; there is no consistency in approach. It is not the purpose of this study to explore how the creative input aligns with debates about the form, nor has the writing been influenced by any particular theories about short story writing. Several of the stories have arisen out of the study of other writers' work, and this is made explicit in the commentary below, but this study has been directed at beginnings, and the influences have, consequently, been around ways of starting the story.

The stories are of varying lengths. This is to test out the way in which the start of a shorter and a longer form might work. Within the collection are two sequences of stories – 'Walking the Dog' and 'Bill Flood'. Here the intention has been to explore different ways of telling the same story. In the case of 'Walking the Dog', each account overlaps with the others, but the critical difference is in the

[131] Roy Sommer, "Making Narrative Worlds: A Cross-Disciplinary Approach to Literary Storytelling". *Narratology in the Age of Cross-Disciplinary Narrative Research*, ed. Sandra Heinen and Roy Sommer, (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2009), p 94.

[132] Paul March-Russell, The Short Story: An Introduction, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), ppviii, 11, 22,28

focalisation, which results in a distinction in the way the story begins, and unfolds. In 'Bill Flood', the experiment is on the point of entry into the story – at the beginning, the middle and the end. These are not attempts to explore short story cycles, linked by recurring characters, a common setting, but to understand how the same story can be presented from a variety of starting points.

The commentary on each story covers the same categories, or functions, as the analysis in section 8. In some cases the opening lines have arisen naturally and the analysis has confirmed, in retrospect, the aptness of the chosen starting point. In others, as the commentary makes explicit, selecting where to start has been a significant part of the creative process and the consideration of the alternatives as laid out in Section 7 has been informative. The exploration of the history, theory and practice of beginnings which is included in the previous sections, has influenced the stories in the collection.

These stories were not inspired by any common idea or topic. They do, however, share a theme that is recurrent, though not dominant, in most of my fiction. That is: the divergence in understanding or perception that exists in the minds of one person or a body of people and another, in almost every situation, and the misunderstanding that results. This is reflected in the title of the collection: *How Can You Possibly Think……?*

Walking the Dog

This quartet of stories covering the same incident is a direct exploration of the theme of the collection. It is tackling directly the issue of time as discussed in Section 5 – *Practical Problems - Where to Begin.* It is concerned with 'the antagonism between the time sequences which the novel imposes, and the instantaneous wholeness of the image of complex human experience which the novel attempts to present'. [133] The same, simple event is recounted from the point of view of the three people involved and also told by an omniscient observer who is also the focaliser - she can only see what is going on but is not privy to the thoughts of the participants. They can be read in any order, as the event occurred simultaneously for all narrators. One viewpoint does not come first. This means that the first few lines will have a different resonance dependent on the order in which the stories are read. That these are four different stories which nevertheless cover the same ground is signalled by the definition of the word 'overlap' which precedes the stories.

The three stories narrated by the Farmer, the Husband and the Wife are all first person narratives with internal focalisation, and are dynamic – that is, they all begin in the middle of the action which has started just before the opening of the story, with two people walking past the farmhouse. They differ in their perspective on the action. The Farmer begins with the facts relating to what is happening – they did this, I did this – but rapidly rises to a pitch of emotional intensity which is maintained for the rest of his account. In his version, there is a mixture of first and third person pronouns in the incipit; although in the grip of his own emotions he is looking outwards, towards others. The Husband uses exclusively the first person. He begins with what has been most important to him up to the point the action starts – his new boots. The information being supplied in this version is about an object, but the object is significant in what the presentation of it implies about the narrator. If the Farmer reveals emotion, the Husband reveals character, not only by his concentration on what matters to him, but by his self-congratulatory tone. The wife, like the

[133] Edward W. Said, p.36.

Farmer, begins her story with action - they were walking, with the dog, and stopped to consult a map. Only once she has described the situation does she begin to reflect on the mood she was in at the point the action started. The three participants' accounts are shaped by the dominant characteristics and emotional state of the narrator: the Farmer's grief at the loss of his wife; the Husband's self-serving need to be in the right; the Wife's inner life which makes her feel like an observer, not a participant.

The heterodiegetic version has an incipit entirely different in content and tone. It is in the diametrically opposite quadrant – static rather than dynamic. It is impersonal; the narrator recounts only what could be seen by anyone in a position to watch what is happening. The incipit uses impersonal language – it speaks of 'anyone' rather than someone. Reading this first would give the reader the facts as an observer before experiencing them from the three different points of view. Whichever order these stories are read in, and particularly if the observed story is kept until last, the reader's prior knowledge of one point of view – the one read first – will influence her perceptions of the others, as each will evoke a reaction and potentially sympathy which will colour the first few sentences of the next.

I have called the quartet 'Walking the Dog' to let the reader know, before beginning to read any of the stories what it is, literally, about. At the same time, the title is too neutral to suggest something that might influence the reader's reactions to the first words.

Only the observed story provides the ending. This is to avoid repetition and because the ending sees the three people approaching understanding from their separate, disparate starting points; the misunderstandings that have made it worthwhile giving each a voice are some way to being resolved. For this reason, I have put this version last.

Life Story

This is a story about story-telling, which is another recurrent theme throughout the collection – the stories we tell that fix what is the truth from our point of view, and the way the telling is revealing of self. This theme is made explicit in 'Life Story' and is specified in the first line. The rest of the opening paragraph introduces the character of the narrator's Grandmother, who is one of two story-tellers in this piece.

This is a static incipit. There is no action in the first paragraph, only exposition. The information relates entirely to who this is; it is designed to create an interest in the character of the first Grandmother, but also to allow the reader to 'hear' the voice of the narrator. She is presenting herself as an impersonal observer, in the incipit, but what she says has a judgmental tone that predicts her role as the focaliser throughout the story.

The core theme of alternative viewpoints in this story occurs through the contrasting styles of two Grandmothers, the narrator's and her boyfriend's. It is in two halves: the first Grandmother looks for disaster, blame and a moral in everything that occurs; the second looks for humour and comfort in it being all right in the end. The story finishes with the narrator having her own story to tell, which would fit into in either of these two ways of looking at events – she is stuck in the dark and the rain waiting for the emergency services after she makes her boyfriend laugh so much he drives into a

flood. She has to decide whether to dwell on whose fault this was and what she has learnt, or how funny it was and the relief of the rescue. The last line is: 'I just haven't decided how to frame it'.

The title is designed to mislead. The reader might start assuming this will be the story of someone's – the Grandmother's, the narrator's – life. The point can only be understood once it has been read, that this about life and story and how they are linked together; how the way we frame the events in our lives will dictate our attitude towards them.

A Life Measured in Puffins

The split in attitudes in this story is between an old man and a young woman, and between story and truth. The first paragraph of this story is static; it provides information on time. It opens with specifics: the age of the narrator at the time she is describing, the age of the man at that time, how much time has passed since, her current age. The passage of time and the way experience alters our perceptions is the theme of this story. Although there is action in the first twenty-five lines, it is still information-giving rather than dramatic. The inciting action in this narrative – the telling of the story by Mr Chivers to the hairdresser – does not begin until line 25. Without this introductory framing, if the puffin story began in the first paragraph, it would shift the emphasis from the impression the narration had on the young girl and give more weight to the story itself. This would encourage the reader to speculate on whether it is true or not, whereas the point of it, as the narrator understands in old age, is not whether it was true but what Mr Chivers was telling her about how to live day by day, how to be grateful for 'the sun when it shines and warmth of the central heating when it rains' because, growing old, she misses 'being able to talk and have someone hear me'. The focalisation remains with the narrator; she reports what Mr Chivers tells her but he is deliberately sparing with his insights, staying hidden behind facts.

A puffin's life span is shorter than the average human, and the title is therefore intended to suggest that life goes through different phases during the course of seventy years. It conveys this only obliquely, but I have not been able to find a more appropriate title.

What Happened at the Party

I wanted to explore how beginnings worked in different genres of story and this one represents crime fiction. Writing it, I came to appreciate the skill involved in crafting credible characters in a situation that is at once complex but capable of resolution within the scope of the short story form. Finding an effective way to begin was one of the issues. In the first drafts, I introduced the character of Henrietta and her judgmental, slightly sour attitude towards the other people in the village. In most short stories, when space is limited, it is important to allow the reader to identify some person, either through the narrative on the page or the voice, at the start, to engage and interest her. With only a few thousand words there is so little scope to bring out the subtleties that would make a person, and therefore a story, of interest. In this instance, though, it did not work. While my interest in writing the story might have been the way in which the events had an impact on Henrietta, this is not the main proposition for the reader. Rather, it is the events and how a whole cast of characters comes together in a given setting to perform their part in a mystery and its resolution. In my early drafts, there was a disconnect between the first paragraphs and the drama on the green, as if I had started telling one sort of story then abruptly diverted onto another.

This final version is a static opening. Although this is a drama, the dramatic action is postponed and the first paragraph establishes the place, and hints at the drama to come, allowing the reader to understand both where they are and what might be about to happen. The mention of a murder in these first lines is a signal of the type of story about to be told, more effective than a dynamic opening. Even when Henrietta is introduced as the guide, in the second paragraph, it is still the place that is being described, and Henrietta's position in it established. This follows the pattern Agatha Christie, a master in the genre, uses in 'The Lamp', as discussed in Section 6 above, providing the setting and some hint of what is to come.

This is a third person narrative but with Henrietta as the focaliser. Nothing in the opening or the text as a whole is reported unless Henrietta sees it. The final sentence of the opening - 'No one would hear her' – is free indirect thought, and I have used this throughout to convey information about Henrietta's character, indicating she is not necessarily a reliable observer.

Within this murder mystery the theme of conflicting perspectives is explored through Henrietta's belief that she understands the people in the village because she has emptied their bins and taken in their parcels, when in fact she knows nothing about them and is wrong in the conclusions she draws.

As with the beginning, it was difficult to find a title that worked in the context of the story. My working title was 'Henrietta', until I concluded that Henrietta was not necessarily the most engaging part of the story and the title would imply it was, above all, an exploration of a woman's life. I changed it to 'Where Were You', which relates to the crucial factor in allowing the events to take place – no one was where they were expected to be or ought to have been – but this does not indicate the sort of story being told. So the final title lets the reader know at once that this is an action story, in which something happens.

Keeping it Safe

In this story, I set out to explore story-telling and dementia, which robs the sufferer of the capacity to separate reality from a jumble of memories; it scrambles truth by confusing context, so although the events the sufferer 'recalls' may be real, the detail is likely to be borrowed from other episodes and periods in their lives. I have opened this story with a paragraph that states that this is what it is doing, taking a muddled recollection from a damaged mind and imagining what incidents and emotions might have occurred in the lifetime of the woman who told it to me that caused this set of 'facts' to be brought together and formed into a story, what gave it its point. This is one of the few stories in the collection with a suspensive incipit – neither information about the fictional world nor the action is provided. It is a frame, a way of entering the text, as author, but directing the reader's attention to the person whose story this is, as someone separate from me. I am asking the reader to hear the story in the context of the woman the protagonist has become.

The story would work without this introduction. It could start with the sentence: 'Estelle was born in Shipton-under-Wychwood in the first half of the twentieth century when the traffic between houses and shops, school and doctor's surgery was on foot.' This would introduce place and character and time in a conventional way but it would deny the reader a layer of meaning on first reading, not being aware of the context in which the story is told.

The narrator is an impersonal observer, telling the story of Estelle's life, because Estelle's voice would be distorted by the dementia, if she were telling this story at the end of her life. The focalisation is internal, however, the narrator only reports what Estelle sees and feels. The title reflects the thought that was dominant in the mind of the woman with dementia – feeling safe in a confusing and unsettling world – and the memory of how this once felt possible.

The Bell Pull

This story was written to experiment with an object in the first lines. It is a straightforward exploration of the theme of differing views, with father and son in conflict over whether the former should visit his wife in a Care Home. Objects are rarely introduced in the first words the reader meets on opening a story. Alice Munro does this in 'Meneseteung'(1990): '*Offerings* the book is called. Gold lettering on a dull-blue cover.' [134] The book contains the poems of Almeda Roth, whose story, drawn partly from the book's preface and the poems and partly from imagination, is told by a first person narrator, who stands back, reading, researching and imagining what the life of the woman whose book (by implication) is held in her hands might have been. Will Self is even more specific about the object being held: 'You are holding in your hands a folder. The hands cannot be described by me because they are yours, but the folder can.'[135]

In both those stories, the object described in the beginning is an intrinsic part of the story development. The bell pull first described in this story is not, but it is a symbol of the wife's dedication to handicrafts. This is either a way of expressing a love which would be rebuffed if shown more openly, or something that absorbed her to the exclusion of all else and justifies her husband's desire to live alone. The purpose of the story is not to explore this in any detail – it is intended to be comic – but to depict a moment when father and son, surrounded by soft furnishings, take opposite sides about how the creator of the furnishings should be treated.

Because the bell pull is not itself significant in the story, I have moved on to the character ringing the bell and what happens subsequently, in the third line. The first sentence is static, but the incipit rapidly moves to progressive. Introducing the idea of something so insignificant having been produced with so much effort is a marker, at the start, of what lies inside the house. Nothing is said about the absent mother, except her concern for her husband, but her presence is everywhere in the house in the cushions, rugs and wall hangings. The words used to describe the bell pull also have some resonance with the couple who lived there – one 'soft', one 'knobbly', in a relationship that is 'densely textured'. The focalisation is external; neither character reveals what he is thinking except through dialogue.

The title relates to the object I have chosen to start with, but it also has a relevance to the narrative. The son is effectively pulling his father out of his lethargy, persuading him to take action.

The Dinner Guests

In this story, I aimed for a narrative approach closer to writers of the early twentieth century than those working today. A group of people are sitting in a cosy room with the fire lit and the lights turned down low, telling each other stories. Philip Hensher refers to this in his Introduction to the

[134] Alice Munro, 'Meneseteung' in *Friend of My Youth* (London: Vintage International, 1991), 50-73 (p.50).
[135] Will Self, 'Inclusion®' in *Grey Area* (London: Penguin, 1993),201-249 (p.201).

Penguin Book of British Short Stories: 'So often the great British short story seems to be fascinated by performance. A recurrent form is the narrator after dinner, who shares the best story ever heard.' [136]As time goes on, he points out, this frequently becomes conversations in railway carriages, as in Graham Greene's 'A Hint of an Explanation' (1949) where a stranger tells a fellow traveller a story from his childhood.

'The Dinner Guests' contains multiple separate stories but each of them, until the last, is designed to reveal something about the person speaking, rather than being relevant to the main narrative thread. The final story involves all the guests and is the climax of the evening when they realise that everything – their invitation to the dinner, the dinner and the setting, the suggestion of story-telling – has been designed to make them hear this particular story, when they are relaxed, comfortable and in company with each other.

Where to start is a harder, and more important, decision with a story as complex as this one. The Greene story creates the mood – the dark, the discomfort, the isolation – and moves on to a discussion of God and free will. Only after two and half pages does the story within a story, which pulls together the strands of the discussion, begin to be told. Because 'The Dinner Guests' has so many characters and each of them carries the same weight in the story, I considered starting with them, setting out clearly who they were, and where they were. This, though, would have tested the reader's patience and without lengthy descriptions it would be hard to make sure the characters were clearly differentiated, one from another.

The line I have chosen to start with puts the reader in amongst the other guests, hearing the first story. It is a dynamic incipit, launching the story when the dinner has been eaten and the first of the six stories is being told. The first paragraph describes the setting, mentions the hostess and introduces the reader to the homodiegetic narrator who is also the focaliser; he tells the reader his opinion on each of the other characters and the stories they told, while concealing some of his own story.

On the second page the narrator recognises that he has started 'from the point where things began to be interesting', rather than with a description of who was in the room. It seemed to me that from the reader's point of view to come in when something of interest had begun to happen was preferable to reading biographies of the characters before anything does. It was my intention that all of the characters would reveal themselves through what they said, not in direct but in reported speech. This also applies to the narrator, who begins to reveal his lack of openness only when he tells his story.

The guests all go on a journey through the course of the story, only those most lacking in self-awareness and empathy ending up untouched. The first line refers to a physical event, a bone breaking; the last line, spoken by the narrator, refers to the effect of the evening: 'I have never regained my peace of mind'. He is referring to an evening of stories with a more traumatic impact than the snap of a bone.

[136] Philip Hensher, 'General Introduction' in *The Penguin Book of British Short Story Volume 2, (London: Penguin, 2015), pxxxii.*

It is the guests who create stories within a story and who are, in the hostess's conception of the evening, the point. The title reflects this, and deliberately gives no hint of what is to come.

Passive Strength

To follow a story on a classic model, I have put one that is unconventional but has an equally dynamic beginning, in the middle of the action with little background or context. It is a first person narrative, internally focalised, but the narratee is not the implied or real reader, but another character, addressed throughout in the second person. It is tightly contained in a single stretch of time covering the performance of a comedian in a pantomime-like act. The collection's theme of differing perspectives is made explicit, in this story. The stooge at the back of the stage is only too aware of how the act looks to the audience and the comedian's attitude towards it and how far away these are from his own viewpoint. He is also aware of the impossibility of making himself heard, of being understood, even if listened to by anyone, least of all the man he supports on the stage. Only by the extreme physical act he contemplates – which silences him forever – does he know he will be noticed.

There seemed to be little choice where to start this story. It has to begin with the narrator on stage contemplating the antics of the comedian. What was important was to set the tone, to introduce the voice of a weary, disillusioned man. The title reflects on both the dumb inactivity of the narrator and the courage he finds to take this last step. It is what the comedian credits him with possessing, not foreseeing that the juxtaposition of these two characteristics could result in such an outcome.

The Dessert Trolley

The theme of this story is yearning for lost innocence and the random way in which choices that determine a path through life occur, and are taken or not. But it is also about how one view may differ radically from another and how what is seen and judged on the surface is not necessarily all there is to see and judge. I have chosen the dessert trolley as an image for loss because the story has food at its core, and I have introduced both food and loss into the first paragraph, which is followed by a break, after which the narrative goes back in time. This is using a dynamic incipit as a frame.

Two women face each over an elaborate dessert and one of them begins to cry at the thought of the old types of puddings and the way they were wheeled up to the table for a choice to be made. The second section after this brief paragraph moves into the past these two women shared. The dessert trolley is only reintroduced in the final paragraph when its meaning is understood by the narrator, listening to her friend, and by the reader. This approach, of describing a scene in the present before telling a story in the past, can fail to work. If the reader is beguiled by the first paragraph there is a risk she will be waiting to see how it is relevant to the rest of the story rather than moving it to the back of her mind and accepting the point will not be made until the end. It therefore has to be relatively short, and concentrating on just setting the scene.

The technique is used by Edith Pearlman in her short story 'The Little Wife' (2011)a much longer and more complex story, which nevertheless starts in just this way, introducing two characters in a specific moment in time, in an aircraft going to the deathbed of one of their oldest friends.[137] The

[137] Edith Pearlman, *'*The Little Wife'*,* in *Binocular Vision* (London: Pushkin Press, 2013),276-293 (p.276).

story then shifts back in time to describe how the couple on the plane met each other and how the dying man features in their lives. The first paragraph lays down the markers for what is going to develop in the subsequent pages of back story and throughout the visit to the dying man: the place of music in the lives of the men, the sense of long intimacy without real closeness between the two people on the plane. It uses the dislocation of time to avoid launching, first, into a back story with the reader having no idea that this is leading to a specific event in the present.

If I deleted the first paragraph of *The Dessert Trolley,* the story would still be coherent. The beginning would then be an introduction to the two women – the restaurant owner and the ornithologist – but without the setting being made explicit. The story of their childhood in a village would follow naturally. But the end would have to change. The moment when Tanya reveals to Caroline the abuse she suffered at the hands of a man admired by everyone they knew, would have to be created in the final paragraphs. This would seem contrived, and would upset the symmetry. The title, which is also the symbol I have chosen to represent lost innocence, would also have to be changed.

Possessions

I was aiming to do two things with this story: to see whether I could effectively introduce a differentiated group of individuals within quite a short piece, and to describe a collective awakening to false perceptions. Introducing five characters, and making plain what are their key characteristics, takes a page and a half of a three and a half page story. This, then, can be described as the beginning. At the end of this, the reader will have understood who these people are, where they are and what is going on. The characters have a paragraph each and there is a final paragraph wrapping up this first section to provide a context and a starting point. This extended incipit is progressive. It provides both information about the young men and the situation and begins the action. The narrative voice is detached and heterodiegetic but the focalisers are the men themselves; as each of them reflects on the experience and his own part in it.

The beginning puts the emphasis on the young men and on their obsessions. The subsequent pages reinforce each of their roles in the group and demonstrate the way they behave together as the walk along the Ridgeway proceeds. As they journey, they are each creating for themselves a narrative of what is going on as seen from within their own certainties and prejudices, but each narrative is also constructed in the light of their uncertainties about themselves. They think about how the events, and their participation, can be turned into a story to tell others later.

All of this builds to the final paragraph, when something which none of them knew at the time is revealed as the one thing which, afterwards, forms the story, and which exposes their previous perceptions of the event as shallow. The title is a play on what they all valued as defining them – the car, the boots, the map, harmonica – being trumped by what was growing inside the only one who thought of others not himself, and whose possessions included everything vital to comfort that they had forgotten to bring.

At the Mouth of the Tunnel

This story is inspired by the opening of a novel, *Golden Hill* (2016) by Francis Spufford[138]. This opens with a paragraph that has four sentences in it but which reads with the breathlessness of one, as a ship enters a harbour and a character on the deck hops from foot to foot in impatience to be gone and runs through darkening streets just in time to reach a building before it closes. I thought this same, extended rush to a sudden conclusion would work as a piece of under 200 words in length. The first words, which is the beginning in this context, make the situation plain; a woman has run to catch an underground train but has missed it. The pace of the prose picks up as she finally spots the figure left behind and recognises the menace and the need to escape. The title, in this length of work, is part of the work, and it conveys both the situation and the imminent danger in which the girl stands.

In a piece of fiction of this length, it might seem irrelevant to talk of the opening as distinct from the remainder of the text, when that text is no longer than what I have been describing as the incipit for stories of a thousand or a few thousand words. Where to start is still relevant to the writer, though. There has to be movement, of some sort, because the piece will only work if distance has been travelled between the beginning and the end, and there are not words enough for scene setting. The incipit must, by definition, be progressive, because the action has to be in progress and information has to be conveyed. With this story, pace was important; so the girl begins out of breath, calms and then builds to new sense of horror. The narrator is heterodiegetic but the focalisation is internal.

Shadow Boxing

This story begins with a paragraph that is suspensive; it says nothing about this world except the weather in it and nothing happens. The point of this opening is to establish the voice of the narrator – his extravagant use of metaphor and metonymy, his belief that the world, including the weather, is out to get him. His defiance in the face of what he sees as persecution. Yet, as he reveals in the second paragraph, he knows he is a victim of his own unhappiness. For all his efforts to stay afloat, the most he can hope for is survival. At the end, he can take pleasure in the fact that this 'bully of a day' did not manage to do him any harm.

This is intended to be a humorous story, (although it deals with the tragedy of a man unable to stop himself hating the world and himself) and the voice signals this. Yet he has never been able to leave childhood behind (he enjoys, more than anything, reading children's literature). The story is called 'Shadow Boxing' because the narrator is in constant conflict with what he cannot touch – his own nature as much as his employer or the random chance that something worth eating will be reduced in Tesco's.

Bill Flood

This trio of stories were all inspired by the traditional Irish ballad which precedes them. William Bloat, in the poem, tries to murder his wife then hangs himself, but his wife survives. There is a story here – of a marriage that goes disastrously wrong and a woman who is forced to live on, damaged, after such a traumatic event. It was this latter aspect that interested me first. What sort

[138] Francis Spufford, *Golden Hill* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016).

of a life awaited this woman, whether she was to blame or not, as she fought to recover her health and rebuild her life. This is covered in the first story,' Still Alive and Sinning'. The second story, 'The Bane of His Life', looks at what might have caused the tragedy to happen. The final strand, 'Ariadne's Story', takes the characters beyond the immediate aftermath and represents a resolution of the conflicts which form the basis of the first two.

All of the incipits for these stories are static: they give information but do not enter the story at the point that action is taking place. Each of them is different in the position of the narrator in relation to the text.

Still Alive and Sinning

The narrator in this story is homodiegetic but an observer, someone who is not directly involved but exactly fits the 'who sees' definition of a focaliser. In selecting this approach I was influenced by Somerset Maugham's short stories. The first line is a conscious imitation of the first line of 'The Voice of the Turtle'(1935): 'For some time I could not make up my mind if I liked Paul Melrose or not,' [139] The narrator in this story is necessary to the action that unfolds – he invites the opera singer and the author to his house – but he is not implicated in it. This was the approach I adopted to narrating what happened after the husband had died and the wife survived.

There were many points at which this story could have started: with the drama itself, the gashed throat and the trip to hospital, or after her return home, facing the rest of her life. I have chosen to begin when all this is in the past, and a new normality, which is nevertheless not normal, has been established. I was interested in the helplessness of the victim of the initial assault, and this required some distance from the events to be realised fully.

The incipit establishes the narrator's point of view but nothing about the action taking place. Although the narrator is an observer, she is also revealing herself, as Maugham's narrators do, through her attitude towards and reaction to the story she is telling. In this case, I have made her detached and cynical. The ending reinforces her lack of depth of feeling about the woman whose cause she took up. Although she did enable an intervention, the final line is: 'Then I put it back on the shelf'. Her involvement is over. It is, for the narrator as much as the reader, only a story.

The Bane of His Life

Told by a heterodiegetic narrator, this is the husband's story and starts at the beginning of his life. It was not necessary for the story to go far back; it could equally have started with his marriage. This would have put the focus of the story on the conflict between husband and wife. In writing this, though, I had to consider its relationship to the preceding story. Although I intended each to be capable of being read in isolation, they also needed to work together. In 'Still Alive and Sinning' I have introduced an evil nemesis, who has trapped and is preying on an innocent victim. I wanted to use this character again in the explanation of what went wrong, to establish that Bill Flood is not a villain. He is not evil, just adrift and vulnerable, which is what allowed the tragedy to happen. He is introduced at the moment he is born, a breech birth as his mother constantly reminds him, as if this is his fault. I was aiming to create an impression of a man who was dominated by the woman who

[139] W. Somerset Maugham, 'The Voice of the Turtle' in *Collected Short Stories Volume 1 (*London: Penguin, 1963), 248-262 (p.248).

brought him up and bewildered by the world. He was a man whose mind is 'sliding out of control across the tilting surface of his world'. In this context, the thwarted figure of Marina is able to become an influence on his life before the arrival of his wife.

The third person, detached observer narrator makes Bill an unknowable figure; Bill is the focaliser – the narrator keeps the narrative to what Bill has seen and experienced, but little of Bill's inner life is revealed. The previous story starts after the attempted murder and suicide; this one stops just before it.

Ariadne's Story

My original intention was to end with the history of Bill Flood's life up to the day he took it. But I felt that the character left, literally, without a voice at the end of the first story needed to be given one, and to find some resolution to the situation she found herself in. I began to tell this, in the first draft, with the following opening lines:

> Here I am, living happily ever after. Stories should have a happy ending, I believe, and I see no reason to save it up until the end, so I am stating it at the beginning. There is misery enough, in my story, but, as you will see, it has all come gloriously right.

I had chosen the voice of Ariadne as the narrator, and this struck the note I wanted, resilient, almost triumphant. I was also experimenting with the idea of letting the reader know from the beginning what will happen in the end. The story that unfolded from this beginning was, in substance, the same as the final version, but was different in tone. From this beginning it was impossible to set a tone of suspense, of menace, and the resultant story was pedestrian and too long, in the circumstances, to justify the reader's attention through to an outcome already foretold. Where this type of opening works is where the event described at the beginning is horrific, a death of disaster approaching, known to the reader but not to the characters on the page until it happens, as Garcia Marquez does (and signals he is doing in the title), in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981).[140] To foretell happiness has no narrative force.

The revised opening also provides a clearer idea of Ariadne, and one that is consistent with the character as she appears in the other stories, before she has gained the strength the original choice of opening reflected. She has few illusions about the sort of person she is, sad but not crushed by the lack of love and encouragement she has met with. From this to the final paragraph, when she can sit by her window and wave to people passing, 'learning how to tell one species ….from another' is a complete narrative arc, through the time she spends outwitting her nemesis and regaining control of her life. The scope to build tension through the movement up and down the stairs, the heart-stopping seconds when she thinks she is going to be exposed, is much greater when the reader does not know from the outset (however much she expects it will be so) that all is well at the end.

[140] 'On the day they were going to kill him, Santiago Nasar got up at five- thirty in the morning to wait for the boat the bishop was coming on.' Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* trans. Gregory Rabassa, (London: Penguin, 1996), p.1.

A Balanced Diet

This begins by setting up the situation. This means the characters, the place and action are all contained in the first paragraph. It is a progressive incipit in which it is clear to the reader what is going on and who is involved; the only information withheld in these first lines is what each of the characters intends to say to the other in the restaurant, although this is also, though not explicitly stated, apparent by the end of the second paragraph: she thinks the time has come to part while he is planning to propose. Under the influence of the pleasure or the stress of the meal, they both decide not to speak, and it is their shift in mood, away from their original intention, that creates the story. There is tension, albeit this is not a tragic story and the language and tone signals that, in whether the couple will, in the end, say what they thought they would say, and what would then be the consequences. The narrative switches between their points of view.

When, at the end, he says he had been thinking they should get an allotment, she says: 'I was going to say that', even though it was not what he planned to say, or what she did. The story ends as the evening does, but there is no reconciliation of their opposing points of view; they both shelve what they had intended to say without having said it. It is left to the reader to imagine how this relationship will develop from this point of mutual misunderstanding.

The word 'balance' in the title refers to the position of two bodies on a see-saw – counterweights, some distance apart. It is a balance that is easily lost, as their equilibrium as a couple is so close to being lost. The word 'diet' indicates it is food that allows them to back away from the moment that might have brought disaster.

A Compassionate Man

This is another progressive incipit. It starts with the situation – who is involved, where they are, what they are about to do. In this case, a man with a hangover on a hot day is going by train to visit his dying grandmother. This is made obvious at the beginning, but the beginning does not make it obvious, as 'A Balanced Diet' does, what is going to happen – will the grandmother die? Will Martin, the grandson, arrive in time? The point here is neither of these; the story ends as the journey does. This is about Martin, not the grandmother.

The narrator is heterodiegetic but Martin is the focaliser. He thinks, on the journey, about the gap between his grandmother's view of the world – everything is wrong – and his mother's – everyone is lovely – and tries to convince himself that he is comfortably in the middle, that he is the compassionate man of the title, but without being weak. He is also ambiguous about his feelings for his grandmother, whether he cares for her at all. Only in the last few lines does it become clear to him that she does matter.

The title could apply equally to Martin, to Martin's own estimation of himself, or to the conductor on the train who shows the most compassion.

Hope

In this story, I have experimented with the long view, the distant place coming closer and the detail becoming clearer until the small space that holds the action and the characters is brought into focus. It is a technique used in film, and is the way Angela Carter begins 'Penetrating to the Heart of the

Forest'. As Carter did, I am using the approach to create an impression of a place because understanding the setting is essential in carrying the theme of the story. The village where the girl lies on the floor of the church giving birth is a narrow valley, is isolated and poor. Effort and expense has only been invested in building a church that is a constant reminder, not of comfort, but of the hell awaiting all sinners. It is this that makes the girl's expectations for her future, and the future of the baby she carries, so hopeless. The narrator is heterodiegetic and the focalisation is initially external, only moving into the hopes and fears of the girl in the church as her labour advances.

I wrote this story while my daughter was expecting my first grandchild, inspired by the different expectations of a woman giving birth in previous centuries to our expectations now. We know it is unlikely either mother or baby will die; we expect the child will have every opportunity to lead a long life without serious deprivation. Although this thought is not articulated on the page, I would expect it to be triggered in the mind of any reader whose life includes recent experience of childbirth.

The story, and the collection, ends on a positive note, looking, as the title of the story suggests, with hope towards the future. The valley the girl lives in is a metaphor for life – a gentle, easy slope to adulthood and a hard, rocky climb through the responsibilities this brings. The baby, born when adulthood never mind old age was not certain, has all that ahead of her. Alice's journey is not over yet, but it is a new day

10 Conclusion

The study of beginnings could, if not circumscribed, expand well beyond the limits of this thesis. The very notion of beginning is fraught with philosophical considerations around originality and the genesis of ideas. The note of authority apparent in the earliest writings on the subject has been overlaid with the complexities explored in centuries of creative writing that have thrown up works that justify, and have received, extensive analysis of the way in which they start. In the Post-Modern era, conventions have been challenged and distorted; writers have found ways of making beginnings signal their intent in how they want the work to be experienced by the reader; or just ways of conditioning the reader's view based on an assumed knowledge of signals drawn from antecedent texts.

This study has concentrated on the decisions that a writer has to make at the beginning of a work, in particular a writer of short fiction, where every word has to carry weight and the burden carried by the first words is therefore greater. The question it has posed, through an analysis of the philosophical and historical background and critical theory, is whether there is a way of isolating the elements of the decisions, and by isolating them, throw light on the authorial practice that results in a finished work.

The conclusion is that these decisions are interconnected and complex but it is possible to identify, in principle, what they are. The work of Achim Hescher, based on an analysis by Andrea del Lungo, has been useful and informative in breaking down the distinct but interlocking ways in which the first words, sentences and paragraphs can be constructed to give the story that follows weight and coherence. From this a structured, analytical approach to understanding the writer's intentions in the beginning of a work has been developed and is applied to selected short stories studied in detail. This approach has been used in the creation of a collection of short stories, the creative element of the thesis, both in the initial writing, in re-writing and in a commentary on the individual stories.

How Can You Possibly Think…?

1. Walking the Dog
    a. The Farmer
    b. The Husband
    c. The Wife
    d. Walking the Dog
2. Life Story
3. A Life Measured in Puffins
4. What Happened at the Party
5. Keeping it Safe
6. The Bell Pull
7. The Dinner Guests
8. Passive Strength
9. The Dessert Trolley
10. Possessions
11. At the Mouth of the Tunnel
12. Shadow Boxing
13. Bill Flood
    a. Still Alive and Sinning
    b. The Bane of His Life
    c. Ariadne's Story
14. A Balanced Diet
15. A Compassionate Man
16. Hope

Walking the Dog

Overlap: If two or more **activities**, **subjects**, or **periods** of **time** overlap, they have some **parts** that are the same.

https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/overlap

All the following narratives occurred simultaneously. They can be read in any order.

The Farmer

Today, a couple walked past. I went outside and watched them. They stopped, she pointed towards the footpath, on which the public have the right to walk. He shook his head and set off down the track across my fields: private land. I went outside and shouted, as Leanne would have done and as she never will again. These hateful, hateful people, trespassing on my land, were bringing back to me the pain of losing her. It should have been Leanne here, shouting.

We were passionate about so many things. Each other, of course. The house, the land, the stock; early mornings when the day held promise and the eggs the hens had laid overnight were sitting on the breakfast table in the wooden egg cups carved by my grandfather eighty years ago, and we were the only people sitting in an empty landscape. Evenings when the weariness was like a basket of logs brought into the hearth and laid down with an easeful sense of hard work well done. Leanne was passionate in anger, too, and I was not. She raged against those who did not do as good a job as she believed they should, who did not behave as she thought they ought to. I was indifferent. Why should I let such things bother me, when I was superior to the people who angered her, leading, as I knew I did, a life more beautiful than theirs? But now, now. The only passion left to me is hate. How can I not hate all these blithe and trivial people who behave in ways Leanne would have despised? The sales assistants who laugh when they drop the thing you are buying on the floor instead of handing it to you as they are paid to do. The solicitor who explains away his failure to do what he is contracted to do by reference to his own problems – his mother's stroke, the central heating breakdown. The oil tanker driver who lets the hose leak across the yard creating a slick that he does not understand is his fault. As I face these people, as I talk to them on the phone, I have images of pitchforks in my head, or the axe I use to split the logs. And it exhausts me. It brings my loss back to me harder each time and I look at each articulated lorry coming towards me whenever I drive to town and imagine what it would be like to turn the wheel just a few inches to the right. But I promised her I would not do that. Treasure the house, she said. Treasure the land.

Leanne always shouted at the people who took one of our farm tracks instead of following the footpath. I never bothered. I felt sorry for them; poor souls who didn't have what I had, who came out once a month, once a year, walked past without understanding the depth and the detail. But she had gone and I was alone with my fury and the thoughtless passers-by were an insult, to the countryside; to the memory of Leanne. So I shouted. I have no idea what words I used. I could hear the echo of Leanne's voice as I spoke, her bold and forceful tone. But my own voice did not sound like that, only irritated, weary. The woman stopped at once and turned to look towards me, then back at her husband, who kept on walking. They had a Labrador, overweight. Both the breed and the condition belonging naturally to the sort of people who come out on a Sunday afternoon believing they have the right to walk where they choose. I went over to where the woman stood. She was holding a map.

"This isn't a right of way," I said. "The footpath is over there."

She flapped the map and looked again towards her husband, called his name. She seemed to be unhappy, uncomfortable and, had she been alone, I would have smiled at her. I like to think I would have smiled at her, that the rage would not have lasted. Leanne could switch from fury to friendliness in a moment but being new to rage, I don't have the control over it that she had. The thought had anyway no time to register because the man began to shout at me and I – how could I help myself? – shouted back. He began to walk towards me. Just as the dog was the sort of dog such people own, so the clothes he was wearing were the sort of clothes such people wear. He was

not looking at me as he came, but kept his eyes on the ground. Despite this, he looked aggressive. I had the impression he was not looking at me because he wanted to hold his aggression in check until the moment he was face to face with me. The wife said nothing, kept watching the husband, as I was. He came on, closer and closer and all the time my hatred for the man was rising in me like the heat from rotting grass in a compost heap, and all my humanity was being eaten away by it, as the grass is, eaten away and destroyed. I felt my fists starting to clench; shoved them into the pockets of my coat. Leanne would have looked for words to use. I had no words; only rage and I did not know how to handle that.

The Husband

There were so many things to enjoy, and I had been taking the trouble to enjoy every one of them. I had new boots. We don't spend money until it is necessary to spend money, which is not because money is particularly short, in our household. It is because we have a healthy (I would say) regard for money. And spending it carefully means there is always pleasure in owning something new. I bought the boots in an Outdoor Shop where the assistant took the matter of which boots I should be buying even more seriously than I did. As a result, I was more than usually focussed on getting this decision right and never mind the cost. It was a treat, to wiggle my feet into those new boots, tighten the laces, take the first few steps. Not just the first few, either; I remembered to be pleased with the sensation of walking in them for a couple of miles, at least.

It was that time of year when the leaves are coming out on the trees, but not on quite all the trees; when the birds are active, squabbling, mating, nest-building; when the wild flowers on the verges are so much brighter and better than my memory of them from the year before. We passed a cluster of trees where there were evergreens and two different sorts of deciduous tree growing together, creating a pattern of dark green and fresh, light green shot through with the brown of a trunk yet to burst into life. I pointed it out to Caroline. 'How lovely,' she said, and I have no idea if she saw what I saw. I am never sure how much Caroline sees – she is quite short-sighted. Sometimes she says: 'Oh yes, I saw that', if I tell her that a woodpecker, for instance, has just flown past, but more often she looks where I am pointing and says what she thinks is appropriate.

She is a dreamy one, Caroline. I sometimes wonder how much she would notice or how she would get on in life without me. It is as if, I think, she is caught on a piece of barbed wire and hasn't got the push to free herself, until someone comes along to give her an arm and a tug, to get her going again. I see it as my job to give her the arm and the tug, and although I sometimes wish she thought for herself a bit more, made her own decisions, I'd rather have Caroline to live with than someone like my sister Matty, for example, who does exactly what she wants without giving a toss for anyone else. Caroline and I, we look out for each other.

That was the other thing, about this walk. Having Caroline there to share the joy of what was all around us. I had given her the map (a bit of a tug out of the dream world she lives in) to make sure she didn't just tag along, leaving it to me to decide where we were going next. And I was pleased to be walking with the dog. I know she's too fat and that is mostly my fault because I can't resist giving her the crust from my toast and the fat from the ham in my sandwich, but I don't mind having to stop while she catches us up. Just standing still is an underrated activity, to my mind. Time to notice a gust of wind passing over a field of half-grown corn, or to try and catch sight of the skylark singing itself silly somewhere up in the sky. The dog was part of the pleasure of this walk. Definitely part of it.

But then, the route we were taking became a little dull. The track we were walking on was difficult to walk on. It was a question of trudging down the ruts in the puddles and mud or making a way along ridges too narrow for comfort. Caroline dropped back; it was impossible to walk two abreast unless one of us was going to take a route even muddier or narrower. The dog dropped even further back and there was nothing to see while we waited for her but a field of beans on one side and a bank of hawthorn on the other. And, although I was not yet ready to admit this to Caroline, I could feel my boots beginning to rub, a sensation of discomfort going on towards pain in my left little toe and right heel. It occurred to me for the first time that the attentive assistant might have sold me the most expensive pair of boots he thought it was possible I would buy rather than

the best pair for my feet, and the type of walking I planned to do. I was truly reluctant to think this as the boot-buying and wearing experience had been so enjoyable up to then that I didn't want it ruined as a memory. So I thought: probably I need to work them in a little. Take them for a couple of two or three mile walks before moving up to a six or seven miler.

This was the state of things, then, when we passed an unattractive and isolated farmhouse and found a track going off to the left. Though Caroline had the map, I had a pretty clear idea of the shape of the whole walk and it looked to me as if we could cut it short by taking this; the landscape was boring, the dog was a pain, my feet hurt. A shortcut was what I wanted.

"Let's go this way," I said to Caroline.

"No, we can't," she said. "It isn't a footpath."

It is, if I'm honest, one of the more irritating things about her, her respect for rules. She will follow signs to a Car Park when there is nothing stopping her parking on the road, just in case parking on the road is not allowed. She studies the rules about recycling as if they were the Bible and follows them as if they were laid down by God. So, at that moment, in view of all the other irritations and despite the previous loveliness of the day, I was irritated. So I just walked off down the track anyway, and before long I could hear her wellies – she will never buy a proper pair of boots – thumping along behind me.

We had hardly started down the track when we heard a man starting to shout. Now, this was in the middle of nowhere. Just the one mildewy old farmhouse, fields of arable. No animals. No fences that would have indicated animals might be hidden by some bush or other, or might be about to be turned out into the fields we were walking through. A track that was grassy, well-used, heading straight to a lane less than half a mile away. No gates. No signs. I knew, of course, that the man was shouting because this wasn't supposed to be a track walked on by the likes of Caroline and me. Only by the likes of whatever red-faced farmer or farm labourer had crawled out of his pigsty of a house to object to us doing what was reasonable. I kept walking. Caroline, of course, (rules! rules!) didn't.

I turned round and looked at him. He was less red-faced, less dilapidated than I'd expected, but more threatening. He was standing over Caroline, who is a small woman, while she fumbled with the map. She seemed to be denying she knew it was not a right of way. She looked to be taking the blame when there should have been no blame. I called out to him, reasonably enough, that we were just taking a short cut. He began to shout about private property as if we had committed a crime as bad as, or worse than, touching up his wife or taking his car and driving it away. This stretch of empty acres was his, and however many other acres he had, however rarely he might walk on them himself, he was not going to lend just a narrow strip of them to us for the fifteen minutes it would take us to walk to the other end.

I didn't like the aggression in his voice; I particularly didn't like the way he stood, so close to Caroline, so poised above her like a hawk about to pounce, and the thought that Caroline would be feeling diminished by this awful bully of a man made me furious. I had been going to suggest to her, calmly, that we continued walking and ignored whatever venomous comments the man might make. He was after all powerless to stop us without physical violence, which I assumed was unlikely; I was anyway as tall as he was, and younger. I had been going to suggest this, but instead, I lost my temper. I am normally placid, I would say, not prone to anger, but what with the business of the boots, and anxiety about Caroline, I surprised myself by thinking that, if he chose to be violent, well, I was more than ready.

The Wife

Mark stopped walking so I stopped walking and the dog, who was overweight, lay down on the grass.

"Straight on or left?" Mark asked. I was holding the map because I don't need reading glasses and Mark does, so it is easier if I have the map, which also makes me responsible for choosing the path to take.

I had not been thinking of the map, or the path; or Mark or the dog, come to that. I had been following two different strands of thought, letting one go while I pondered the other, then going back to the first.

"Um," I said, and turned the map until I had a view of the precise area of woods, fields and farms we were crossing. "Straight on."

Mark needs reading glasses because he is long-sighted which means he had a much better idea than I did, in my relatively short-sighted understanding of the topography, of how the brow of a hill to our left related to the field of wheat to our right. He knew where we were in general while I only knew where we were in particular.

"Are you sure?" he said.

"Yes. Look, there isn't a footpath to the left."

"There's a track, though. Isn't that marked?"

"Ah, yes."

"And does it go all the way to the lane this side of that wood?"

"Well, yes, it does."

"We should take it, then. It's shorter."

"But it isn't marked as a right of way."

"Oh, Caroline!" he said, and walked towards the start of the track.

I didn't really care which way we went just as long as I could fall back into the rhythm of walking and return to my two strands of thought, which were these. Firstly, my sister-in-law Matty, who is married to a banker, had phoned to tell me a lifestyle magazine was going to do a spread on the interior of her house. This is the sort of thing that happens to Matty and not to me, and I prefer that it should be so. But as I trudged along at Mark's pace with frequent pauses for the dog to catch us up, I fell to imagining what it would be like if, for once, this had happened to me. I imagined the type of people who would come to the house to be shown round and take photos; I imagined the interviewer as a younger, prettier version of Matty in vintage clothing and the photographer as a juvenile Benedict Cumberbatch, rueful and shy. I would, I thought, show them every room, as if every room was worth seeing, writing about and photographing. I developed a script I would follow as we went round. The sofa, I would say, had come from the charity shop in town, and the assistant had taken all the cushions off to show us the label confirming it was fire retardant; otherwise, she said, she couldn't sell it to us. When we got it home, Mark scrutinised the label and decided it could have been sewn on by the duplicitous person wanting to offload it to a charity shop rather than paying to have it taken away. He lit a match and dropped it on one of the cushions, where it smouldered sullenly, burning a neat hole, then went out. I would show them the hole, but probably wouldn't tell them that Mark has yet to make up his mind whether the experiment proved it was or it wasn't flame retardant. The wardrobe in the spare room came with the house, I would tell them, that is to say, the people we bought the house from failed to take it away probably because it was too big to go down the stairs. We kept it for the same reason, even though the quantity of clothes it

held, if piled neatly on the floor, would occupy less than a third of the space the wardrobe did. In every room, I found, there was a story to tell the proto-Matty and proto-Benedict Cumberbatch in my head. We have quite a few rooms in our house and this little fantasy was easily enough to keep me amused for as long as it would take to walk the long way back to the car, on the designated footpath.

The interviewer and the photographer, it should be said, were no less fictitious than the diffident but amusing version of myself showing them around.

Secondly, I was thinking about the construction of a liner for the log basket. I had seen log baskets for sale with fabric liners to prevent the debris from the logs dropping through the cracks onto the carpet, and I had found a piece of fabric in my bag of bits-I -might- need -one- day which would be perfect for the task. Before I started, though, I had to work out the construction: how to attach the sides to the bottom, how to secure the top to the basket. The planning, when everything in contemplation has the chance to turn out perfectly, is often the most enjoyable part of a project such as this, and I was enjoying it.

In the circumstances, I did not want to argue with Mark about which way to go, because such an argument would delay my return to my fantasy and my planning. So I followed him.

We had gone ten yards or so down the marked-but-not-public-right-of-way track when we heard a man, calling.

"Excuse me!"

I hesitated. Mark carried on walking.

"Can you stop, please?" said the voice, and I did. At this moment, I knew the day had escaped from me. The walk, my fantasy, my plan for a perfect piece of sewing were so much fluff, not to be held on to in the face of the incident even now unfolding.

I turned round and found an upright, serviceable-looking chap, not young, coming towards me. I looked back to Mark, who was still walking.

"Mark!" I called. "Mark!" He stopped, every angle in his body expressive of irritation. Slowly, he turned towards me, fixed to the spot, looking at me, not the approaching man.

"What?" he said.

I gestured at the new arrival, who had reached me, by this time.

"This isn't a right of way," he said.

"Oh." I fumbled with the map as if I had perhaps misunderstood it, or was holding it upside down. "Isn't it?" I glanced from the map to Mark and it struck me that he was like the patch of green denoting wood, over there, while I was the isolated building, over here, and the tracks connecting us were both linking us together and holding us apart.

The dog, who likes people, other dogs and food as much as she dislikes walking, trotted up and wagged her tail at the stranger. He ignored her.

"It quite clearly isn't," he said. "I must ask you to follow the signposted footpath." He pointed at the regulation green arrow marking the path we had left.

"We're not doing any harm," shouted Mark, from the distance he had kept between himself and the land owner, for such I assumed he must be. "It's a shortcut."

"This is private property!" yelled the man, raising his voice as Mark had raised his, though this was hardly necessary for the purposes of making themselves heard.

I looked from the man beside me on my left, a stranger, to the man a little distance away, on my right, my husband, and felt myself to be contemptible in both their eyes. The land owner must

think me silly, weak, unable to read a map or take a firm decision on which way to go; Mark would be thinking me silly, weak, unable to stand up to someone who, in his view, was trying to bully us. I could think of no way to recover the illusion I was not silly. Not weak. Too late now.

Mark began to walk back towards the stranger. The stranger stood where he was and waited. The dog lay down on my foot and sighed.

Walking the Dog

It is an April afternoon in a stretch of farmland no more than five miles from the newest estate on the edge of the old village, but still remote. Reached only by a lane and then a track. The farmhouse is old and squats amongst its outbuildings, invisible to anyone on the roads and railways of the district. Discoverable only on foot, or by the occupants of any vehicle with a reason for visiting, because no one would choose to drive down the rutted track without a purpose. Anyone standing outside the farmhouse would have a view of fields, hedges, copses, pasture and sky. A landscape that changes with the weather and the seasons. Anyone wishing to watch the world go by should choose a different place to stand.

It is an April afternoon and there is no one standing outside the farmhouse but there are two people passing by. On foot. A man and a woman, quite young, are walking past the house towards a footpath that leads straight across the fields ahead of them. The man, whose name might be Mark, is slightly plump, above average height and he is placing his feet with care. The woman, Caroline, perhaps, is small, slight and walking just behind the man. They pass the farmhouse and stop where a grassy track leads off from the path, and consult a map. A yellow Labrador, overweight, trudges up to the couple and lies down at their feet. When the consultation ends the group of three – man, woman, dog – set off at intervals, in that sequence. Mark turns off the path and goes down the grassy track, more briskly, with more determination although with a just perceptible limp. Caroline waits, watching him, looking round, refolding the map, then she, too, sets off down the track, falling into position behind her husband. The dog, finally, understanding that all other options – being allowed to stay here and fall asleep, being allowed to stay here for the rest of her life, being given a biscuit – are now closed to her, struggles to her feet and follows.

Watching them, an observer, if there were one, would have missed a man coming out of the farmhouse. His name, let us say, is Robert. He is unlike the house he has just left in being tidy, apparently strong, without, at first glance, any weaknesses, any cracks or flaws. Yet he looks to be in a place where he belongs, in the context of the house and the landscape. He lifts his head, tenses his shoulders and begins to walk, at a steady, sturdy pace towards Mark and Caroline, retreating away from him down the track they have chosen to take.

"Hey! You! Excuse me!" he calls, his voice cracking then rising syllable by syllable and ending on a firmer, louder note. "Can you stop, please." He sounds peevish now. Although he looks strong, appears at home, his voice hints at weakness and uncertainty.

Caroline stops at once and turns towards him. He has almost reached her, and the dog bounces towards him, but receives no encouragement and lies down again. Up to this point, Caroline has been walking with her eyes down, smiling slightly, as if thinking of something quite unrelated to the walk she is taking, but something pleasant nonetheless. Now she raises her eyes to Robert's and she looks stricken, and guilty. She calls to Mark who stops and turns towards her.

Around this still, upright trio all is as it was before. The light breeze teasing the tips of the newly-greening tree branches, the sunlight catching the spiders' webs studded with dewdrops, laced across the hawthorn in the hedge, the chatter of blackbirds in a crab-apple tree, the passing shadow of a kestrel high overhead. It is of no moment to Robert, to Mark, to Caroline, each concentrating on the others as closely as if they were in a room together, negotiating ownership of something precious. Even the dog is keeping her focus on the matter in hand, though she has no idea what that matter is; because she has no idea was that matter is. She sits nearer to Caroline than to Robert but close to both, watching.

Mark begins to move. He is definitely limping. His hair is beginning to thin and his waterproofed, breathable, branded jacket is unzipped and hangs as if zipping it up might be a stretch. He could, as he trudges over the grass, looking down, be a teddy bear. Or a bully. Caroline keeps her eyes fixed on Mark. She is slightly pigeon-toed and is standing with her wellington boots closer together at the toe than the heel. She is wearing a worn corduroy coat, a scarf and a fairly short, flared skirt that bounced and lifted as she walked. Now she stands perfectly still as if called upon to model these garments in the window of a charity shop. She might be serene. Or vulnerable.

Robert watches Mark, too. He has his hands in the pocket of his waxed jacket, but they are not still; seem to be clenching and unclenching around whatever is inside. He is frowning. He might be threatening. Or pathetic.

Robert and Mark are both frowning. Mark draws closer to where the older man is standing, finally comes to a halt and looks up. Each man notices that the other is frowning. Mark glances at his wife, then back at Robert, and his hands clench into fists. Robert takes a step towards him, his left hand comes out of his pocket, balled up as Mark's are, knuckles sharp. He pulls his right hand out, and something comes with it. Something he lets slip from his grasp, if he ever had hold of it. Something small, which drops to the grass at their feet.

They all look down, but the dog is quickest to react, picking up what has fallen. Caroline crouches and grabs it back from her, then stands and holds it out to Robert, who is still frowning, still has his fists clenched, his features rigid. On Caroline's palm is a Fox's Glacier Mint, its wrapper slightly damp.

"I'm so sorry," she says.

Robert begins to shake his head and, having started the movement, appears to be unable to stop. Without lifting his hands to take the sweet, or shield his sorrow, he lets himself go in a storm of sobs that could almost be the roar of anger that Caroline and Mark believed to be building in him since he first spoke to them. Caroline puts her hand on his sleeve.

"Mate," says Mark, awkwardly. "No, mate."

Robert, still sobbing, drops his chin to his chest and Caroline takes a step closer, puts her arm round his back, being too short to reach higher. Mark takes two steps closer and lays an arm across the other man's shoulders.

Maybe more words are spoken, but if so, they are whispered below the wind and who can say what they were. Then the trio turn and begin to walk back towards the farmhouse, the dog following, keeping her eyes fixed on the hand in which Caroline still holds the Fox's Glacier Mint.

Life Story

My Grandma has her own way of telling stories. If Aristotle was alive today he'd be hanging on her every word to record the art of tragedy in the oral tradition in the twenty-first century. Her stories are all tragedies and they have a shape – follow a formula which starts (The Beginning) with a general introduction, a sort of tracking shot covering the broad area of the story's landscape, before moving on to the detail (The Middle). The actual event. Then comes the lesson (The End), the moral or the learning points that Grandma expects the audience to have taken from the preceding parts of the story. Grandma doesn't do comedy, or happy endings – or happy beginnings or middles come to that. And she has no time for fiction; every story she tells is based, as she would put it, on 'real life'.

Take holidays, for example. Most people, when they've done the planning and spent the money and been away for a fortnight with those supposedly dearest to them, are never going to tell you it was grim, completely, unremittingly ghastly. It would make them look as if they had failed: what kind of loser makes all those choices and can't say, at the end, there was something that worked out, something that could be labelled as 'lovely', even if the holiday was a toxic interlude of fried food, excessive heat, whining kids and no sex because of the sunburn/hangover/dodgy burger. Unless, that is, it was enough of a disaster to make a better story than the one about the charming little bistro by the harbour where the waiter got to know them and treated them to a bottle of wine on the last night. If the flight was turned round after take-off because of a drunken passenger vomiting in the aisles; if the hotel had cockroaches, bedbugs and an all-night disco; if one of the party fell off the kerb in the car hire queue , broke her ankle and developed septicaemia, then it is OK not to say the entire holiday was wonderful. But even then, most people would search for a softening moment or two after the horror was all done with – a moment of kindness, one memorable meal. My Grandma has never had a holiday where anything even close to a disaster has occurred. But nor does she ever admit to having had a holiday she enjoyed.

She will tell you, first, about how disgusting the food was, it might be, or the state of the bedrooms, setting the scene, giving you the general idea, before homing in on the one incident or series of incidents which form the story, which demonstrate beyond question the incompetence or moral bankruptcy or lack of manners and wit of the chosen villain – fellow guest, hotel employee, taxi driver – and the way in which he or she failed to live up to even Grandma's low expectations of civilised behaviour. And then, the message; a reminder of the ways in which Grandma is superior to the person who had been featured.

It isn't just holidays. Every story my Grandma tells, and this is her preferred way of engaging in conversation, so almost everything she says, is an illustration of the shortcomings of people who are not Grandma. Or, to be fair, Grandpa. She never complains about Grandpa and this is only right because he is a lovely man, who says very little, and never a word against anyone. He has had half his jaw removed, along with a tumour, but even before that, he listened more than he spoke. His illness was a fruitful time for Grandma's stories. No one, from first to last, did as good a job as they should have done in saving Grandpa's life. By some miracle, it was saved, though, leaving him with a sideways mumble (in place of the evenly balanced mumble he had had before) and a permanent, sideways smile. He is awkward, but loving. When I was a child he would walk me to the bridge over a stream down the road from their house in Basingstoke, and we would play pooh sticks. I was excited by this, as a five-year-old, and although I am now twenty-four, Grandpa can think of no other way to entertain me, so we still walk down there whenever I visit, select our sticks, mark our initials

on them with Grandpa's penknife, and count backwards from five before dropping them over the parapet on the upstream side.

We have our best chats while we wait to see if either stick is going to make it past the debris of the last storm and the cans, bottles and crisp packets already trapped in the debris from the one before. When I was old enough to begin making my own judgements, I asked him why Grandma complained so much.

"Why can't she ever say how nice someone is, or how well something went?"

"Because she doesn't want to think she's been taken in," he said. "Only fools are happy with everyone they meet and everything they see. Now me," he wiped away the dribble from his damaged jaw with the perfectly ironed handkerchief which Grandma made sure he was never without, "I'm happy to be a fool."

"And Grandma's miserable."

"No, no. She's happy knowing she is never going to be taken for one."

She had a point, I began to think, as I grew older. I began to introduce my boyfriends to Grandma, because I don't want to be taken for a fool either and I am easily beguiled by men. Their certainty and solidity and the way they tend not to chatter or worry about what they are wearing makes me feel they must be superior to me. My last boyfriend was a rugby player. He looked magnificent as long as he had a certain amount of flesh exposed and even better if it was all on view. He even smelt big and hairy and muscular and I could never doubt him when my view was blocked by slabs of raw manhood. But with everything except his face, neck and ears covered up, I was not so sure. He had a lot of views about issues which he tackled head on, no messing, and I was less than certain that his choice of issues, or his views, were impeccable.

Grandma told him a story about going to the supermarket (dreadful places, staffed by people who didn't understand the meaning of the word service, etc.) and seeing a woman with two, very small, badly behaved children. The mother was shouting at them and they were paying no attention to her. A passing shopper (male) advised her to control her children out of consideration for the other customers of the store. The Rugby Player, not waiting for the end as the rest of us did, said:

"He had a point." The mother, Grandma went on, ignoring him, burst into tears. She abandoned her trolley, took a child in each hand and ran out of the shop. "Result?" suggested the Rugby Player, smiling. The rest of us waited for Grandma's verdict.

"Of course," she said, "I wouldn't expect a man to understand the stress that poor woman must have been under, but he could have shown a little bit of consideration, in my opinion. I would never dream of making a bad situation worse by becoming involved in something that was none of my business."

Rugby Player looked sideways at me with a silly grin on his face. I dumped him, and on the rebound, found a wispy little Welshman. One of his attractions was that Rugby Player despised the Welsh - it was one of his most strongly held views – and he particularly despised Welshmen who did not play rugby. If you were going to let yourself be born Welsh, he thought, at least have the decency to Play the Game. What point was there in the ones who didn't? It was hardly worth the bother of despising them. Wispy boyfriend looked better with his clothes on than he did with them off, quite frankly, and he was not a head-turner in either condition. I took him to meet Grandma in Basingstoke.

She told him a story. It concerned a woman called Susan Baldock. Grandma is free with names in her stories, using them as if they were as clear a signifier for the listener as they are for her, when she must know that the audience, in this case the wispy Welshman, has never met Susan Baldock and knows nothing about her. I knew that Susan Baldock lived three doors down and always had done, and that she had been widowed young and re-married late so, in this instance, even the name was inaccurate. She was no longer Susan Baldock but Susan Someone Else, but no one (meaning Grandma) could ever remember her new name. Personally, I would have included a bit of back-story before the nub of the tale was reached, but Grandma expected you to keep up and not ask for information she could not see was relevant to the main event. Grandma, it seemed (after an introduction relating to the general decline in standards on the street) had walked past their garden and seen Mrs Baldock (sic) up a ladder trimming the top of the hedge while her husband stood at its foot holding it steady. Grandma was perfectly capable of climbing a ladder or anything else, if something needed doing and it was otherwise out of reach, but having a pre-conceived notion that not-Mr-Baldock must be a man of low moral principles, she chose to be outraged at this distortion of the natural order of things, and was thrilled (she did not put it like that – it was 'no surprise') to see Sue B a couple of days later with a black eye which she claimed she had sustained falling off the ladder. It was confirmation, if any was needed, that she should never have married the man who was not Mr Baldock because, to put it at its best, he was untrustworthy by virtue of not being prepared to climb his own ladders, or to put it at is worst, he was potentially a wife-beater who had sent her up the ladder in order to have an excuse to hand for the damage to her face. I have stated the moral a little more clearly and succinctly than Grandma did, but wispy boyfriend seemed to follow the logic.

"I've got a good head for heights," he said.

When he suggested I go and meet his grandparents, I said yes, without having fully understood this meant a journey into deepest Wales. He is a slow driver and it took time to reach the border, then we crossed it. It was autumn and the leaves coming off the trees were caught up between the banks either side of the sunken lanes, lifting in drifts as we drove through them. Before each bend, if the leaves didn't cover it, the word ARAF was painted on the road. So was the word SLOW but I am used to that and can overlook it. ARAF, though, what sort of word is that? It began to sound the way I felt, on this slow, leaf-bothered journey with a man whose very ears were insubstantial. Araf; yes indeed. And Ildiwch . And Gwyrrch yn ofalus. That pretty well summed up the mood I was in, with my consonants all jammed together.

Wispy boyfriend hadn't thought to tell me his grandparents were Welsh-speakers. Or that he was bilingual. I had assumed he was Welsh insofar as that was the place of birth on his passport; all right, he had a Welsh name and Welsh accent but that's just like being a teenage Goth, isn't it? Or wearing plaits in your fifties (male or female): it's a bit of a persona, a style you choose to adopt. Fundamentally (a word Rugby player boyfriend used and which I am still trying to shift) wispy boyfriend was just like me. And I'm not Welsh. Then I find out I'm wrong. He *is* Welsh. In a fit-the-shape-to-the-hole kiddie's puzzle, he'd fit the Welsh-shaped one. I was the one who didn't fit, in this Welsh house full of Welsh people speaking Welsh. I felt inclined to be outraged.

I was framing the narrative of this trip in my head, following the Grandma template, and had almost reached the end of the intro and the beginning of the ramp up to crisis point ('And that's not the half of it') when I was diverted by a black cat stepping delicately between the china ornaments on the window sill, which in turn made me notice the light beyond the window-pane, which was softer than normal, more Welsh. And then I became aware of the ebb and flow of the language as

wispy boyfriend and his grandparents spoke to each other. They could have been talking about anything: Aristotle's Poetics, package holidays, rugby, pooh sticks or the postman. It was the most soothing conversation. Wispy boyfriend looked almost chunky, beside his squat little grandparents. All of them were smiling. I was within a gnat's whisker (one of Grandma's phrases) of feeling both a fool and happy. They switched to English for my sake, when the important things had all been said, whatever they were, and I spent the rest of the weekend feeling tantalisingly close to yet excluded from wispy boyfriend and his family.

Welsh Grandmother told a story, over a plateful of something thick, dark and delicious. She had been at a choir rehearsal, she said, in the local chapel, which was decorated with banners, hung on poles mounted at right angles to the wall, high up above the congregation. During the rehearsal, the screws holding one of the mounts parted company with the wall and the banner fell off. It was the one representing the Fire and Rescue Service and was bright red with an arrow shaped finial on the end of the pole not attached to the wall. The banner came down finial-first and embedded itself in the boot of the man standing next to Welsh Grandmother. He was standing, furthermore, in the place where Welsh Grandmother herself normally sat, but she had detected some stickiness on that particular chair, the residue of a recent children's party she suspected, so she had shuffled along and left the man who should have been in her chair, to bear the full force of the falling banner. I was fully involved in this story and was waiting to find out who was to blame – what inefficiency had resulted in the banner falling, what level of responsibility was Welsh Grandmother accepting for having placed someone else at risk, or was she holding the nameless child with its sticky fingers responsible. But then the story ended – the man was wearing working boots and was more discomforted by the dusty folds of the banner wrapping themselves round his head than by the point of the pole – and I looked round for enlightenment and found all three of them completely helpless with laughter.

On the way back to England it rained and the springs sprang off the hillsides and poured over the road, leaping across the gutters and drains blocked by fallen leaves. Wispy boyfriend had to concentrate on his driving. I concentrated on him concentrating and thought how lovely a pattern his ears would make if inked and pressed onto a sheet of paper. It was a relief to be leaving Wales, yet I felt I hadn't quite had enough of it to frame the narrative. I told Wispy Boyfriend that I'd expected the word ARAF to appear backwards, driving out of Wales, as FARA, and he laughed so hard he drove headlong into a flood. The car shuddered to a halt in a couple of feet of fast moving water and the engine cut out. We scrambled out as the footwells filled up and sat on the bank, in the rain, for four hours waiting to be rescued.

Now there's a story for the Grandmothers. I just haven't decided how to frame it.

A Life Measured in Puffins

When I first met him, I was eighteen and he was some age unimaginable to me then; over fifty, over sixty even. It is twice the span of a puffin's life, since I last saw him, the time it takes for an ash tree to grow twenty-five metres. I am over seventy now and he is dead, and for all I know, I am the only person who remembers his story.

The first time I met him he watched me in the mirror as I fluttered my hands round the back of his neck, tying the gown in place. I picked up the scissors, said:

"Just a trim?"

I was like a dancer, in those days, learning the steps by copying the moves others made.

Mr. Chivers nodded and I began work on his thick, dark thatch. I was happier with the scissors than I was with the chat. The other girls eased each customer into a topic, and could pass the time without effort discussing holidays, children, the refuse collection, cake icing, noise pollution. Men were harder to engage than women, and Mr. Chivers' lean face and fixed eyes gave me no encouragement. I looked at his hands to see if they bore any sign of a man who cultivated vegetables. Vegetables had served me well as a topic with other men. I have his hands clearer in my mind now than any other part of him. You would imagine, after all the times I cut it, it would be the texture of his hair I remembered best, the way it grew from the crown, the way it fell across his forehead, but although I have an idea of what his hair was like, I could draw his hands, if I had the skill, down to every last line, every vein, every discolouration. They were larger than a man his size should expect to have, and they looked like a pair of old gloves worn out with work; as if they had done wonderful service but were now spent.

That first time, I began to babble about the weather, about the way the newly painted walls looked in the sunlight. Had he been before? Had he noticed the walls were newly painted? He interrupted me.

"Do you like stories? Shall I tell you mine?"

At once I said, "Oh, yes. Please."

"When I was young," he said, "I thought I'd take up flying, but after a handful of lessons, the school I chose went out of business and they sold off the planes. I went to the auction and bought one. It wasn't airworthy, as they call it. It was a single seater, one engine, and it was being sold for scrap. No one bid for it but me. I hired a man to deliver it to my father's house in Scotland and I went up after it. After that I lived with him until he died, tinkering away to put the plane back in working order."

As he spoke, his hands lay stiff and idle in his lap, but I could imagine them gripping spanners, wiping grease off shafts, manipulating engine parts.

"I had no cares all the while," he said. "All my thoughts were in the present, in the time I was living in, with my father and his needs, with the next repair on the plane. Every morning I woke up and thought 'what am I going to do today?', not tomorrow, or next week, next year or for the rest of my life. Only today.

"Then my father died and the day after his funeral I cranked the engine on the plane and it fired. My father lived right out on the coast, no one close, moor land all about. I pulled the plane up to the top of a slope with his Land Rover, only the sheep to watch me, and I took off."

My hands were still busy in his hair but my mind was with his younger self, a carefree orphan on a remote hillside, launching a home made craft into the blue of a clear sky.

"Was it a fine day?" I asked.

"It was. I had so much common sense still about me, I wouldn't have tried it otherwise."

"And it flew?"

"Yes, it flew. I remembered the mechanics of flying from the few lessons I'd had, but the sensation, the being connected with the plane and unconnected with the earth, I had forgotten that, or never felt it before. But it was like living. As long as the plane flew, I was alive."

"How long was that?"

"What measurement do you want? It was an experience, it couldn't be parcelled up into a number of ticks and tocks. It was long enough to be memorable. It wasn't long enough for me to wish it would end."

"How did it end?"

"The engine stopped. I was over the sea but there was a dark smudge ahead of me I took to be land, so I set the plane towards it and tried to hold the angle of the glide. As I came nearer I could see it was a small island, maybe three miles across, rocky round the edge, wooded hills in the middle, nowhere flat to land a plane. But land it would, without caring for that. The sea might have been safer, but by then, that wasn't a choice I could make. In truth I hadn't many choices left, but there were a few. Do you know what it was I thought about, as the plane and I headed downwards?"

I shook my head.

"The safety harness. If I unlocked it before the impact, I could be thrown out and killed. If I left it fastened, I could be consumed by flames before I had the chance to release myself and escape."

"So what did you do?"

"I aimed for the best outcome. Land with it locked, unfasten it quickly. I practised unclipping the buckle, as the plane went down. Again and again. Shut, open. Shut, open."

Still his hands didn't move in his lap, but I could see them as surely as if he had demonstrated the movement; grip, push, pull; and again, grip, push, pull.

"The plane came down in the canopy of the wood; it ripped its wings off as it hit, but ploughed on with me strapped in place, branches lashing me round the head and shoulders. At last the nose of the plane came up against the trunk of an oak tree, and the energy driving it forward turned into a spin. It spiralled downwards and I had my hand on the buckle so the moment the movement stopped I got it free of the catch and flipped myself out of the cockpit like a coin spinning to make a bet, heads or tails. I came down tail first, lucky for me. The other way up, I might not have survived."

I had finished his hair, and picked up the hand mirror to show him the back of his own head.

"How long did you have to wait to be rescued?" I asked.

He looked at me in the mirror.

"You're in a hurry to reach the end of the story."

"I thought that was the end."

"No, it's only the beginning. The story is the life I led on the island."

"How long was that?"

"It was long enough, that none of the puffins living on the island when the plane landed would still have been alive when I left."

"How long does a puffin live?"

"Twenty-five years."

Then I asked him a question I never repeated but which is still unresolved in my mind.

"Is this a true story?"

He said, "How much do I owe you?"

I asked the other girls about Mr. Chivers and the island.

"Oh, yes, we've heard it," said Bea. "Complete fantasy if you ask me."

"You're welcome to him," said Dorrie. "He can be your gentleman, if you like."

He came in every six weeks, the time it took for his hair to grow long enough to justify my time in cutting it. Each visit, he started talking as if we had just broken off a conversation to fetch ourselves a cup of tea or close a window against a draught.

"I was lucky in more ways than one," he said. "The plane survived, too. It was left hanging in the trees until a storm knocked it to the ground and by then I'd drained the fuel out of it, so it didn't catch fire."

He talked like a man giving testimony, not the way my friends did, like I did, when we had a story to tell, taking care to give it drama in the detail, exaggerating the slightly odd into the extraordinary. And I became the judge, or the prosecuting council, wanting to know everything, teasing out the facts, making sure there were no gaps.

"Was that the first thing you did?"

"No. The first thing I did was run like a madman through the trees and the scrub till I reached the shore and then I stood about on the rocks just as if I'd arranged to meet someone there and couldn't think where they were. I don't know whether I really expected to see help on the horizon, or whether I was just avoiding thinking about the future. When it got dark, I lay down and fell asleep among the rocks, and when I woke up, I went back to my old way of thinking – 'what am I going to do today?' – and that's how it went on. Day by day."

Each time he paused, I asked the next question, then the next and he gave me the answers. I began to feel this was my story, something I was creating from the information available.

Q: What did you eat?

A: Berries and fruit, puffins' eggs and puffins, rabbits, mice and fish.

Q: How did you catch them and kill them?

A: With traps and knives made from parts of the plane.

Q: How did you cook?

A: In an oven made from boulders with a fire inside.

Q: How did you light the fire?

A: With fuel from the plane, twigs, a piece of broken windscreen and the heat from the sun

Q: What did you wear?

A: Rabbit skins

Q: Where did you sleep?

A: In a hut made from branches and plane parts.

Q: How did you wash, and clean your teeth?

A: In the sea. With a twig.

Q: What was the weather like?

A: Everything in its season.

Q: What did you drink?

A: Spring water.

And so on. These were the facts. How little they seem, but they filled many a haircut hour, plumped out as they were with detail. As he answered each question, I saw those hands, cutting,

filing, trimming, grinding, moulding. I could smell his sweat, feel the sharp sting of a thorn catching in flesh, taste the hot, unsalted puffin flesh.

But the more facts I gathered, the more uncertain I became about where exactly the story lay. The more I knew, the more I felt I was excluded from the truth. As I snipped the hair neatly round his ears with my scissors, I asked:

"What did you miss?"

"You mean, what did I lack in my life on the island? You don't ask what I was grateful to have, what I had freedom from, only what was missing?"

"You must have missed something."

"I missed being able to talk and have someone hear me."

"And what were you grateful for?"

"Every mouthful. The sun, when it shone, the metal roof on my hut when the rain fell, the fire when it snowed."

"And what did you have freedom from?"

"Too long a list for me to tell you or you to remember. Let us say, society. I was free from others' expectations, from the need to compare what I had with what others had. I did not have to pay tax, earn a living, find a plumber, book a holiday, buy a car."

I thought this over while I snipped.

"You'd have had nothing to talk about at the hairdresser's," I said.

"Indeed," he said.

I asked my mother what she would miss, if she was marooned on an island. We were watching my father play bowls, a game like a church service, following slow rituals. My sister was expecting her first baby and my mother was knitting, the needles clicking.

"Let me think," she said, though her hands did not pause nor her eyes change their orbit between the game and the clock. "I wouldn't miss the work, I know that. All the cooking and cleaning and running round."

"But you'd still have to do that," I said. "You couldn't sit around doing nothing, you'd starve."

She reached the end of a row and switched the needles round to start the next.

"Yes, but I wouldn't have to set the same standard, would I, if there was only myself to please."

"How did you pass the time?" I asked.

"I wasn't aware of time passing. Each day I had food to find and cook."

"Didn't you try and measure time?"

"Only in ash tree years. Each winter an ash tree would be half a metre taller than the winter before; half a metre's worth of extra fuel. The seasons mattered because the food supply was seasonal. The years only counted in terms of firewood.

Bea wanted to know if Mr. Chivers had told me about the rescue.

"No," I said. "I haven't asked."

"What on earth have you been talking about, then? What else is there to know?"

"Do you know what I think," said Dorrie. "I reckon he was in prison all those years. The island's just a story he made up to explain where he was. After all, if it had really happened, there would be press cuttings, wouldn't there?"

Next time Mr. Chivers came for a hair-cut, I asked about the rescue.

"You think you know the whole story now?"

"I don't think I'll ever know the whole story. But I don't need to stop hearing it just because I know the end."

"Some people came to look at the puffins and found me."

"Is that it?"

"What more do you want?"

"Did they write about you in the papers?"

"You want to read the story in other people's words?"

I shrugged.

He brought me a press cutting, pulling it from his jacket pocket with his huge, solid hands and passing it over, folded like a pocket handkerchief my mother might have ironed with tight straight creases. I cut his hair first, before I looked at it. He told me how he'd plaited the shoots of old man's beard together as they grew, to form a solid rope. When the sap died down in the winter, he cut them from the plant and used them to tie logs together, to make it easier to carry them through the woods. When he had enough, he wove them into a solid blanket, which he used to catch puffins. He told me the best way to catch puffins was to startle them into taking off then cast something over them as they flew. They are not very good at flying, he said.

When I finished the haircut, I unfolded the paper. It was a short article, no photos and the creases and various other marks had made some of the text illegible. What was left, read:

MODERN DAY ROBINSON CRUSOE

'A team from the RSPB found more than just puffins, when they went to a rock in the N*crease crease* to ring the birds in the colony there. They found Mr. Robert Chivers *crease blot*ght pilot whose plane had come down on the island during a test flight.

"He was lucky we turned up," said Ben *crease.* "This is a small colony and we don't *crease smear* very often."

Mr. Chivers was taken to hospital, but released after a check-up, none the worse for his ordeal.

"I don't know how long I was there," he said. "My *rip* stopped. I managed to survive on fruit and berries."

He expressed his thanks to the *crease crease*logical team and said he was looking forward to a *blot.'*

I handed it back to Mr. Chivers.

"It doesn't seem much of a story, for all those years."

After I gave up hairdressing to raise a family, I used to see Mr Chivers in the street, as I walked past pushing a buggy. He looked ordinary, and I remembered what the other girls had said and I agreed with them. It was all a fantasy. It did not seem possible that those large, idle hands hanging out of the sleeves of his raincoat had done the things he said they had done. But now I am old myself, and I sit with my hands idle in my lap, looking at the veins and spots of old age, and I find myself remembering Mr Chivers' story. I wake each morning thinking: 'what shall I do today?' I occupy myself with what I will eat, how I will procure the food, how I will prepare it. I am grateful for every

mouthful, for the sun when it shines and the warmth of the central heating when it rains. I miss being able to talk and to have someone hear me. I have outlived too many puffins.

What Happened at the Party

The village was called Scruton. It was an ugly name which was unfortunate, or ironic, for it was beautiful; the houses, mellow with age, faced each other across the village green like well-turned out, not overfamiliar guests at a vicarage tea party, shielded from the vulgar gaze by the curtains of woodland that surrounded it. This was not the sort of place, everyone would have said, where murders are committed. It was, on the contrary, desirable.

It was so desirable that none of the houses Henrietta could see from the front step of her cottage in Scruton was owned by anyone who lived there. They said they did, the owners. To each other and in the pub, on Facebook. They lived in Scruton, so they said, but were forced to spend time away from it because of the demands made on them by their profession their children, their charity commitments, their cultural commitments, their friends. On a Monday evening in winter Henrietta could stand on her doorstep, waiting for the dog to defecate in the garden of Field View Cottage next door, and know that no other lights would be burning in the houses she could see; no cursors flashing on computer screens, no human lungs breathing in and out anywhere closer than the cottage on the outskirts where poor, confused Mrs Eldred lived with a succession of carers, or the pebble-dash terrace up a narrow lane leading nowhere, the property of the unsavoury Robinson family, though most of the tribe, these days, denied the Robinson connection. If Henrietta had needed help, as she stood on the doorstep, and had called for it as loudly as she could, none of the people in these dwellings would have been able to hear her. No one would hear her.

She had been born here; it was the only home she had known. But as far as she was concerned, what had happened to the village in her lifetime was a good thing. It suited her, economically, socially, emotionally. As the only trustworthy person left living in Scruton, she was in receipt of more money than she needed from the other householders, in exchange for services they could not perform for themselves. Many of these were small: plant watering, parcel receiving, letting engineers into kitchens. But the compensation for these tasks was grossly inflated by the understanding that Henrietta would, in return, 'keep an eye on the place'. The owners understood that this was why they paid an hourly rate several times over the minimum wage for hours not necessarily needed; Henrietta understood that this was their understanding. A few houses paid even greater sums for the privilege of having their floors mopped and their beds made up before arrival, and in these cases, the understanding on both sides was that she was doing them a favour, and the envelopes left under the vase in the hall were never mentioned.

Henrietta's social life was no one's business but her own. That there was no one around to take notice of whether she had one or whether she didn't was, therefore, a bonus. Her well-being – as she had frequently pointed out (not quietly) in the days when she shared her cottage with others – depended on peace and quiet. Now she had it. Bliss.

It was a Tuesday after a Bank Holiday weekend. The village had been full, all weekend. Laurel Bashford, who lived in The Lodge had a birthday which meant her age, for the next twelve months, ended in a zero, reason enough for a party, to the likes of Laurel Bashford. Not only this, though, but Cat and Conrad Monks who lived in Scruton Cottage (it was a peculiarity of Scruton that the largest houses had names suggestive of cosiness) had been married for ten years, the very same day. Henrietta had been alerted to these two events and their astonishing concurrence in advance, and had submitted to an additional burden of work attendant on the joint celebration which, in the

planning, moved rapidly from back lawn barbecues to a Street Party. Henrietta mentally deleted all the exclamation marks apparent in the written and oral communications of this change.

It was quite a weekend. The pub from the next village set up tables and a bar on the Green; Cherry Suchenskaya from the Old Vicarage, mother of four-year old twins, provided a range of equipment, games and treasure hunts for the children; Bart Graham from Sunnybank negotiated with a butcher – 'the sort of chap I do business with' – to deliver a partially cooked pig on a spit which Bart oversaw through the rest of its cooking time with the assistance of his wife, Thea, and such teenagers as could be persuaded to take part. Bunting was hung up by two ladies in floral frocks who seemed to make a living out of creating and installing it, which made Henrietta wonder if there were not easier ways she could profit from the inability of the other residents of Scruton to understand the value of labour than by cleaning their loos.

Every house was occupied for the weekend, even Field View Cottage, next door to Henrietta, whose owners were male and resistant to the lure of Henrietta's services to the extent of not appearing to notice she existed. She knew them as the Philip-James. These were the names she had heard associated with them, and might have been any or all their first and surnames, or none of them. They never had parcels delivered or any post too bulky to fit through the letter-box so Henrietta had no way of finding out. They never spoke to her, even to remonstrate about the dog faeces in their garden, perhaps because they assumed it was the inconsiderate dog walkers from outside the village, who turned up in their hordes on sunny days to take advantage of the many charming paths round about. Or perhaps because both the turds and Henrietta were alike beneath their notice.

The Street Party went particularly well. There was almost no friction at any point during the long weekend partly because, Henrietta thought, the mixing of the two occasions, the significant birthday and milestone anniversary, meant no one objected to people they didn't know or didn't like turning up at the festivities, in case these strangers were intimates of the other party. There had been some absences and then unsteady presences amongst the young; there was some vomiting but not in plain sight; a bit of flouncing and some tears occurred among the less solidly together couples. There had been a few weary looks and ironic remarks among those who had taken the decision to stay together but without feeling any joy in having taken it. All this Henrietta noted in the time she could spare from fetching, carrying and washing up. She made sure to keep an eye on the whereabouts of the more untrustworthy, (the Robinsons who claimed not to be Robinsons) and to spot where fun was being had in unfortunate quarters. Altogether, an enjoyable interlude. And a profitable one. Not only the extravagant payment for the extra hours worked, but a freezer full of good quality steak and a couple of dozen bottles to be savoured when the village was hers once more. When the cars had all left. Which should have been now. This Tuesday morning.

Henrietta came out of her front door early and breathed in. Out. She took her dog, a particularly stupid spaniel called Arnold, out for a waddle round the wood behind her cottage and waved to the not-me-I'm-not-a-Robinson loading trestle tables on to the trailer behind his pick-up. Watched him drive away. But when he had, there was still a car parked beside the flattened grass of the Green. She looked to right and left, expecting to see a distant figure striding across the water meadows. It would be unusual for anyone to have come so far, so early, but stranger things had happened. There was no distant figure. Maybe, thought Henrietta, one of the weekenders had decided to leave a car here and go back to London with someone else. In which case, it was parked in an inconvenient position, and not very neatly. It was the sort of car driven by someone who knows

nothing and cares less about cars; not old enough or new and expensive enough to be interesting. In other words, not the sort of car she recognised as belonging to a resident. She walked up to it and looked inside. There was nothing to be seen. It was none of her business, she thought, but without conviction. Was not everything in this village her business? If not hers, whose? She turned away, pausing to let Arnold lift his leg on the back nearside wheel arch. As she waited for him to finish this manoeuvre, and he was never a dog in a hurry, she noticed that the boot lid appeared not to be entirely shut. It was hard to be sure, in the dim dawn light, but she thought there was a distance between the edge of the boot and the edge of the boot lid, a slight pout, which might mean she could insert a hand or a tool of some sort, a mop handle for example, and prise the two apart. If it came to that.

It was her morning for The Lodge and she let herself in, began the process of restoring order to the Bashfords' so-called home; unmaking the beds she had made; loading and emptying the washing machine and the dishwasher; finding things left behind that would never be missed or wanted – flowers, magazines – and putting them into her bag. It had been Laurel's sixtieth birthday the party had celebrated, she noted from the cards, a decade later than Laurel had led them all to think. Henrietta listened to Radio 4 as she worked, answering back to the voices. When she had finished, it was raining. The village was empty except for the car, which was still there. The one thing left that did not belong.

She still had to clean Scruton Cottage, the home of the ten-year married Monks, and the Old Vicarage where Cherry Suchenskaya lived. It was not about to stop raining. She borrowed a cagoule from the Bashfords' cloakroom and ran the hundred yards to the Cottage. Normally, it was an easy job, the Monks being the sort of people who did not leave much sign of their passage, but today it took longer to sort out than expected because an incident had occurred in one of the bedrooms that resulted in a pillowcase being ripped and quantities of goose down released to float in the breeze and clump up under the wardrobe, the bed, the dressing-table, waiting for any sort of disturbance, such as a door opening or a vacuum cleaner being switched on, to lift up and populate the atmosphere, dipping towards and then away from her, as if flirting. What the incident was she neither knew nor cared. She ate lunch from the Cottage's fridge, watching the lunchtime news on the Cottage's TV. It was still raining. The village was still empty except for the Rubbish Truck collecting the recycling. The rattle and crash of glass bottles landing in the bin was loud enough to startle the crows off the trees round the Green. The car was still there.

Henrietta ran to the Old Vicarage and found she could not get in. The shelter provided by the porch over the front door was insufficient and by the time she had turned the key to left and to right and shoved the door with all her strength, she was damp around the edges. It appeared that a bolt had been shot, from the inside. The back door, then, Henrietta thought, must be unlocked. She was wet, by the time she reached it to find that, too, appeared to be bolted from the inside. She retreated to the open-fronted barn Conrad used as a shed and found a towel hanging on a nail which she used to dry her face and neck. It left her less wet but smelling unpleasantly of turpentine and grease. She rang Cherry Suchenskaya to ask what unforeseen combination of circumstances had left both bolts closed, and it went straight to voicemail.

On her way home she passed the abandoned car. It affronted her. It added to the residual dampness, the smell of old fluids and the frustrated attempt to enter the Old Vicarage to produce something like rage. She stopped, and, allowing the rain to wash her hair flat and drip down between her chin and her breasts into the front of her blouse, walked up to the alien vehicle and lifted the boot lid. It was that easy. Where the Vicarage door, which should have opened, stayed

shut, the boot which should have stayed shut, rose gracefully upwards at her touch and left the interior open for her inspection.

It was full. In the first seconds after the boot lid had come to rest in the upright position, Henrietta though of two answers to the question of what is was full of. One was a pile of old clothes; the other was a tailor's dummy. Even as she reached out to touch the hand-shaped, flesh-coloured object lying nearest to her, she knew she would regret the motion. She did. The hand-shaped object was a hand, and it was not made of plastic. The old clothes were, indeed, clothes, but they were being worn by a body that was plainly not that of a living person. The boot was full of a dead body.

Henrietta stepped backwards. She did not, she allowed herself a moment to notice, scream, although watching Midsomer Murders had led her to assume this was an unavoidable reaction. She was absorbed, instead, in trying to make a decision whether to shut the boot, or not to shut the boot. The clothes the body wore were beginning to darken with its exposure to the rain, and whoever it was did not need access to air to breathe. She shut the boot. Walking stiffly, because her jeans were now so wet it was impossible to bend her knees, she crossed the road and went into her own house. She went upstairs and dried herself. Changed. Hung the Bashford cagoule up to drip over the bath. Then she came downstairs and rang the police.

While she waited for them to arrive, Henrietta imagined how it would be. They would be concerned for her, thankful for her brisk and unsentimental reaction, pleased with her crisp, informed responses to their questions. They would want to know everything she knew about the village and its almost-always-absent inhabitants. But it was not like that. From the moment they arrived they treated her as if every element of her story was suspicious. Why had she opened the boot? Why had she closed it again (it turned out the latch had caught, this time, and locked)? Why had she waited from twenty-five past three when she found the body to five past four before ringing the police? When she told them about the puzzling incident of the bolted doors at the Old Vicarage, they stared at her and said nothing for an unnerving length of time. Then Inspector Bradley Rose, the solid, sensible looking older of the two men in her kitchen, said:

"Did you ring the bell?"

"Why would I do that? I have a key."

"But the key didn't work, did it?"

"Ringing the bell isn't going to make the door open, is it?"

"Not unless there was someone inside."

"I've already told you, there is no one in these houses during the week."

"Then how do you explain the front and back door both being bolted on the inside?" asked Sergeant Martin Sharp, the younger, slimmer, less capable looking of the two.

"I don't know," Henrietta said. "I haven't had a chance to think about it yet."

She was beginning to wish she had disposed of the body without involving these men. She wanted her village back and it had begun to dawn on her that it could be a long time before that happened.

Bradley asked her for the key to The Vicarage and gave it to Conrad who left the room.

"Now," Bradley leaned forward, "do you know who the chap in the boot is?"

"No." It had not occurred to Henrietta that she might know him.

"You're very certain. I assume you looked at his face and didn't recognise him?"

"No, I didn't look at his face. I've told you. It was frightening, it was raining. I wasn't going to start moving him around to get a better view."

"You came home and had a shower and changed instead."

"What is *wrong* with that?"

"Let me show you his face, then, and see if you recognise him."

Henrietta braced herself. She did not want to go outside, where it was still raining, and where vehicles with blue lights and people in protective clothing were filling a space which should be empty. But Bradley produced a tablet, pressed a few keys and turned it round so she could see the screen. She was looking at a photo of a man who might so easily be asleep if she hadn't known he was dead.

She did recognise him. It was one of the Philip-James. The older one. Still irritated by the policeman's challenging manner, it crossed her mind to say she didn't, but he was watching her too closely and she knew he had noted her initial reaction.

"He's my neighbour. Or one of them. Field View Cottage."

"What's his name?"

"I don't know. I've heard the names Philip and James but actually, I don't know them."

"You said you knew everyone who owns houses in the village."

"Well, yes, I know who they all are. That's all I meant. I meant I could let you know the sort of people who live in each house but I know some of them better than others. I know nothing about this man or the other one except that they own the house next door."

"The other one?"

"The other man who lives there with him."

"His partner? His father? His son?"

"I've told you, I don't know. They never spoke to me. They never asked me to do anything for them."

Henrietta kept looking at the photo as she spoke and she realised she had never really studied the two men closely. If this photo had been in a newspaper, she might not have realised at once why he looked vaguely familiar. It was the rough-hewn face of a man a little older than she was, an ordinary face. Or maybe all dead faces are alike in looking ordinary, all animation and expression lost.

It seemed Inspector Rose was waiting for her to carry on speaking because when she looked up he was still watching her.

"Do you have a key to Field View Cottage?" he asked.

"No, I told you. They've never needed me. I've never been into it."

There was a flurry of activity outside the door, people coming into her hall and speaking to each other, as if this was not her house, hers to let people into or keep people out of as she chose. Bradley Rose stood up and went to the hall and came back to tell her they would be leaving her for now, but might need to come back and speak to her again. When they had gone, shutting the door behind them, she went to the window and looked out. It was still not quite dark, but she was blinded by the lights on the cars and ambulance parked outside her house. Another ambulance drove past as she watched and went, blue light flashing, towards the Old Vicarage. She remembered that she had not recovered her key.

It was still raining later when she went out with Arnold. She led him to the back of her cottage, not liking to let him defile the garden of the newly-dead. She would have snooped round

the village but there were still lights, still vehicles. For once, she could have stood on her doorstep and called for help and she would have been heard, would have been helped.

The next few days were wild and wet but eerily quiet, so far as Henrietta's contact with the police was concerned. There was constant activity but it did not involve her. Although she still had keys to most of the houses in the village, she was prevented from entering any of them by the presence of police cars parked on the Green. She wanted to be able to go in and out of the houses as she normally did, and planned to do, when the police were no longer watching. She had developed a nice little dialogue with Inspector Rose, in her head, in which he was forced to acknowledge that her superior understanding of what belonged, of what was out of place, had enabled them to solve the case.

She glimpsed, through the rain, cars she thought she knew driving past. Cherry Suchenskaya's, for example. One evening there were lights on at Field View Cottage and a bulky shadow that looked like the surviving Philip half of the Philip-James. She wondered all night if she should go round and offer condolences but in the morning the house was shut up and there were no cars outside. She carried on leading Arnold elsewhere to drop his turds, though. Out of respect for the dead and the surviving.

The incident was made public and Henrietta learnt that the dead man was called James O'Mahoney and his death was being treated as unexplained. There was no mention of where he was found. He was described only as a 'resident of Scruton' whose body had been discovered near his home on Wednesday. The item was accompanied by archive footage of the village and more time was devoted to the beauty of the place than to the passing of Mr O'Mahoney. Henrietta braced herself for the press to arrive, knocking on doors, pressing for information, but they never came. Scruton in the rain was not much lovelier than anywhere else, and the 'unexplained' might only mean some out of condition city type had dropped dead of a heart attack in a spot no one walked past very often. As Henrietta, in her bleaker moments, had thought might happen to her.

Then the sun came out and Sergeant Sharp came in a car and asked if she would be prepared to come to the station with him to help them with her background knowledge of the village residents. The words 'station' and 'help' had an ominous ring but, in the bright sunshine of a glorious morning, the sergeant looked a bit like a fit but easy to control young man she had once enjoyed a relationship with. So she said yes, she was so prepared, and she put on a pair of shoes and climbed into his car.

"Have you asked the Not-the-Robinsons, too?" she asked.

"The…?"

"From Beech End."

" Oh. We have talked to them, yes." There was a pause while he looked carefully both ways before pulling out into a busy road. "Why do you call them Not-the-Robinsons?"

"There have always been Robinsons in those houses and they have always been a certain sort of family. They still are, even if they claim they are not called Robinson."

"None of them is."

"I know that."

As he drew into the yard at the police station, he said: "Capable of murder, would you say, the Robinson type?"

"No, of course not. What a silly idea."

She was led into a room with three or four desks and asked to sit down at one of them, in front of a large computer screen. Inspector Rose, who also looked less challenging and more formal this morning, explained they had asked everyone from the village to forward the photos they had taken of the weekend's party. He introduced Henrietta to a WPC called Mandy who sat beside her and started calling the photos up onto the screen.

"Right," she said. "If you could tell me who the people in the photos are, and just a little bit about them."

The pictures came up one by one, and Henrietta detailed those she recognised in each of them, looking at the figures in the background as well as the foreground. A number of people only featured in the background; some were always in the foreground. The positioning of the figures depended, Henrietta realised, on who was holding the camera, and had nothing to do with who were the more prominent characters, in the village and on the day. Among the first to appear were the entire Mabblewick family except for Mr Mabblewick who was presumably behind the camera. Henrietta had never known the first names of Mr and Mrs Mabblewick, who were both overweight and always appeared happy, which had led Henrietta to assume foolishness. Their habit of referring to each other as Mrs M and Mr M only reinforced this impression. They had asked her for help twice, once to be there to take delivery of the ugliest floor-standing lamp she had ever seen and again to supervise the removal of a perfectly lovely bird bath from the rear garden of the Old Chapel, the small and, since the Mabblewicks' arrival, excruciatingly bijou conversion of a Methodist hall. Their two children, both boys, might have been discovered under any gooseberry bush, for all their physical similarity to their parents. They were thin and miserable and in the process of negotiating the assault course of teenage life, with the most advanced along the road sprouting unattractive bristles and acne. His name was Ross and his wardrobe seemed to consist entirely of trousers with crotches that hung half way down his legs. His brother was called Oliver, and was less unattractive but even more sullen. All of this Henrietta reported to Mandy, but without specifying the bird bath which she now had tucked, tastefully, into a corner of her shrubbery.

The other family intent on recording their collective presence for posterity were the Finstocks from The Pines, an ordinary looking house with one fir tree beside the gate. Sally, Aiden and their three little girls were captured in various poses with the parents alternating so both of them appeared in one photo or another. They were perfect: perfectly groomed, dressed and graded as to size. Sally Finstock was the only person who ever asked Henrietta to do the ironing. Henrietta enjoyed ironing but was contemptuous of anyone who believed it to be necessary.

It was curious to note that Bart Graham, with his several chins and prominent stomach, was the subject of so many of the photos. Bart, wearing a chef's hat and his wife Thea, wearing a butcher's apron stood behind the black and glistening pig. Even in the way he held the carving knife, Henrietta could detect the messy incompetence that meant nothing ever worked in Sunnybank, the Grahams' house, and an army of plumbers, electricians and delivery drivers were kept employed putting things right or replacing what was broken. Bart's wife, Thea, with her long, stringy neck and her long, stringy ear rings, was borderline anorexic which might be a result of the way Bart threw his weight about, with its overtones of bullying, or it might not.

In the background of the Graham and Pig show were people who happened to be there, had not chosen to have their picture taken. In one, Cherry Suchenskaya's nanny was talking to someone just out of shot, only an arm and a fuzz of hair indicating someone was there. The nanny, who was young and angular, seemed to prefer the company of the children she looked after, Cherry's twin toddlers, to that of adults. Looking at her, frozen, on the screen, Henrietta noticed how pretty she

was; as a rule she stayed so firmly in the background she was close to invisible. Cherry herself, tall, confident, casual, was in many of the pictures, caught chatting to Mr Mabblewick, laughing with Stuart Smith from the Forge and his sullen girlfriend, possibly French.

Cat and Conrad Monks, just ten years married, had chosen to pose with anyone else who happened to be in reach, Conrad, who was very tall, draping an arm round the shoulders of someone Henrietta realised with a shock was the dead man; Cat, who was extremely short, standing on tip toe and laughing up at a man turned sideways who must be the dead man's partner. This was the only photo of the victim, if such he was. His partner appeared in a later photo with the nanny. Partially obscured by the Finstock girls eating ice-cream, he looked to be touching her arm or even holding her hand. If she had control of the mouse, Henrietta would have homed in on the nanny's face because it looked as if she might have been crying. After several photos of people Henrietta did not know, because they were guests for the day, the Finstocks, Stuart Smith and his possibly-French girlfriend and Mrs Mabblewick appeared in the background of a picture of Laurel Bashford and her husband Morris standing in front of a cake procured from somewhere to celebrate her birthday. Cherry Suchenskaya was on the edge of another photo of the cake and the Bashfords, looking towards Ross Mabblewick, who seemed to be walking past, ignoring the ceremonious moment. Bart Graham, released from the pig and the chef's hat, looked to be having an intimate conversation with Conrad Monks just to the left of a game of quoits; Cat Monks was talking to Sally Finstock, to the right of someone's dog, Cat looking smaller than usual in contrast to Sally's perfection. They were bent towards each other in a confidential manner.

So it went on. Henrietta was enjoying herself. She appeared in none of the photos; she took care to be out of shot when she saw anyone with a camera, and no one ever suggested that she should pose for them. And anyway, she had been too busy.

Mandy had a notepad on which she was writing down what Henrietta told her, but it looked a muddle.

"Let me," Henrietta said. "I'll do it."

She drew a map of the houses in the village and put the names beside each. On the Green were:

Scruton Cottage: Cat and Conrad Monk, young, childless

The Old Vicarage: Cherry Suchenskaya, twin daughters, nanny

The Lodge: Laurel and Vincent Bashford, middle-aged, prosperous

The Old Chapel: Mr and Mrs Mabblewick, large and jolly; teenage sons Ross and Oliver

Forest View: Philip and James

The Pines: Sally and Aiden, young , three little girls

Up a lane to one side and out of sight were:

Sunnybank: Bart and Thea Graham, middle-aged and fat (him), thin (her)

The Old Forge: Stuart Smith and French(?) girlfriend

Hidden in the woods were, at one end of the village, the ex-council houses and the other, Mrs Eldred's which had never, in Henrietta's lifetime, been called anything else. There were other properties, but these were holiday lets, or belonged to people who seldom came and had not been there on what Mandy kept calling 'the weekend in question'.

Henrietta was pleased with herself, as she handed these notes over; she was demonstrating efficiency and knowledge which, this time, were sure to impress. But Mandy's reaction as no more satisfying than Inspector Rose's had been.

"You don't appear to know very much about your neighbours," she said.

Henrietta was taken aback. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Mandy, "that you haven't mentioned what they do for a living, or what motivates them, what they care about. What they do with their time."

"Of course I know all that," said Henrietta, nettled, "but there is nothing interesting to say about any of them on any of those heads."

"You think not?" said Mandy. "Yet a man was murdered in their midst."

"It will have been something to do with greed and covetousness," said Henrietta.

"This young woman, for instance." Mandy scrolled back to the photo of the Finstock girls eating ice-cream with the surviving Philip and the nanny in the background. "You only refer to her as the nanny. Don't you know her name?"

"Well, I don't. All I know about her is that she puts all the children's toys away before they go back to London, which is more than most of the mothers do."

"So Mrs Suchenskaya refers to her as the nanny, does she?"

"I can't remember, honestly. She probably uses a name but I don't recall what it is. Why? You must have found out from Cherry what her name is."

"And another thing," Mandy said, changing the subject, "you've missed yourself and your house off this list. Are you assuming you are not a person of interest to us in this investigation?"

Henrietta stared at her. "Why would I be?" she said. "I was the one who found the body."

Even as she spoke she realised that in the murder mysteries she watched in the evenings, Arnold wheezing on the rug beside her, it was often the person who claimed to have stumbled across the body who turned out to be implicated in putting it there.

Mandy did not reply.

On the drive back home with an unnamed PC, Henrietta reflected on whether she really believed what she had said about what lay at the root of the murder, or whether she had just said it because she was cross with know-it-all Mandy. It must be true, she thought. Greed or sex. They were obsessed with the first, these people, and she suspected more of the second went on than she could find evidence for. She needed her keys back so she could start her own investigation. Now she had another reason for finding out the truth: she did not like the idea of being a suspect.

At the weekend, the village filled with residents. None of them had let Henrietta know they were coming. She went over to The Cottage and rang the bell. Conrad Monks came to the door and looked down at her as if he could not, momentarily, remember who she was.

"Oh! Henrietta."

"Yes, I just wanted to say, I haven't made the beds up because I didn't know you were coming."

"Well, no. No one expected you to. Thanks anyway."

Cat appeared in the corridor behind him.

"Oh, Henrietta," she said, with much the same intonation as he had used. She looked less bouncy than usual, less of a perfect full stop next to the towering presence of Conrad.

"I'm here if you need me," Henrietta said.

"Yes, yes of course. We expect you to be." Cat managed a smile, but it did not carry conviction.

Outside the Old Vicarage one of the Not-the-Robinsons was unloading logs from the back of his pick-up and stacking them on the porch.

"Hello, Dave," said Henrietta. "Is Cherry in?"

"No," said Dave, lining up the cut ends of the last armful. "She's gone to fetch her step-daughter from hospital."

Step-daughter? Hospital? Henrietta was at a loss but not about to display her ignorance to a man in a hi-vis jacket and boots with steel toecaps.

"Right," she said.

Next she carried the cagoule she had borrowed back to the Lodge, where Laurel Bashford opened the door as soon as she knocked.

"Oh, Henrietta," she said, just as the Monks had done, but Laurel sounded as if she had been disappointed in her expectation that her caller would be someone more significant. "I don't suppose you have any idea what's going on, do you? No, of course not," as Henrietta began to shake her head. "Never mind." And she shut the door leaving Henrietta standing on the step with the hand she had stretched out to return the cagoule not yet back at her side.

Turning away, it struck Henrietta that what she needed now was an intimate. Someone who would exchange gossip with her in a way that is only possible if both parties to the gossip recognise they are essentially on the same side, and will not repeat to those gossiped about, what has been said. Henrietta had no such intimates. She had never required one before, because the houses and lives of the village were open to her and she had not needed to hear someone else's point of view. But now.

She went back home and was cheered by Arnold's geriatric enthusiasm at her return. She felt, no question, lonely. No one came near her. By the middle of the afternoon she could stand it no longer and took Arnold out for a walk through a wooded short-cut to where old Mrs Eldred lived. There was no point talking to her – she probably thought the war was still going on – but it was possible her carer knew something. And there was no shame in asking the carer, who was of too little consequence for it to matter what she thought about Henrietta, or for anything she repeated to be taken seriously.

Mrs Eldred and the carer, a slender South African who had perfect teeth, when she smiled, which she did not often do, were sitting in the sun on the patio shelling broad beans. At least the carer was shelling broad beans and Mrs Eldred was dozing.

"Sabrina, hi!" said Henrietta, fearing, the minute the name had left her lips, that this was what the previous carer had been called. The current incumbent did not object to the name, though. Henrietta sat down and taking a handful of bean pods, started to extract the beans.

"How's Cherry's step-daughter?" she asked. "Have you heard?"

"Lucky to be alive," said Sabrina.

"But she's going to be all right?"

"I suppose so. I haven't heard she did herself any long term damage. Though you never know, do you? Depends what she took. If the police hadn't broken the door down when they did, she might well be dead."

Henrietta pieced this together and felt a flush of indignation at credit deserved and not given. Obviously the girl had been lying, close to death, in the house when she had been trying to open the door. If she hadn't mentioned to the police that she couldn't get in, they wouldn't have broken the door down. One dead woman.

"Do you know," she said, keeping her eyes on the bean pods, "I always thought she was the nanny?"

"Betsy? Oh no! I think Mrs Suchenskaya let her look after the twins to take her mind off everything that's happened, with the trial and her Dad being in jail and so on. She does like being with children; she's very good with them, isn't she?"

It had never occurred to Henrietta to wonder whether Mr Suchenskaya existed and, if so, where he was. She had imagined a divorce, probably acrimonious, with Cherry, who was tanned and slim and wore too many bangles, fighting to get more than her fair share of the loot, citing her need for a country cottage for the children as well as a central London flat. Henrietta wondered how Sabrina, who she did not believe had ever set foot in the Old Vicarage, knew more than she did.

Mrs Eldred woke up. "Has the taxi come?" she asked Henrietta. "We're going to be late."

Henrietta did not have an internet connection. She had never felt she needed one. Now she thought she did. She drove to town and went into the library and searched for the Suchenskaya name on their public access computer. It was easy, given the unusual name, to find out that Sebastian Suchenskaya had been tried for, and convicted of, the manslaughter of his ex-wife. She had died in the kitchen of the home she shared with their daughter, Betsy, of whom she had custody. Sebastian, who was also in the kitchen at the time, called for an ambulance saying she had tripped and hit her head on the corner of the marble-topped island unit. Betsy, a third presence in the kitchen, had appeared to confirm the story and the police had appeared to accept it. But his ex-wife's relations stepped in with evidence of previous altercations between the couple in which violence had featured. The house was searched and the ex-wife's files turned up enough suggestions of her fear and loathing of the man who was no longer her husband to make an alternative scenario plausible, reinforced by bruises and abrasions on the body. Suchenskaya, the police now believed, might well have pushed or hit her, causing the fatal injury. The Crown Prosecution Service agreed and he was sent to trial. Betsy proved to be an unreliable witness, making widely divergent statements that either implicated her father or agreed with his version in some but significantly not all its details. The case had gone against him. He was currently in jail.

When Henrietta was younger and had gone to college, she had thought, for her first year, that she was having fun; she went to pubs, and parties and was quite satisfied with the student experience. Then in her second year she moved in with some girls she didn't know, but who had a spare room available at the last moment. She realised then that she had been partying in the background, as it were. The real fun was happening somewhere else, somewhere these girls had been all along, swimming in the wide, wide ocean while Henrietta had been splashing about in the slick of water left by the breakers on the beach. It was too late to catch up. She resented the rest of her time at college for not being the experience she had thought she was having. So she felt now, looking at the details of Cherry Suchenskaya's real life, so different from the way it had appeared when viewed from her bins and bathroom, her fridge and kitchen cupboards.

Henrietta typed in the Bashfords' names. There was a link to a page for leaving charitable donations. Laurel, it seemed, was running a marathon in support of a charity researching childhood leukaemia, in memory of a girl unknown to Henrietta. Among the sponsors who had pledged money and left messages were the Grahams from Sunnybank; the message implied that the Bashfords and the Grahams had both lost a child.

Henrietta was half way home before she realised she should have checked on the murdered man, but when she turned the television on that evening, he was the subject of a news item, because the police had announced that they were now treating his death as murder. They were appealing for information from anyone who had been in the village between midday on the Monday

of the party and midday on Tuesday. Mr O'Mahoney was apparently fifty-two years old and a psychotherapist who specialised in supporting those with post-traumatic stress disorder. He was in a civil partnership with Philip Simms. The report had no more information on Mr Simms.

Henrietta smiled a little in contemplation of the avalanche of trivial and irrelevant observations the police would have to process, from people who only wanted to be able to say 'I was there'. As well as the party-goers, there would have been an abnormally large contingent of dog walkers, thanks to the good weather and the bank holiday. The report went on to show pictures of the village, in the sunshine this time, and the car, which the police would only say 'was central to their inquiries'. This was a police photo, taken in the rain, both the vehicle and its surroundings looking sullen and murky against the brightness of the library shots the producer had cut in.

Betsy Suchenskaya was not mentioned but Henrietta had developed her own theory by the time the broadcast finished, and she would be surprised if the police weren't thinking along exactly the same lines. James O'Mahoney must have been Betsy's counsellor. She was most probably the one who had killed her mother and now, racked with guilt for letting her father take the blame, she must have finally been able to carry the secret no longer and had spilled the beans to James. Henrietta remembered the photo with Betsy in the background, talking to someone who could have been James. Horrified, he had set off to find Cherry to tell her what Betsy had said, and Betsy had chased after him and killed him. How she had achieved this and how she had managed to insert the body in to the boot were details Henrietta needed to do a little more work on. The overdose was her reaction to the enormity of what she had done. Obviously. Henrietta was beginning to enjoy herself again.

It was the Tuesday before anything happened. In this time, there were people in the houses, but who, and during what times, Henrietta couldn't make out. It seemed to be completely random. One evening, there were lights at the Old Vicarage, the next morning it looked to be shut up, abandoned, no cars in the drive and the blinds lowered in the rooms facing the road. The Cottage had two cars in the drive, which never moved, but no lights were visible. Henrietta could hear vehicles moving about and at first she went to the window each time to see who was passing, but it was often a stranger – dog walker or sightseer, who knew? – and only occasionally did she catch a glimpse of one of the residents. None of them came near her. She thought of going again to visit Sabrina at Mrs Eldred's, but that was not the way to test out her theory. Instead, she went back into town and researched Mr O'Mahoney and Mr Simms more thoroughly, looking for the connection between James the Physiotherapist and Betsy, the disturbed step-daughter. She learnt nothing except that Philip Simms was a doctor. Nothing else. This screen was not going to give her the answers she needed. But she had no idea where to go next.

In the event, events turned up on her door step. That evening, the Tuesday a week after the Tuesday when she opened the boot lid, as she was checking to see if the cheesy topping on her fish pie had browned enough, the doorbell rang. It was a particularly dark night. Although it was dry, the cloud cover was dense and there were no street lights in the village. Henrietta pushed down the switch for the outside light. Nothing happened. It was so long since she had used it, she had not even known it had failed. Peering through the glass panel of the door, though, she could just make out, in the light from the hall, that whoever was outside formed only a small patch of denser darkness against the expanse of night beyond, so she opened the door. On the step stood Betsy Suchenskaya, hunched and pale inside a long-sleeved cardigan which she was clutching to her body, each hand holding firmly to the opposite sleeve.

"Hello," said Henrietta, mystified. "Is everything all right?"

Betsy shrugged, then started to cry. Henrietta had never wanted children because they failed to charm her and she could see no reason why her own would be any more appealing than the brats she saw playing on the Green or came across in the street or other people's houses, so she assumed she had no maternal instincts; didn't even know what this phrase was supposed to mean. Now, though, she felt a hint of something that was pity, as in the sorrow for someone else's sorrow, mixed with protectiveness, and this made her unaccountably want to hug the little waif in front of her. Such an action was beyond her, but nearly as uncharacteristic was what she did next. Stepping back, she said: "Come in."

Betsy followed her into the kitchen. Henrietta turned off the grill to prevent the fish pie from burning. She had a glass of wine sitting ready for her on the kitchen table but, looking closely at Betsy for the first time ever, she comprehended how young the child was. How could she have assumed this pale creature with its unbrushed shock of hair and bitten nails was a nanny? She moved the glass onto the side and offered to make a cup of tea. Betsy, it turned out, only drank herbal tea, which Henrietta did not have. Inspecting the cupboard for anything else to offer, she came up with cocoa, and Betsy, looking happier in the instant, offered to make it. She did this painstakingly, measuring the chocolate into the mugs, creating a paste with cold milk, heating the rest of the milk in a pan and whisking as she added it to the paste. Henrietta sat at the table as she did this, saying nothing because she could think of nothing to say, and because she was struggling to understand whether it was an outrage to have someone else working in her kitchen, or deeply comforting. When the cocoa was ready, Betsy began to talk.

"I hope you don't mind," she said. "About me coming to see you. I couldn't bear to go back to London and then I didn't want to be alone. I wanted someone to talk to and I thought you would be just the right person to be with. You don't get involved, do you? You just get on with your own life." The tears had dried on her face which looked even younger and prettier in the bright light of the kitchen.

"I suppose that's right," said Henrietta.

"I wish I wasn't involved," said Betsy looking close to tears again. "But I am. I really am. I can't help thinking it was all my fault."

Henrietta shook her head. "That must be difficult to cope with. But you may be wrong. Do you want to talk about it?"

And Betsy did. Hardly able to believe her luck, the fish pie cooling under the grill, the glass of wine untasted, the cup of cocoa untouched, Henrietta sat as still as she could, not to interrupt the flow.

Betsy had been seeing James O'Mahoney, she explained, to help her with the trauma of her mother's death. He had been wonderful. It had all been behind her, pretty much. She was back at college, down to having sessions once a month, not having to take her medication at all. In the sessions, they now talked about the good things; about her twin half-sisters, her netball team. It was obvious to Henrietta, in the words and the silences, in the nervous movement of Betsy's hands stroking the sleeves of her cardigan and the constant eye movement, in the emphases and the swallowed sobs, that this state of equilibrium, if not actual happiness, that Betsy was describing was fragile, at best; at worst, a lie constructed to hold the cracks closed.

This was all before the party, Betsy went on. At the party, she had been standing idle, waiting for the twins to have their faces painted and Mr Mabblewick from the Chapel had been

standing next to her, waiting for his wife to bring him another pork roll. Betsy knew who he was but did not remember having spoken to him before. He said to her, as they stood there:

"It won't be long before your Dad comes out. I expect you're looking forward to it." Betsy turned and stared at him and he laughed. "Don't worry, I'm not making a study of your family. I work in the probation service and his case is being handled by my team." Then he walked off, leaving Betsy with the unshakeable understanding that her life had just fallen apart. What it was that frightened her so much about her father's release – physical fear for her safety, never wanting to see him again because of what he had done, or just wanting nothing in her new, stable life to change – she did not say. But it was clear she had been devastated by the news.

"You'll be thinking I should have known he'd be coming out some time," she said to Henrietta. "But I didn't. I thought, after the trial, it was all over. James helped me believe it was all over."

After the shock, came fury, beyond her control. She was furious with Mr Mabblewick, whose broad, smug back was moving away from her, but mostly she felt betrayed by James O'Mahoney, who had encouraged her to think she was safe when she wasn't. She felt cheated, and she needed to tell him so; she needed to shout at him; she needed him and no one else. And at first, she couldn't find him. Her search took her away from the Green, round the buildings in the village and at last, she heard the unmistakeable rumble of his voice. It came from the old blacksmith's workshop, attached to Stuart Smith's Forge Cottage. It had been left open; tables and chairs, now in use at the party, were stored in it and would be returned later. The door was ajar and the sound of James's voice came from the dark interior. Betsy moved closer until she could see inside. James was sitting on an old sofa and Ross Mabblewick, he of the droopy trousers, was sitting with him – on his knee? Snuggled up? It was too dark, and Betsy could not tell. Without doubt, though, James had his arm round Ross and Ross had his head on James's shoulder. They did not notice Betsy.

At this point in the story, Betsy diverted into an incoherent assessment of her own character, the burden of which, so far as Henrietta could make out, was that she only ever wanted to be loved and needed; that she never put herself first; that it did not occur to her to resent ill-treatment, taking it as no more than she might expect given her lack of any attributes that would make her lovable. Henrietta thought this was a needless excursion as she had already understood the girl's low self-esteem and knew from experience that there was no remedy for it except the passage of time. Luckily, it turned out only to be a preamble to the explanation of what Betsy did next. It was, she wanted to convince Henrietta or, more likely, herself, completely out of character. She was so angry, she said, again and again, so angry. Henrietta thought she was not so much angry as frightened; the small, slight body of Betsy Suchenskaya hardly seemed capable of holding all the emotions her disturbed, teenage mind was feeling.

Baulked of the audience for her fear and fury, Betsy understood at once that here was an opportunity to punish both James, the purveyor of false optimism, and Mabblewick, the bearer of bad news. She blundered back to the party and spotted Mr Mabblewick with his teeth embedded in a pork roll, laughing at the efforts of his younger son to knock over the inflatable skittles. She walked up to him and touched his sleeve.

"You should keep an eye on your other son," she whispered. "James O'Mahoney is abusing him in the old forge building while you're standing here eating."

"What do you mean, abusing him?" asked Mabblewick, slivers of pork spilling out of his mouth onto the front of his T-shirt.

Betsy shrugged. "Well, you know James's reputation. No young man is safe." And she turned her back, as he had done earlier to her, and walked away.

"Was that true?" asked Henrietta.

Betsy, who had become quite animated in the telling of the story, began to cry again.

"No, of course not," she said. "He was in love with Philip."

It seemed that sticking the knife (metaphorically) into Mabblewick had not cooled Betsy down, and she went round the Green looking for Philip. He was helping the smallest of the Finstock girls pick up the precious things she had been carrying in a little pink bag in her little pink fist, which had fallen out when she let go of the handle. Betsy knelt beside Philip and scooped up the remaining pebbles, fragments of shell and plastic hair slides.

"You need to keep an eye on James," she said, in Philip's adjacent ear. "He's having sex with one of the lads while you're enjoying yourself."

They stood up and Philip Simms, now towering over her, took hold of her arm.

"What do you mean?" he said. "What are you talking about? Where is he?"

Betsy shook his hand off and ran away. She wanted to be anywhere, now, except here, at this party, in this village. She pushed through the throng of people drinking, eating and laughing until she was clear of the Green, then she ran, literally, out of the village and into the woods. She ran off the paths, so well used by dog walkers, into the undergrowth, stumbling over bushes and brambles until she reached the deepest part of the wood where the trees' canopy kept out the light and the ground was soft with old beech mast. Then she lay down, curled into a ball, and cried. And, after a while, fell asleep. When she woke, it was late; past the twins' bed time, Betsy said. It took some while for her to find her way out of the wood and back to the Old Vicarage and when she got there, she found her step-mother sitting on the sofa and looking glassy, an odd word but one Betsy thought about before choosing it.

"You know how she normally is," she said, and Henrietta did: poised, calm, on the edge of a laugh. "Well, she was still the same only sort of frozen."

For a moment Betsy thought (hoped? wondered Henrietta) it was her absence that was paralysing Cherry, but she soon saw it was not. Bart Graham was in the room with her, still in the clothes he had worn for the role of the slightly comic pig-roaster. He looked disorientated, adrift.

"What's happened?" asked Betsy.

"James O'Mahoney is missing," said Cherry, not looking at her.

"Missing?" said Betsy. "What do you mean, has someone killed him?"

She was thinking, of course, of her malice, her deliberate provocation to Mabblewick and Philip Simms, stirring up hatred and jealousy against a man, now unaccountably absent. A man who was important to her.

"No one has killed him," said Bart. "How can you think such a thing? No one has killed him. It's just that he has a condition and we're worried about him. Tell her, Cherry."

Cherry pulled Betsy to her. "It's all right, my dear. We'll sort it out, I promise you."

"How can it be sorted out when James isn't here?" Betsy cried, and no one answered her.

Cherry gave Betsy a sleeping tablet and she slept until dawn when Cherry woke her to tell her to get up and dressed. They were going back to London.

"How can we go if James hasn't been found?" Betsy said.

"Oh, my dear," said Cherry. She had not recovered her normal balance; on the contrary, she looked even more fragile this morning than she had done the night before.

Betsy felt James's absence like the loss of a leg, like the loss of both legs. She would never, she felt, be able to walk through life without him. That he was dead was a conviction so strong she did not feel the need to voice it. So she didn't. She just rolled over in bed and told Cherry she wanted to stay for a couple of days. Wanted to be by herself. In the end, desperate to leave, with the twins squabbling in the hall and the car packed, Cherry gave in. She would come back in a couple of days, she said, and left.

Cherry, Betsy was keen to explain, had no idea how upset she was. She didn't know about the conversation with Mabblewick. Had she known, she would never have left Betsy alone in reach of the medication that had stockpiled as Betsy had stopped taking it. Cherry had also assumed that Henrietta would be coming in to clean, and would let her know if anything was amiss. As it was, the absence of James was too big a loss to contemplate, alongside the threat of having to meet her father again, and Betsy had bolted the doors and taken the pills.

"They were never going to kill me, anyway," she said.

They sat in silence for a while, Henrietta sorting through what she might say that would make this scrap of a girl feel better, because the sense of ownership of someone else's grief that had struck her on the doorstep had not gone away, but it was not a feeling she was used to. She did not know what response to make. Betsy spoke first.

"It's always me," she said. "It must be something to do with me. First my Mum, then James. The people I love, they don't just *die*, someone kills them. It feels like it's my fault."

Henrietta, not quite believing she was doing this, reached out and took hold of Betsy's hand; felt the little twiggy fingers curl round hers.

"I learnt long ago," she said, "that if something happens that shouldn't have happened, you can drive yourself mad looking for reasons why it did. Believe me, it is never one person's fault, and it is never a co-ordinated conspiracy and I don't believe in some malign god. What it turns out to be, is a series of coincidences and accidents that ended up with this result."

As she spoke, Henrietta realised that she did know this, but she had never articulated it before, and had never applied the wisdom, retrospectively, to the things that had gone wrong in her own life. Now, she thought that of course her current situation – living alone in the house she was born in and working as a paid help – was not entirely her mother's fault, or her ex-husband's fault, as she had always told herself. She had chosen to give up college to look after the first because she had hopes of marrying the second. Not just because her mother was a domineering, demanding woman, though she was, but because this particular man had walked into the pub on that particular day. Then the disaster that her marriage turned out to be was not wholly because her husband was weak, but because he lost his job which meant he also wallowed in self-pity. And because he was embittered by her refusal to have children, now she had finally rid the house of the last of the needy foster children her mother had introduced into it. She felt comforted by the thought that, later, she would be able to contemplate all this more calmly in the light of what she had just said. Betsy seemed to find it calming, too. She wiped her face with the sleeve of her cardigan and got up to go.

"I knew it was a good idea to talk to you," she said. "You don't make judgments."

In the hall, Henrietta asked Betsy how much of this story she had told to the police. None of it, was the answer. Cherry had advised her to say she hadn't talked to James at the party, which was true.

"And do you know now how he died, how he ended up in the boot of that car?" Henrietta asked, as she opened the front door.

"No," Betsy said. "I don't want to think about it."

After Betsy had gone, Henrietta ate the lukewarm fish pie and drank the glass of wine, but absently, because she was preoccupied with the story the girl had told her, and in fitting it into everything she remembered about the day of the party and the subsequent days. In particular, she thought about the old blacksmith's workshop were James O'Mahoney was seen with Ross Mabblewick. It was out of sight of the Green, up a no-through-road that ended at the Forge, passing Sunnybank Cottage, where the Grahams lived, on the way. Henrietta had not been up there, during the day, but as the party ended, she had helped Thea Graham carry trays of cooked pork back to the house. She could remember, now, wondering why Bart, ever the bustling busybody, had left his frankly limp wife to do this job, and then meeting him coming down from the direction of the Forge as she was carrying the last tray to Sunnybank's kitchen door.

"I'll take that," he said, and almost snatched it from her. "You get back to the Green. You'll be needed down there."

Bart was habitually bluff and this sounded more abrupt than it would have done coming from someone else, but at the time Henrietta just felt pleased that the moments of glory in the sun with the pig and the carving knife had turned out to be hard enough work to make him grumpy. Now she wondered what he had been doing up at the Forge. She also recalled seeing Ross Mabblewick running, during the afternoon. This was odd, and must have struck her as odd at the time because she remembered it; he was such an inert, sulky young man any activity was unexpected, but this was more than just moving, it was positively taking exercise. Henrietta tried to reconstruct where she had seen him running from and to, and had the impression it was from the direction of the Old Forge.

She thought about all the people who seemed to be implicated in whatever had finally happened to James O'Mahoney from when Betsy saw him in the blacksmith's shop up to when he had been placed in the boot. These people were Cherry, Bart Graham, Mr Mabblewick and Ross, Philip Simms. There was a point in the afternoon when the birthday cake was produced, exclaimed over and cut; at this time toasts had been proposed to Laurel and to Cat and Conrad Monks, and the festivities had settled down into a more relaxed, loose affair than at the beginning, when everyone had been meeting and greeting and the showmanship of Bart Graham had been at its height. Henrietta had a feeling that James O'Mahoney might have been missing before this point, but she couldn't be sure. She was fairly confident she did not notice Philip Simms again, or only at a distance, outside the main centre of the fun, from shortly after the cake cutting. Bart Graham had been there until quite near the end but, significantly she now thought, not at the end. Cherry she could not be sure of, but she thought she had not vanished until most of the guests had left. Mrs Mabblewick and the younger son, she suddenly remembered, had been sitting on a bench while the clear-up was taking place, with even the always-smiling Mrs M looking morose. Her husband and older son were not with her.

On Wednesday, Henrietta woke up with the joyful thought that she still had the key to the blacksmith's shop. Stuart Smith had probably forgotten she had it, as it was for emergencies only, when the stop cock needed turning off, for example, or the burglar alarm silenced, both of which could be done in this outbuilding. She set off after breakfast. There were cars in several of the driveways, but Henrietta ate breakfast earlier than most of the residents, and no one was about. There was no sign of life from the Old Forge, and no cars, so she felt safe in assuming that neither Stuart Smith nor his possibly French girlfriend were there. She unlocked the heavy, planked door and slipped inside. She had no idea what she was looking for, but her original idea that she would

be the one to solve the mystery by noticing what was out of place seemed even more compelling now, so she stood and let her eyes adjust to the darkness. She had not often been in this building. The burglar alarm had gone off unexpectedly only once, but she had been involved, over the years, in fetching and carrying the tables and chairs stored here back and forth to village events. These were all stacked neatly where they always were; she remembered having seen the Not-the-Robinsons gathering them up on the morning after the party. Apart from these, she would have expected to see an oil drum cut in half and mounted on legs, once used as a barbecue but now too rusted to be useful, and a quantity of junk left by the last owners which Stuart had never bothered to remove, including a wardrobe, two broken bicycles, a bird cage, a standard lamp and a sofa. It was all there, and nothing new had been added. Stuart hardly used this building, keeping whatever most men keep in their sheds in another shed in the garden, or using the services of men who turned up with their own equipment to do jobs round the house and garden, rather than keeping his own shed-full.

What she did notice, though, was that the rubbish left behind had been rearranged. Whereas it had previously been all together in a corner, the sofa and the standard lamp had been extracted and placed more centrally. The lamp even had a flex trailing away from it which, following it to its source, Henrietta found had been plugged into a socket she hadn't realised was there. As she was bending over to inspect this, the door of the building swung open, creaking on its hinges as such doors are always meant to do.

"What are you doing here?" asked the man standing in the doorway. He had his back to the light and she couldn't see who it was so she produced the excuse she had prepared in case Stuart Smith should prove to be, after all, in residence.

"I borrowed a couple of chairs after the party and I couldn't remember what happened to them so I thought I'd better check they were here."

The man stepped further in, and resolved himself into the sturdy figure of Inspector Bradley Rose.

"Somehow, I doubt that," he said. "I don't suppose you'd like to tell me what you actually know about what went on at that party? And why you chose this particular shed to come and poke about in?"

"Yes, of course," said Henrietta. "Would you like to come back to my house for a cup of tea?"

"I would," said Bradley

When they came out of the blacksmith's shop, the village was full of police, some with dogs, forming lines and setting off to walk slowly across the Green and into the woods.

"Do you know what you're looking for?" Henrietta asked.

"Yes. Now ask me if I think we're going to find it?"

"Are you?"

"In my opinion, no. We've got a story, which more or less holds together, but no one will tell us if it's true. So we have to look for evidence to wave in front of the people who know whether it's true or not, to try and make them confirm it. Only unfortunately, I don't believe the evidence exists where we can find it."

"Do you think I'm one of the people who know whether your story is true or not?"

"No, I don't. I did, at one time, but where we are at the moment with the plot, you don't seem to fit. No, I'm hoping you can give me confidence in some parts of the story. Then I can become confrontational with the people who do know."

It was as Henrietta had imagined it would be, when she made the first phone call. The police, or one member of it, sitting across the table from her, wanting to know what she knew, looking at her as the person most likely to help them delve into the detail of the events leading up to James O'Mahoney's death. Only, Henrietta felt more compromised now, more involved. Then, she would have said anything about any of the residents; she had believed them all to be people of so little basic worth, with their wealth and their carefully designed lifestyles, that real heartache, real tragedy could not touch them. Now she also had parts of the story available to her, and she could see it was full of ambivalence and good intentions. She had to make a decision about what she thought of Inspector Rose and his team. What she said would have consequences and it mattered, all of sudden, what those consequences would be.

"Right," said Rose, "how about telling me why you were in that shed?"

"I was looking to see if anything was different."

"Go on."

"Well, I've thought all along that if something had changed or been moved, or removed, or had arrived unexpectedly, anywhere in the village, I would be the one who would spot it. So I thought I should make an effort to look round. Just in case I saw something that might be helpful to you."

She smiled at him. As she did so, it came to her that she might not have smiled at him on the previous occasions they had met and that therefore the lack of friendliness in his attitude towards her might not be entirely down to him.

"Tell me," he said, "did you start with the Blacksmith's shop or have you completed a tour of all other buildings in the village accessible to you?"

"Actually, none of them are. I know I have keys but I'm not about to go in and out of other people's houses when they haven't asked me to go there for a purpose."

Or when they might be arriving any minute and catch me at it, she added to herself. There was an expression on Bradley's face which made her think he was aware of her thinking this.

"So what did you find in the Blacksmith's?" he asked. "Was anything changed?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact something was. There used to be a lot of junk left behind by the last people piled up in a corner and someone has used some of it to make a sort of snug. You know, moved the sofa into the open, plugged in the lamp. In fact, I've only just realised, there was a rug on that bit of floor, too, which wasn't there before."

"Mr Smith might have set it up like that."

"He might, but it seems unlikely. He's hardly ever here, and he never seems to use that building."

"So who, then?"

"I don't know." He was watching her closely. "I honestly don't know."

"Bu you know something, am I right?"

"You must know more than I do."

He laughed and leaned back, the wood of her kitchen chair creaking under his weight.

"All right then. I'll tell you one thing I know which has not been released to the public, and you can tell me if you have heard anyone from the village mention this as a possibility. Mr. O'Mahoney died from an insulin overdose."

"Was he a diabetic?"

"He was."

"I didn't know that, and I haven't heard any speculation about his death. But surely, this means it was likely to have been as the result of…..I don't know, a miscalculation, or a mistake, an accident?"

"Exactly. But then why would those involved try so hard to cover it up?"

"Because someone feels vulnerable, or is trying to protect someone who is vulnerable?"

"Again, exactly. Now, will you tell me what you know?" Henrietta thought before answering and in the pause, Bradley leaned forward again and said, "I'm sure you realise, until we have the story confirmed by the people who know what happened, we will not leave and none of those involved will have any peace."

She recognised that this was true, and nothing that Betsy had told her implicated the girl in the final act in James O'Mahoney's life. So she told Inspector Bradley Rose the story, just as Betsy had told it to her.

"Thank you," he said, when she had finished. "Splendid."

"Is it?"

"Helpful, certainly. I may as well tell you we believe Mr O'Mahoney died in the Blacksmith's shop. And we know that a number of people had been in there in the time around his death. We have fingerprints and DNA samples and the question is, how far to spread the net in looking for a match."

"Betsy never went in," said Henrietta.

"No, we are confident she didn't. If I may say so, you seem to feel surprisingly protective towards a girl who, until last week , you mistook for a nanny and whose name you didn't know."

"You may say so. I surprised myself."

After Bradley Rose had left, Henrietta worked out that she did have a reason to go into at least one of the house in the village, Scruton Cottage. She cleaned once a week for Cat and Conrad Monks whether the house needed it or not, and it was just over a week since she last went in, the day she found the body, when she had had to clear up all the pesky feathers in the bedroom. There was a car in the drive and the back door was open. Henrietta stepped inside and called out:

"Cat! It's me, Henrietta, come to clean."

The Monks had always seemed the most anonymous of the residents. They were fresh-faced and unfailingly pleasant and were bland, in respect of their appearance, their behaviour, their furnishings. Their only outstanding feature, Henrietta would have said, was their disparity in height. Still, they came to the village more than most of the other householders and were therefore the most lucrative, for Henrietta, and had the best claim to be called local.

There was no answer to her call and she assumed the Monks must have gone for a stroll, leaving the door open, as well they might, in this village, or were somewhere else in the house doing the crossword or discussing the best word to describe the colour of the peony in flower outside the window. She had come across them doing both these things, or something like it, quite often, and imagined this was how they passed their days – dreamily and to no purpose.

She extracted the vacuum cleaner from the utility room and carried it through to the hall, where she found something unexpected, something that must surely be connected with the circumstances of James O'Mahoney's death, though Henrietta was at a loss for a connection. In the hall, the colourless and predictable Cat Monk was sitting on the bottom step of the staircase with a glass in her hand and a half empty bottle beside her. She had clearly been crying. She was wearing what appeared to be pyjamas with what might have been chocolate ice-cream spilled down the

front. She looked extreme – extremely drunk, extremely miserable – and the defining feature of the Monks was that they were never extreme.

"Are you all right?" Henrietta asked.

"No," said Cat. "No." And she keeled over and laid her head down on the step on which she sat. "I wish I was you, Henrietta. Your life is so organised. So right. You're a marvellous woman, I've always said so, a marvellous woman." She reached out a hand and waved it about until it encountered the newel post, then pulled herself upright. "No, listen, you should get yourself a decent job. Someone like you, why do you let us all exploit you the way we do? When you could do anything, if you tried? Anything! I wish I was you."

It was news to Henrietta that any of the residents had an opinion of her that went beyond recognising her usefulness, and she was not sure she wanted to be judged.

"Would you like a cup of coffee? We could go through to the kitchen and have a chat if that would help."

Cat was happy to talk. She wanted to talk, about her sense of ill-usage, her fury and her misery. It was clear from the start that these arose through some action of Conrad Monks that Cat saw as a betrayal, but what that was she did not waste time on making clear, cutting straight to the injustice of it. She was the one who held them together as a couple and supported them as a family unit, never, never, NEVER throwing back in Conrad's face that he had failed to earn a bean in his life, while she had built up a business in floristry, going from one shop to five then to a franchising system that meant she no longer had to get in among the buckets and the oasis first thing in the morning but could sit back and run her empire and spend time with Conrad while still making more money than he could have DREAMED of, and had never, whatever the provocation, hinted that his vaunted creativity that was going to make him famous and admired was so much HOGWASH, his paintings, etchings, collages, whatever other rubbish, were bad, bad, BAD. And now he had done this, in the face of her patience and tolerance and unstinting effort. How could he?

This plaint went round and round without ever answering the question of how he could, nor yet Henrietta's unspoken question of what it was he had unexpectedly found he could do. It was interrupted by Sally Finstock, who came in the back door as Henrietta had done, without knocking.

"Cat," she said, "how are you, my dear?" She was wearing a sleeveless dress, quite long, in a shade of yellow edging towards amber, which caught the sun in its folds. There was not a crease or a stain on all its bright length and width. In contrast to red-faced, pyjama-clad Cat, she was a masterpiece of perfection. Even Henrietta had to avoid feeling dowdy in her jeans and T shirt by hanging on to her scorn at the time wasting represented by this level of cleanliness and order.

"Henrietta!" Sally said, noticing her belatedly. "The police are looking for you."

"Are they? Why?"

"They want you to go and sit with Mrs Eldred until they've arranged for Social Services to send someone in."

"What's happened to Sabrina?"

"Oh, they've arrested her."

"What?" said Cat and Henrietta more or less together.

"Oh, yes. They've just driven off with her in a car. Now, Cat, let's try and get you sorted out, shall we?"

Cat stood up and let herself be led away. Henrietta added smugness to her reasons for despising Sally Finstock and went back to her cottage, leaving the vacuum cleaner standing in the hall. Sure enough, a constable was waiting for her at the gate, ready to go with her to Mrs Eldred's,

where another constable was sitting looking awkward in front of the old lady in her grubby cardigan with her mouth as well as her eyes open and giving no sign of being aware that anything in the room had changed, that the slender, black woman she was used to had been replaced with a solid, pink young man she had never seen before

"What is Sabrina supposed to have done?" Henrietta asked the constable on the way.

"I can't tell you," he said.

Whatever crime she might have committed, Sabrina was an excellent housekeeper. Almost too good. Henrietta could find nothing at all useful to do in Mrs Eldred's house. She made lunch, coaxed Mrs Eldred to eat some, took her to the toilet, and, once the old lady was dozing in her chair, took a prowl round the house, looking through the rooms on the ground floor, clean but cluttered, then the bedrooms above. The room Mrs Eldred slept in was like her living room downstairs; clean, cluttered with a whiff of urine overlaid by bleach. Sabrina's bedroom, on the other hand, was just as clean, but sparse. There was nothing to show what this young woman, displaced from her home country, living with a companion who had no memory no empathy and no conversation, did with herself when she was not cooking, mopping or wiping. No books. No computer.

Henrietta was about to leave the room when a mobile bleeped. Not her mobile. She felt in the pockets of a fleece hanging on the back of the door and found it. There was a new text:

Pretend not to understand. Leave it to me. Sorry. Love you. Big C.

The call came from a number stored under the initials CM.

Mid-afternoon, Henrietta was relieved by a professional carer. She went straight to Scruton Cottage where Cat Monks was still sitting at the kitchen table, but fully dressed, with a cup of coffee, making notes on a tablet.

"Oh, Henrietta, where did you get to?"

"I went to sit with Mrs Eldred. They've arrested Sabrina."

"Of course they have. I only wish we still had the death penalty."

"Do you know what happened, then?" Henrietta asked.

"I know what Conrad told me. Though he's not trustworthy, as I now know. As you're here, could you do some tidying up upstairs? It's a bit of a mess."

Henrietta wondered whether she should remind Cat about her advice not to let the residents exploit her.

"Not more feathers, I hope," she said.

Cat looked up from her notes. "What? Oh, that! No, I was only cross with him for vanishing for half the afternoon, it was a bit of fun. This is way beyond pillow fights. Don't worry, though, I'm going to be using financial weapons in future, nothing you need a vacuum cleaner to clear up. Can you just put things away, in the front bedroom and the bathroom? Don't bother with any of the other rooms."

Upstairs, every cupboard and drawer had been ransacked and every item of male clothing, all vestiges of male grooming equipment, had been removed. Henrietta restored order as requested. She opened the other doors on the way downstairs. In one of the smaller rooms, a single bed was piled high with what had been thrown out of the master suite; a mute monument to the fate of Conrad Monks.

Cat was still working. She had various bank statements and other documents spread around her and the wailing wreck of the morning might have been a different person altogether.

"Tell me," said Henrietta, sitting down opposite her. "What happened to James O'Mahoney?"

Cat looked up. "Why should I?" she said. Henrietta wondered how she had failed to notice the pursed-up meanness in the little face. She had probably been looking over Cat's head at Conrad, the better looking, more confident, substantially taller one. Cat had been there as an appendage, small in every sense. It would be trying to be Cat, Henrietta acknowledged to herself. But then, if she appeared to be the lesser of the two characters in this marriage, for all her business success, then maybe she was.

"Because I want to know," Henrietta said.

Cat appeared to think about this.

"I really don't think it's my place to tell you," she said, finally, suddenly sounding just like the bland little body she had always appeared to be.

Henrietta went to Mrs Eldred's in the morning, with Arnold wheezing along beside her, an excuse for walking through the woods. The woods were full of bird song and brightness filtered through fresh leaves. It was a time for new life, Henrietta thought. And maybe not just for the birds and the trees. She needed to think – but not now. Now she could only concentrate on uncovering the story of what had unfolded behind the doors of the Blacksmith's shop a week ago.

Sabrina was hanging sheets on the washing line.

"Thank you for stepping in yesterday," she called.

Henrietta shrugged. "No problem. Are you off the hook, now?"

"No." Sabrina put the peg bag down and came over to where Henrietta and Arnold were standing. "I'm on police bail. My passport has been confiscated and I'm not allowed to leave the area. They haven't charged me yet, because they haven't worked out what to charge me with."

Henrietta opened the gate she was leaning on and led Arnold into the garden.

"But did you do anything? Is there something they could charge you with?"

"Oh, yes," said Sabrina. "I killed James O'Mahoney. No doubt about that. Murder or manslaughter, though, that is the question."

Henrietta had learnt to look properly, over the last few days, to see past the shorthand she was used to use to keep people pegged as caricatures and, therefore, hardly human at all. Having learnt this lesson, she saw that Sabrina was not just black and morose. She was beautiful and sad; graceful and emotional.

"I can't believe you meant to kill him."

"No, of course I didn't. I meant to save his life. It's what I trained to do." She folded her arms and looked at Henrietta, who said nothing. "Oh, look, I might as well tell you the story. At least you will listen with an open mind. I'm not wrong about that, am I? You don't make judgments."

"You're the second person recently who has said that to me."

"Am I? Is it true?"

"I think it could be."

"Come on, then."

Sabrina went inside and checked on Mrs Eldred, then they sat on a bench outside the open lounge window; Arnold squeezed underneath for the sake of the shade and provided a snuffling, snoring accompaniment to their conversation. Henrietta sat at one end of the bench, holding herself into a still, tight package to avoid appearing to react when reaction was not asked for, Sabrina sat at the other end, loosely, moving her hands to touch the back of the bench, her knees, her skirt, even, as if forgetful of where they strayed, Henrietta's arm.

"You should know I trained as a nurse, at home in Cape Town, and I had a good job at a hospital there. Then I made a mistake and married the wrong man and I wanted to get away from the mess, make a break, so I signed up for this." She jerked her head towards the window behind which Mrs Eldred sat, vacant. "You seem to be someone who's happy with silence and solitude, so you won't understand what a shock it was to me, to find myself here where I can hear nothing at all except the sounds of the animals and the birds and the weather. I don't know what frightened me most, the loss of the noises I was used to, or the new sounds I had never had to listen to before. I missed everything about my old life but I'd signed a contract for a year and I had to endure.

"The only person in the village who noticed me was Conrad Monks. I knew why he noticed me, of course. I've met that type of man too many times before. But he was the only amusement on offer so I agreed to pretend I was in love with him; he's the sort that needs to think there are deep emotions involved, not just sex. We set up a little den in the Blacksmith's Shop and we met there whenever the purse-pincher he'd married let him come down here. I might sound bitter, but I'm not. I enjoyed the sex, even the play-acting was fun of a sort. It's only a year, I thought.

"On the day of the party, he told me we had to have at least ten minutes together, he wouldn't be able to stand it otherwise, he said, so we arranged a time to meet. When I got to the Blacksmith's at the time we'd agreed, James O'Mahoney was lying on the sofa, unconscious, with bruises on his face, and that oaf Mabblewick was ranting away at Ross who was shouting back at him so I couldn't work out what they were saying or what was going on. I went straight to James. His skin was clammy and his pulse was too fast so I shouted at the Mabblewicks to shut up and tell me what had happened. Mr Mabblewick said something like: 'stop making a fuss, woman. I only gave him a little tap,' you know how men like him talk.

"Then Conrad arrived. He looked through the open door and didn't see the Mabblewicks, only me, bent over James on the sofa, so he rushed in shouting: 'Oh, my daring, my darling, are you all right?'.

"Of course, that set Mabblewick off. He saw at once what was between us and he began to have a go at Conrad for being disgusting. Ross kept shouting: 'shut up, Dad, just shut up,' and Conrad was trying to be dignified. I was the only one paying any attention to James. I felt through his pockets to see if he had any medication on him and I came across the card they give insulin-dependent diabetics so the emergency services will know how to treat them. It seemed to me he was suffering from hypoglycaemia, either because he'd injected and hadn't eaten or hadn't injected. When they'd stopped shouting at each other I told the men to find Philip Simms. I didn't know he was a doctor, only that he was James's partner, but the others did, so they agreed he was the man they needed and Ross and Conrad went off to find him. Mabblewick stayed with me, babbling all the time that it wasn't his fault.

"Ross and Conrad came back saying they couldn't find Philip anywhere, so I asked them to phone for an ambulance. They couldn't have been more shocked if I'd taken all my clothes off or started speaking in tongues. No, no, they said, surely it wasn't that serious. Look, they said, there's a party going on, we don't want to spoil anyone's fun do we? Of course, they were all thinking about how they could explain what they doing in the shed, with each other, and me. About how James got the bruises on his face."

Sabrina stopped talking and looked at her feet. She was wearing old trainers. Scruffy, cleaning lady shoes.

"I knew what I should do," she said, at length, "and I didn't do it. I let them send Ross to James's house for a syringe of insulin. Mabblewick kept saying that was all it needed to sort James

out, and he was bound to have some in the house, as if he had some real knowledge or experience. I wanted to believe he did, and Conrad was backing him up saying yes, yes, let's just get on with it and Ross ran down there and came back with a syringe and I injected James and he died."

She stood up and went over to the washing, feeling the edge of a sheet as if it could have dried in the fifteen minutes since she hung it up.

"OK," she said, coming back to the bench, "you can say something now."

"I don't think you're the guilty one," Henrietta said.

"I'm guilty of something. Being weak, or stupid."

"All right, guilty of stupidity. What happened next?"

"The place filled up. Conrad had asked Cherry Suchenskaya and Bart Graham to look out for Philip and when they found him, they all arrived together. Now there were even more people who didn't want to be caught with an unexplained dead body on their hands. Philip picked up the syringe I'd used and his hands started to shake. Whatever it was, he clearly shouldn't have had it in the house, or not in that quantity. Cherry was quite calm but she was adamant she wasn't going to be mixed up in it. Something about her husband coming out on parole. Only Bart wasn't just thinking of himself. I had him down as a complete idiot but actually, he really is full of good cheer to all, you know, not just acting it out? He was the only one who tried to comfort me rather than himself. Then Conrad realised I was the one who had technically killed James, and began to insist it had to be covered up for my sake and they all joined in, as if suddenly they really cared about what happened to me.

"So they hatched this plot. Philip was going to go down to the Green and bring James's car up the lane. The party was breaking up and lots of cars were on the move. Then they'd put the body in the boot and drive the car back to where it was. Philip had taken charge by now and the whole plan revolved around him. He needed to go back to London, to go to work first thing in the morning, so he was going to leave the car there, with the body in it, and come back up late the next night. He figured there would be no one around, after midnight, and he could carry poor James into the house then without being seen. Then the following night, after work, he would come back in daylight and 'discover' the body. He'd sign the death certificate and everyone would say how sorry they were and turn up to sing hymns at the funeral and then get on with their lives. We all agreed to it. At that moment, we would have agreed to anything as long as it meant we could go home and pretend nothing had happened. Only it didn't work. Someone opened the boot and found the body before Philip had a chance to move it."

"It was me," Henrietta said. "I used to think I owned this village, no matter how many title deeds the so-called residents had, and there was this strange car, where it shouldn't have been. I thought I had a right to investigate."

"I wish you hadn't," said Sabrina. "Although, in a way, I feel better about it, from James' s point of view. He was a lovely man, so everyone says, and he didn't deserve to be stuffed into a car and manhandled and lied about."

"How did the police work out you were involved?"

"They were always going to, weren't they? They questioned everyone who was at the party to find out who had seen the car move, and who hadn't been in plain sight all afternoon. They narrowed it down pretty quickly and sat Conrad down, Cat in attendance, of course, and asked him where he'd been. Cat had already had a go at him for not sticking to her side like an obedient husband and he decided to act like a man (I imagine that's what he thought) and tell the truth. He told them he was with me because he was in love with me and he didn't care who knew it. I wish I'd

been there to see her face." She started to laugh. Henrietta had never heard her laugh before and it was joyous, so she laughed too. "We were done for, after that," Sabrina said, when she's stopped laughing. "He probably tried to wriggle round the details but he'd make a rubbish liar, and anyway they had a pretty good idea who else was involved by then so they only needed to talk to each of us, and they'd get a different story from every one of us. We never thought to agree what we'd say if it all went wrong. So BAM! Over we all went."

"What happens now?" asked Henrietta.

"I get deported, that's for sure. The only question is whether I go to jail first or I'm straight on a plane. I tell you, I'm not going to miss this village. I know it's your home and you probably love it but it's like living in a bowl of cold soup. You can keep it."

"I've been thinking it was time to move on, too," said Henrietta. "I might as well have been living in a cupboard. I couldn't see out and I wouldn't let anyone see in."

Inside the house, Mrs Eldred started to wail, calling out a name that was neither Sabrina nor Henrietta. Arnold, startled from sleep, hit his head on the bottom of the bench and began to bark. Sabrina stood up to go indoors, but turned back and gave Henrietta a hug.

"Visit me," she said.

In the end, no one went to jail. The inquest verdict was death by misadventure but Mabblewick, Philip Simms, Conrad Monks and Sabrina were all found guilty of failing to report a death and perverting the course of justice. Scruton, which for a moment seemed to have changed forever, turned out, once the moment was past, not to have changed at all. So Henrietta left. She put her house up for sale and embarked on a career as a house-sitter. Having thought, once, she belonged in Scruton, only to find it had had its back turned to her all the time, she chose to avoid the illusion of belonging; jettisoned permanence for perpetual motion. It suited her. She spends the winters, the close season for house sitting, in South Africa, visiting Sabrina who had, as she predicted, been deported and also barred from nursing. Undaunted, she retrained as a cook and set up a seafood restaurant, in a beautiful location on the coast. From time to time, Betsy Suchenskaya, skipping through adolescence and young womanhood looking for ways to avoid spending time with her father and step-mother, joins Henrietta in a house sit, if she happens to be at a loose end and the location is convenient. It is from Betsy that Henrietta learns about the other residents of Scruton.

The Mabblewicks are still there though Mr M lost his job and began to drink, and Mrs M's determination to stand by him seems to increase rather than alleviate his overwhelming fury at the injustice of it all. Philip Simms was struck off, sold Field View Cottage and vanished from sight. Over time, there have been hints of something unsavoury about the man woven into the fabric of the conversation amongst the residents who were there before the party (The Party). Conrad Monk has never been seen in the village again by Cat Monk is still there, with a different name and a different husband, a man only slightly taller and slightly blander than she is. New families and couples have arrived to take up residence – though following the Scruton tradition in never making Scruton their only home – in Field View, in Mrs Eldred's cottage and in Henrietta's old home. The waters of Scruton have closed over the place she used to occupy and no ripples remain.

Sabrina and Betsy have long since stopped suggesting they were responsible for James O'Mahoney's death, but, having spent time in the quiet of other peoples' houses thinking it over, Henrietta believes she has isolated the one moment at which the outcome became inevitable. It was when Betsy, having told Philip Simms that James was being unfaithful, ran away without telling him where

to find his partner. It turned out that Philip had looked first in his own house and then come to the conclusion that James would have gone to a roofless cottage in the corner of a distant field where they had been together, in the past. So while his lover was dying for want of his care, he was a mile or more away, calling James's name and cursing him. This small, thoughtless act of Betsy's had changed so many peoples' lives. Not all of them for the worse, Henrietta thought.

Keeping It Safe

This is a story a woman in a Care Home told me. Someone should write it down, she said. So I have. Only I have not written down the story she told me; I have drawn out the fragments and rearranged them to make a pattern. Not the pattern the woman had in her head, which was a mosaic of fractured memories, but the story she might have told if there was ever a cure for the condition which had landed her in the home. Or maybe not. Maybe the brightness would vanish from the picture when the detail was revealed and the facts reassembled. Maybe she would have thought, in her newly restored state, that none of this was worth telling, and perhaps she would even lose the sparkle that made her telling of it a thing worth writing down.

Estelle was born in Shipton-under-Wychwood in the first half of the twentieth century when the traffic between houses and shops, school and doctor's surgery was on foot. Shipton-under-Wychwood belonged to Estelle; she had walked the lanes and fields with her mother's hand holding hers for the eternity it took to grow from having a view of the first two courses of stone in the wall round the Old Prebendal House to being able, at its lowest point, to see over it. When she started school, she could not wait to tell her mother the exciting news that she had met a girl who did not live in Shipton-under-Wychwood. This was extraordinary. Everyone else she knew, and therefore the entire universe of which she was a part, did. By the time her mother had stopped holding her hand she understood that there were other villages, there were towns where other people lived. People who had never even been to Shipton-under-Wychwood. But these were people without substance, who had been born and lived in the wrong place and were therefore to be pitied as unfortunates, if they were worth thinking about at all.

When she was eleven, Estelle's parents did something that, had she had the words and concepts available to her, Estelle would have described as child abuse. They moved away from Shipton-under-Wychwood. She went with them – what choice did she have? – to live in Banbury, an alien land, populated by other children whose entitlement to own Banbury was greater than Estelle's could ever be. She was translated into an unfortunate. It was inevitable that the children at her new, large school would treat her as an unfortunate, which they did. At first, no one took any notice of her; then no one spoke to her, which was subtly different because whilst, before, no one spoke because she was invisible, now they took notice of her, and decided not to speak. Or not to her. They would look at her and laugh, then speak to each other.

Her school bag began to take on a life of its own, moving from where it was meant to be to somewhere it definitely should not be; emptying itself on the floor of the cloakroom; collecting objects that Estelle had never put in it and never would, some of them disgusting. She did not tell her mother, who had betrayed her by making her move to Banbury and was thus no longer to be trusted.

The children who lived near her new house began to torment her on the walk home. There were several of them, but the worst three were all boys and the ring leader was David Goode. The irony of this was lost on Estelle who was not a humorous child. David and his gang started calling her names (which she did not much mind; she agreed with some of the names they called her) and asking her questions, which she did mind because it was impossible to ignore. Impossible, in the end, not to answer, and the glee of this happy band of Banbury-owners when she did was almost more than she could bear

"Hey, droopy-knickers, what you having for your tea?"

"What you having then, go on, what does your Mum cook you? "

"Bats on toast, is it? Is it?"

"Yeah, she's a witch, isn't she, your Mum? Do you have to eat the bats raw?"

"Do you bite the heads of first?"

"Oh, go on, only kidding. Tell us what you're really having."

And in the end she would say something, and whatever it was, they would mock her for it.

Still she didn't tell her mother.

In history they studied the Great War. The teacher wrote notes for them to take home asking if they could bring in any mementoes of the war, to help the class imagine their own family members caught up in the conflict. Estelle's mother gave her a cigarette case which had belonged to her grandfather. There was an inscription on it and a story to go with it which Estelle hardly listened to because she could not imagine standing up in front of her tormentors and giving them, unasked, information which would be absorbed, distorted and re-used as a weapon against her. What she did hear, though, was the instruction to keep it safe.

The teacher was particularly pleased with the cigarette case. Estelle's ignorance was no defence because the teacher knew all about it, it was a gift to the troops from Queen Mary who sounded like a ship to Estelle. Her cigarette case was held up, talked about, she was congratulated on owning it. She was speechless with dread, in anticipation of the walk home with this so publicly revealed treasure in her bag.

It had rained but, as Estelle walked as fast as she possibly could without running the risk of looking as if she was running away, the sun was shining. The water collected in the hollows, where the road or the pavement had worn away was oily, brown and sparkling. When David and his gang caught up with her, she took the cigarette case out of her bag and held it in her hand, thinking it was her bag they would aim at. It was always her bag. But the first of them to arrive alongside her never reached out a hand, he simply swung his hip to the side, and butted her into one of the dirty, shining puddles. She threw her arms out to save herself and the case left her hand, flew in a tumbling arc towards the gutter.

They all stampeded after it. All the boys. Estelle sat on, water soaking into her dress, knickers and socks and salt tears running down her face. David Goode reached the puddle first and stretched down to grab the prize, but a foot, a foot wearing a pair of lace-ups in an adult size at the end of a leg inside a black stocking, got there first. It placed itself above the wet and muddy cigarette case, heel on the ground, sole held just clear of the case but blocking it from David's grasp. The owner of the foot was between David and the sun and he had to twist his head upwards and squint to see who this was. Afterwards, in bed that night, Estelle conjured up the picture he made, crouched in the gutter, face distorted, head turned at an unnatural angle, and thought she would never fear such a grotesque little gnome again.

The shoes and the stockings belonged to a woman who was obviously known to the gang, and they to her. They dispersed, looking injured or innocent or sheepish according to their various senses of themselves. The woman crouched down beside Estelle and slipped the cigarette case back into her bag.

"It's all right, my dear," she said. "You don't know me but I know who you are. I'm a friend of your mother's. You're quite safe now."

And so it proved. Estelle found that, by the light of day, David Goode and his friends were as terrifying as they had always been before they had been made to look small, but they moved on to other games; she was no longer the skittle they chose to bowl at.

The woman who had rescued her worked with Estelle's mother at the Garden Centre and became a familiar figure in Estelle's life in Banbury, but she was never able to superimpose the rescuing angel over the ordinary housewife and part-time till operator the woman turned out to be, and recognise them as the same person. She clung on, in moments when she did not feel as safe as she had when the woman who was her mother's friend crouched down beside her, to the remembrance of that moment, and this comforting image seemed to have nothing to do with anyone she knew.

Estelle vowed to herself, growing up, that she would return and live in Shipton-under-Wychwood where she belonged. She never did. She married a man in the diplomatic service and went to live in one town after another, in cold climates and in hot. Her husband's name was Edgar and he used to refer to them as the two Es.

"Ee, lass," he used to whisper to her in moments of intimacy, and she would whisper "Ee, lad," even though neither of them had any connection to the north of England. But intimacy did not come easily to either of them and this little joke saw them through, kept them together. Their public profiles were highly polished; they perfected the business of arriving, settling in, engaging in the local social circle, packing up and travelling on to arrive somewhere else. They were like the geese who came in Spring to the river Evenlode, Estelle used to think, but never said, taking off and landing, sometimes here, sometimes gone. Not belonging became her way of life.

Until Edgar retired. They moved to a village near Oxford, which was not Shipton-under-Wychwood, because a suitable house, Edgar said, could not be found in what she still thought of as her home village. Their daughter was living in Oxford and Edgar, who had always lived in one conurbation or another, had wanted to join her there, but Oxford was too expensive and Estelle was uncharacteristically stubborn in refusing to move to Banbury, so they settled down in Kirtlington, adjacent to a golf course

Estelle was unsure if moving to Kirtlington had been, after all, the right decision. She felt more visible than she was used to or liked to be. People were friendlier, for no obvious reason, than she expected and she found herself uncertain how to respond. Her diplomatic training had prepared her for transience and purpose. In those days, there was a reason why these people, whoever it happened to be, were in her house holding a glass, or she was in theirs and it had nothing to do with whether they liked each other or not. Both she and they knew that in a few weeks or months or at most a couple of years, they would cease to live in the same town and need no longer fill each other's glasses. The nature of the relationships, the parameters of the social chatter, were set by this knowledge. It was important to remember, when choosing topics to entertain a dinner guest, that personal matters were an inappropriate starting point.

Now she found that people wanted to know her for no other reason than that she lived in the next street, was married to a man who played golf. It made her uncomfortable. Then, shortly after the last box had been unpacked, a stroke carried Edgar off on the eighth hole. And surprisingly, it became easier, when the funeral was over, (at which Estelle's daughter, after a quantity of wine, made a joke about strokes and golf courses, which Estelle only belatedly understood). She felt able to make a connection back to the girl she had been in Shipton-under-Wychwood. Nothing stopping her from being comfortable. She began to bake cakes, attend talks, go on organised walks, join a committee or two, take up knitting. She was happy.

One day in winter, when it had snowed and the snow had melted and formed puddles full of oily, brown water that sparkled in the sun, Estelle was rushing to catch the village shop before it shut, to buy hundreds and thousands to decorate cupcakes for her grandchildren who were coming to tea the next day. She tripped and fell. Her bag flew open and all the precious contents – her purse, her pills, her phone, her diary, her keys and her glasses – spilled out and scattered, flipping and rolling into the water in the gutter and beyond the gutter into the road. Estelle lay where she had fallen, wishing she could close her eyes and re-wind, rise up and resume the route she had been taking, untripped.

She heard feet running towards her.

"Estelle," said a voice beside her, "are you all right?"

She had to turn her head to look up at the speaker, who stood between her and the sun. "My bag…." she said.

"Oh, don't worry about that," said the voice which she could identify as someone she knew and knew well though at that moment the name wouldn't come to the front of her mind. "Let's get you up out of the mud."

When she was sitting up, because, although she was not hurt, standing was momentarily beyond her, she saw that other people had gathered round, customers from the shop, villagers whose windows looked out over the place where she fell, a passing motorist, and they were collecting up the contents of her handbag, chasing after till receipts blowing along the verge, putting their hands deep into the oiliest, brownest puddles to fish out a comb, a pencil. Everything she had lost was being saved, restored to her. She turned to the woman crouching beside her and asked: "Are you a friend of my mother's?"

Life began to be irritating in ways Estelle was sure it had not been before. It was impossible to prevent her cleaner from moving things to places where they did not belong and where Estelle could not find them. Even more irritating was the cleaner's refusal to admit guilt. On the contrary, she kept asserting that it was Estelle herself who had put the marmalade away in the fridge instead of in the cupboard, who had hidden a reminder of a dental appointment in the drawer full of freezer bags, who had taken the breadbin out to the back garden and left it there.

It was true that Estelle's memory was not as good as it had been. This was why it was important to have the reminder from the dentist kept in a safe place, pinned to the calendar in the front hall. (Only with the cleaner being so cavalier about where she moved things to, maybe a safer place was needed.) It was hardly surprising she kept forgetting people's names, at her age. Everyone did that, didn't they? It was certainly troubling that she had begun to find it hard to remember which way to turn at the end of the road to reach the village shop, but she had never failed to find it in the end. There was always someone to ask.

Then someone – it couldn't be the cleaner, she refused to think that badly of her, so it must be the children creeping into the house on their way home from school, or next door's gardener – someone started emptying the bottles in the drinks cupboard. Estelle liked to have what Edgar used to call a sundowner in the evening. Six o'clock, a small sherry. Only the clocks in the house had become unreliable and she had to guess when six o'clock might be. And when she went to the cupboard there never seemed to be any sherry left, or any of those bottles of sauvignon blanc she like to take a glass of with her meal. She was having to go to the shop all the time to buy more.

Estelle's daughter, who had always been pleasant to her, if a little brisker than Estelle could ever remember having been herself, now began to be positively unpleasant. She kept insisting that Estelle was unable to look after herself, and pointing to plastic food containers melted in the oven

when Estelle was sure she had not put them there. It was hardly surprising, with all this stress, that she fell ill. She was not quite sure what was so wrong with her that she had to be in hospital but the nurses were lovely. She told her daughter and her friends from the village when they visited. But this couldn't go on.

"When am I going home?" she asked her daughter, one day.

"You keep asking me that," her daughter said, though Estelle was sure she hadn't mentioned it before. "You can't go home. You wouldn't be safe."

"My friends will look after me," said Estelle.

"But don't you feel safer with the nurses?" said her daughter and, when Estelle thought about it, about the confusion at home, the people accusing her of things she hadn't done or expecting her to do things she did not remember she was meant to do, she had to admit: the nurses were comforting.

It was delightful in the Care Home, in Chipping Norton. It was not far from Shipton –under-Wychwood, her daughter told her, but Estelle could not see how these rooms and corridors linked to the landscape she still held clear in her mind of the place she was born. Her daughter drove her there once, to remind her, but it seemed to have slipped away from her when they reached it, not to be the same place at all, and she was quite relieved to get back to the Home.

One of the old ladies in the lounge – they all seemed immensely old to Estelle – lost a hearing aid and there was a discussion, between the owner of the hearing aid, a visitor, and another of the old ladies, about where it might have gone. Estelle seemed to remember she had lost something once, it might have been a hearing aid, yes, it almost certainly was. She told them the story as she remembered it. She was living in a village, she said, and she had gone for a walk down a muddy lane and her hearing aid had fallen into a puddle. She had been worried she would never get it back but then a woman, in a nurse's uniform, had come up to her and said: 'I'm a friend of your mother's', and other people from the village had come along and put their hand into the puddles until they found the hearing aid, all wet and slimy, and given it back to her.

"That was lucky," said the visitor.

"No," said Estelle. "That's what happens if you live in a village."

"It was a good story," said one of the old ladies.

"Someone should write it down," said Estelle, "keep it safe."

The Bell Pull

Beside the front door is a ship's bell with a plaited bell pull. The plait is formed from lengths of cloth; each length itself a plait of other, narrower strips. It is tensely textured, randomly patterned, both soft and knobbly in the hand. Morgan takes a firm grasp of it and works it in a circular motion he has developed over the years and the bell responds with overlapping booms of sound that hang in the air after Morgan's hand is stilled. Morgan waits. Nothing happens. Morgan seems to have expected this result; he shows no sign of impatience, but looks down at his two, tightly laced, well-polished black shoes just long enough for the noise of a siren on the by-pass half a mile away to become audible, loud, then fade away. Then he walks round the side of the bungalow, through an unlocked gate, and looks in at the patio doors opening onto the lounge at the back.

His father is lying back in an armchair, unshaven, in a pair of jogging bottoms, a pyjama top and slippers. He is watching television with the sound turned down and eating chocolate digestive biscuits. Morgan raps on the glass. Slowly, his father raises his head, looks at him, shakes his head, brushes biscuit crumbs off his trousers and, finally, stands up, fiddles with a latch and slides the door open.

"You should ring the bell," he says.

"I did," says Morgan. His father begins to shuffle backwards towards his armchair. "Come on," says Morgan. "It's time we were going. I'll fetch your shoes."

"Don't bother," says his father. He rearranges the patchwork cushions behind his back, and settles himself against them. They are smeared with dried food and spilt drinks, a pattern repeated on the knitted throw on which he sits and the tapestry cover of the footstool where he rests his slippered feet. "I'm not coming."

"You'll come," says Morgan, going into the hall. He returns with a pair of trainers, cratered and knobbed to an exact replica of his father's feet.

"No, I won't." says his father. "You can argue with me all you want, it won't work."

"I'm not going to argue with you," says Morgan, putting the shoes on the once bright but now stained rag rug beside his father's chair and sitting down on the arm of the sofa.

His father helps himself to another chocolate digestive. Eats it.

"So you're not going to tell me it's my duty, after all she's done for me, can't I spare half an hour to visit her when she's no use to anybody anymore? You're not going to say 'Oh, Dad,' in that whiny voice, over and over, when I'm trying to watch my programme?"

"No."

His father shifts one of the cushions behind his back and settles himself again.

"Why not?"

"Two reasons. Firstly, because it gives you an excuse to go through all the hardships you've had to bear which is why nothing can be expected of you that involves any effort on your part, or any reduction in your level of comfort. And secondly, because it's Lent."

"Lent? Fucking Lent? What the hell has that got to do with the price of fish?"

"Mum was talking to one of the nurses about what they planned to give up for Lent, last time I visited. The nurse said chocolate, and Mum said she couldn't think of anything she might eat or drink which she felt it would be difficult to give up, and given she eats and drinks so little, it would be a bad idea."

"I suppose there is some point to this," says Morgan's father, reaching inside his trousers to scratch his groin.

"There is. Bear with me. The nurse said, you can give anything up for Lent, anything at all, like biting your nails or complaining about your arthritis."

"Your mother's never bitten her nails."

"So I said, I could give up arguing with my Dad, and that's what I've done. It's Ash Wednesday today, and for the next forty days, I am not going to enter into any conversation with you that involves disagreement."

His father feels down the side of the chair for the remote control and turns the volume up on the TV.

"That's all right, then," he says. "I'm not going to visit your mother and you're not going to argue with me about it. Not much point coming round, was there?"

Morgan goes into the hall, opens the front door and uses the plaited bell pull to ring the bell.

"Will you stop that noise, and shut the door?" his father shouts. "You're letting the cold in."

"Just checking," Morgan calls back, over the sound of Kirsty Allsop's voice.

He goes into the kitchen, opening and shutting a few drawers, turning the oven on and off, inspecting the inside of the fridge.

"What the fuck are you doing?" asks his father, vertical, in the doorway.

"Just checking," says Morgan, again. He edges past his father and goes into the bedroom, picks up the intricately patterned patchwork quilt off the floor and puts it back on the bed.

"Why can't you leave things alone?" says his father. "Just mind your own business. Who do you think you are, coming in here and checking up on me. Clear off, why don't you?"

Morgan squeezes past him again, opens the door to the bathroom, looks in, shuts the door, then goes back into the living room and begins straightening the cushions on the chairs his father does not use and which are, therefore, still clean and vibrant testimonies to the hours his mother spent, with needles, wool and fabric, creating this nest from which she is now absent. His father pushes by him, picks up the remote and mutes Kirsty.

"What the hell are you playing at? Just stop it, do you hear me? Stop it!"

Morgan sits down on the sofa and stretches his legs out. Slowly, his father sinks back into his armchair and absent-mindedly reaches for another chocolate digestive.

"You didn't ask me," Morgan says, "what Mum decided to give up for Lent."

"That's because I don't care."

"She's decided to give up worrying about you."

"Well, hallelujah. I never asked her to in the first place, did I?"

"But the problem is, you see, that she can't stop worrying about you because she has no idea what state you're in. She never sees you, so she can't stop worrying about you."

"Oh, I get it," his father says. "This is a nice little plan you've dreamed up, the pair of you, to make me go and visit her in that place. Well forget it, she can carry on worrying about me. No big deal, is it? She tries to give it up, can't do it, so what? The world doesn't come to an end."

"But it will cost her."

"Cost her? How?"

"The Home has made a note of all the pledges to give something up for Lent and every time someone does what they have pledged not to do, they have to make a contribution to charity."

"What charity?"

"Macmillan Nurses."

"You're telling me she's going to be shovelling money towards a bunch of nurses just because she said she would stop worrying about me and she hasn't?"

"That's about it."

"Well, it hasn't worked. I'm still not going to visit her. Let's face it, she hasn't got that much money to throw at them. I can live with it."

"No, she knew you wouldn't visit, so there's only one solution."

"I expect you're going to tell me what that is."

"She's going to come home."

"She can't do that."

"She can. She can discharge herself at any time, as long as there is an adequate care package in place at home."

"Adequate care package, what the fuck's that?"

"Well, she'll be eligible for help from the council. They'll arrange for a carer to come in once a day and do whatever it isn't possible for you to do. For the rest of the time, you'll have to care for her yourself." His father stares at him, a half-eaten digestive in his hand. "The council will do an assessment of what aids she 'll need – rails, ramps, commodes, you know the sort of thing. As far as I can see…"

"This is not going to happen," his father says.

"When Lent is over," says Morgan, "remind me to remind you of all the years she spent caring for you."

"Here," says his father, kicking off his slippers, "help me get these shoes on instead of sitting there like a useless waste of space."

On their way to the front door, Morgan's father catches his foot in a crocheted mat and has to steady himself by hanging on to a macramé wall hanging.

"Bloody junk," he says. "Place is full of it."

As Morgan locks the front door behind them, he gives the bell pull a tug and its mournful notes follow them down the path.

The Dinner Guests

"I heard the bone snap," said Theo.

"I knew at once," said Vi. "I knew it was serious."

They turned towards each other as they spoke, tossing the story line back and forth, relaxed in the way they sat, side by side, on a two-seater sofa upholstered in gold velvet. There were eight people in the room, all of us full of good food, all of us sitting comfortably, in the spacious, dimly-lit, well-furnished lounge of our hostess, Miranda Peabody. I had never met Theo and Vi before but they appeared to be a successful, lately-young couple, holding still to the illusion of youth. There was a chance I would know them better by the end of the evening as it was set to be a long one.

Theo and Vi were in the middle of a story about their walking holiday in the Auvergne; more specifically, the occasion on their walking holiday in the Auvergne when Vi jumped off a wall and broke her ankle. It was a story, I could tell, that they had told many times before, as a couple. They were humorous, in the parts that involved their own stupidity or discomfiture:

"Of course, " (Theo) "my mobile had run out of charge and Vi's mobile was…remind me, darling?"

"On the bedside table at the hotel. Of course!" (Rueful smiles exchanged.)

They were sentimental in the parts that involved someone other than themselves.

"He just dropped the spanner he was holding, I mean, literally just let go of it, not waiting to put it down, and ran to the quad bike shouting to his wife to call the doctor. His wife said: 'I don't know any doctor because we are never ill, but I will find one.'"

It was a nicely framed story. The brightness of the cold day, the starkly beautiful landscape, the view from the peak where the incident occurred. Just enough detail for us to be able to picture the scene, sympathise with or admire the participants, all the way through to the happy ending: arrival back in the UK with a perfectly set ankle and no more than a few weeks' worth of impaired mobility ahead. It was almost possible to overlook the consuming banality of the little tale. All six of us, in the audience, listened attentively to the end. This, though, had more to do with the instructions our hostess had given us at the start of the evening, than with the quality of the story and its telling.

"I can't bear it when people take it in turns to talk about something that has happened to them," she said, over the pre-dinner drinks. "For one thing, no one listens because they are busy working out what similar story of their own experience they can start to tell when whoever is talking shuts up. And for another, some people grab more turns in the speaker's chair and others never get to share their own, just as interesting anecdote."

There was general agreement. Theo told us the story of a party he had been to where the host spent the entire evening explaining how he had built the house, starting with the purchase of the land and progressing through design, planning permission, foundations up to and including the fitting of the loo seat and the fixing of the knocker on the front door. Our hostess, Miranda Peabody, waited for him to finish then made a proposal or, rather, dictated a plan for how she wanted the evening to run. Each of us, she said, could tell one story. It could be any story from the distant or recent past and could be as long or as short as we chose to make it. Whatever story anyone else told, we could – indeed should – discuss and comment on. But we could not use it as a springboard for another. Or, if we did, that was our only turn, gone.

"We'll start after dinner," she said. "That will give you all time to plan in your mind what you're going to say and leave you free to concentrate on those who go before you."

As well as Theo and Vi, there was one other couple among the eight of us, Carl and Maeve. They could tell one each, Miranda said to the couples, or one together.

Now I realise I have set off relating the events of that evening from the point where things began to be interesting: that is, from the first story told. When really I should have begun with the other guests, or more properly, with the hostess. She was a woman in her sixties, familiar to me as a neighbour, but not one of my familiars; someone I had known for some while as a member of the society I mixed with in the village, but she is a private person and in truth, I knew almost nothing about her. I still don't, but I do know her to be even more formidable than I had thought her before this dinner party. Of the other people in the room, I knew two of them at least as well as I knew Miranda, had a passing acquaintance with another two, and had never met Theo and Vi before.

The two I thought I knew quite well were Solomon Thorogood and Berenice, whose surname, being Polish, I have never learnt to spell or even pronounce; she is always addressed as Mrs B by the people who don't feel they want to attempt her first name. Solomon is a retired solicitor, a dry man who spends his life indoors and is an expert on Venetian glass. A widower, so I understand. Berenice is also a widow, or at least, lives alone; she is very well-dressed and fading into old age in an elegant way, retaining a restful beauty. What she says is in keeping with her appearance, sounding well put and meaningful. They are both perfect dinner party guests, if not very interesting ones. By the end of the evening, I would be able to make a much better judgment on both.

The couple I knew only slightly were unlike the rest of us in the room. Carl Turner and Maeve. I don't know Maeve's other name. It may be Turner, for all I know. Carl is a gardener and therefore known to almost everyone in this village, where the people who can afford to have other people labour on their behalf greatly outnumber those prepared to so labour. It is a large village; what Carl has to offer is hard to find, and his time is fiercely contested. Maeve is a care assistant at the local Nursing Home, a converted Manor set in its own park. She has a particularly engaging face; round, freckled, wide mouth, fringe of red curls. I have always liked women who look like Maeve. I married one, once. Where is she now, I wonder? Carl is big and solid and has fingers thickened to sausages through years of manual labour in the wet and the cold. Though not so many years, in fact. Both he and Maeve are younger than the rest of us; a decade younger than Theo and Vi, I imagine. Two decades younger than I am.

Strangely enough, and this must be a credit to Miranda Peabody's skills as a hostess, it did not occur to me until towards the end of Theo and Vi's broken ankle story, what a strange collection of guests this was. How odd, that Miranda should have invited two comfortably off, withered old people, a thrusting mid-life career couple, two young people in jobs regarded as low skilled (because the skills they had were useful rather than exploitable for large gains) and me. How shall I describe myself? Middle-aged, middle class, middle income? So I present myself; and the first of these at least is true. My name is Henry.

The funny-but-of-course-essentially-serious story of the trip to France drew to a close. The rest of us, who had been entirely silent throughout, followed Miranda's lead in implying interest and attention, when it ended.

"I've always found the French to be helpful and friendly," she said.

"I've never been to France," said Berenice, "but I would love to go."

"I expect you were wearing the wrong sort of shoes," said Solomon.

"I don't know what would happen to us if Carl broke his leg," said Maeve, and he took her hand and shook his head at her as if denying such a possibility existed.

"That was a good start," I said. "I'm looking forward to the other stories."

"I'll go next," said Solomon. "As a contrast."

The story he told was, indeed, a contrast. No action, no detail, no weather or landscape. Instead he chose a dilemma he had been faced with in the years when he was still working. Some years ago, he had been involved in a case of alleged child abuse, acting on behalf of the accused. Two couples, one without children, one with a daughter of eight years old or so, had become close friends. They lived near each other, went on holiday together, the one babysat for the other, they fed each other's cats and watered each other's tomato plants and wandered in and out of each other's houses at will. Until the mother of the young girl had accused the husband of the childless woman of abusing her child. The case never went to trial. The accused man was vehement in his denial, supported by his wife. They could only imagine, they said, that the allegations had been prompted by some jealousy on the part of the parents who had less freedom to enjoy themselves and less money to do it with. Solomon's client said, in private, that he was afraid the accusing wife was secretly in love him and had chosen this way of making him notice her. It was possible, his wife said, sadly, that the father of the child might in fact be the abuser and the mother was in denial and seeking someone else to blame.

At length, the authorities concluded that there was insufficient evidence, and convinced the mother and father to let it go, to avoid putting their child through the ordeal of a trial. When the police, in Solomon's presence, reported this outcome to the accused, they also told him that they had taken note of him; that they would know him again if anything similar occurred in the future. Solomon felt the same. He could not like the man and for all he wished to believe him, he did not. It was a relief to him (and significant, he could not help but feel) that it was the accused couple who moved away, and he heard no more of them.

Recently, a divorcee with a young daughter, for whom he had acted in the divorce and in the subsequent selling of one house and buying another, came in to consult him. She was in a relationship, she told him, and her partner was about to move in with her. Marriage was possible. She wanted to know what his advice was in relation to the making of a new will, the ownership of the house. This was a woman he liked. He applauded her good sense in seeking such advice and they talked through the possible advantages and disadvantages of letting the new man in her life be a partner in all her financial affairs. Speaking hypothetically, Solomon laid out the problems that could arise if the man turned out to be unreliable, untrustworthy, fickle. He did not think it likely his client would have chosen unwisely. Until, almost on parting, she mentioned the name of the man who had been the subject of their conversation. It was the husband accused of child abuse, some years before, with a girl of a similar age to his client's daughter. What, he asked, should he have done?

This story was interrupted frequently with requests for clarification, but, with a few detours back over territory already covered, the tale was told and the question understood. There were two or three lamps lit in the drawing-room where we sat, and the polished wood and heavy fabrics of the furnishings were so many pools of darkness around the edge. The expressions on the guests' faces were hard to identify, unless they leaned into the light or showed extreme emotion. I looked at Miranda, waiting for her to speak first, and I sensed the others, too, were waiting for her lead, but I could not tell from her face what she thought.

"An interesting dilemma," she said, finally. "Professional and compassionate obligations would compel you to say nothing. But if harm came to the mother and her child as a result, you would have made yourself complicit."

"I think you should have told her," said Berenice. "Poor woman, all alone. You can't imagine how hard it is, to be a woman, living alone."

"Hang on," said Theo, "this is someone who has never been found guilty of anything. What would you say? He was once accused of something he probably didn't do? What a way to destroy someone's life."

"Two people's lives," Vi said. "Even if she didn't believe it, the woman would never feel as safe and happy with the man again."

"I would say it was none of your business," I said. "Who are you to make judgments?"

"You could have kept an eye on her," said Carl. "You know, watched out for her, not spying as such, just noticing, if you know what I mean."

Miranda leaned forward into the light and the expression on her face was puzzling: pleased, but suspicious.

"Well done," she said to Carl, "well done."

"I'll go next," said Berenice.

"Hold on a minute," said Miranda. "What did you do, Solomon? We need this story to have an ending, as well as a beginning and a middle."

"I said nothing, of course," said Solomon, smoothing the material of his mustard-coloured cord trousers over his knees as if checking they had been correctly made, with the nap going downwards. "I'm not quite sure how my young friend here thinks I could have, as he put it, 'kept an eye on her', but obviously I made sure she knew she could consult me about anything in the future."

"Did she?" asked Vi.

"No, actually. Really, I don't know what you're all expecting. This isn't a story in a book where the ends are neatly tied up. This is life. It was the dilemma that interested me; the ethical question. If you must know, the couple moved away so I have no idea whether they lived happily ever after or if it ended in tragedy."

"What were the names?" asked Theo, getting his phone out. "I could google them and find out if they've featured in the news."

"I think Solomon would prefer us not to know," said Miranda. "Over to you, Berenice."

Berenice's story was short and yet full of irrelevant detail, most of which I will eliminate. One evening, she said, when it was nearly dark, the wind blowing strongly in the conifers round her isolated cottage, far from the nearest street lamp, there was a knock at the door. She opened it, as far as the chain would allow, and peered through the gap. A man stood outside, unknown to her, dressed in jeans and a waterproof jacket with a knitted beanie on his head and a dog on the end of a lead.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said, "but there is a cat in your gateway and it seems to have been injured in some way."

He stood back and moved his arm to indicate the gate, lost in the darkness behind him.

"A cat," said Berenice.

"Yes. I'll show you."

Here Berenice's story moved from the what to the why, from action to analysis, that is, the man's possible motives for wanting to lure her, a lone, defenceless woman, out of the house. Stepping across the threshold would have put her in his power. Any attack hidden by darkness, any cries inaudible above the wind, even if, and this was unlikely, anyone was close enough to have heard them. What, she speculated, was he doing, out after dark, was the dog a prop to give him a

feasible motive for being there or part of the plot, ready to hold her at bay while he ransacked the house?

"I thought you said it was a Labrador," Maeve said. "I've never known a vicious Labrador."

Berenice looked from Maeve, who is quite a solid young person, to Carl, who is positively well-built and nodded, investing the nod and the direction of her gaze with meaning.

"Ah, but you've never been in my position," she said. "Alone, and vulnerable," dropping her voice on the last word.

Maeve looked puzzled, as well she might, but Berenice was back on her doorstep, enjoying herself. She was an animal lover, she said, and would be prepared to risk limb or indeed life if the situation arose where either of these could be effectively sacrificed for the removal of pain from one of God's little creatures. But in this case, she was quite clear that God would not have expected her to offer herself up for a possibly mythical cat which might or might not be injured . So she said to the man with the Labrador and the knitted hat:

"I don't have a cat," and shut the door.

There was a pause during which Berenice looked smug and no one spoke. It was not clear whether the story was over or, if so, what had made it worth telling. It turned out it was not over and the pause was for dramatic effect.

"The next morning," said Berenice, "I went down to the gate, and what do you think I found?" No one offered to speculate, so she told us, with a note of triumph in her voice. "A dead cat!"

It crossed my mind to say the story was a dead end, but it was not a flippant gathering, so I kept quiet. No one else could think of anything to say, either, or nothing they wished to say out loud, except for Maeve who murmured: "What a shame!" which was ambiguous enough to suit all of us.

"Thank you, Berenice," said Miranda. "Now, Henry," turning to me, "would you mind topping up everyone's glass then I think we might have your story."

I have a few stories I tell, carefully selected, edited and embellished, for just this sort of occasion. It means I can join in a conversation when I feel it is appropriate without finding myself revealing too much about myself by carelessly launching into an anecdote I have not reflected upon and thought through. I selected one of the humorous stories, as the dark night, the menacing figure at the door and the dead cat had left a gloomy taste on the palate. So I set off through a little tale involving a lift in an apartment block in Rio de Janeiro stuck for four hours between two floors. I described the people with me in the lift; the grandmother and her granddaughter who had been shopping for a party and took up, with their bags and boxes and not insubstantial bodies the space of four people. The British boy on a gap year, wearing flip flops and showcasing a bad attack of fungal nail infection on his right big toe. The American evangelist who was wearing too many clothes and whose bald head had started to drip even before the lift stopped moving. The two workmen who had been going up to paint the penthouse, one of them with a speech impediment, who had entered last, just squeezing themselves and their pots and tool-bags into the space available. And me. I described the way the conversation started, quite hesitantly and in at least two languages, then became general, ultimately jovial as the grandmother and the teenage girl concluded that the party might as well start early, and the bottles of red wine and the salty snacks were circulated. By the time the lift moved and the doors opened, the younger of the two painters and the granddaughter were writing each other's phone numbers on each other's bare arms; the grandmother was teaching the American the Portuguese word for everything within her eye line,

which as she was now sitting on the floor, consisted mainly of parts of the body; the gap year student and I were seeing how many opening chess gambits we could remember and articulate clearly and the painter with the speech impediment had nearly completed a painting of a mermaid on the inside of the door. The last of the bottles of red wine was empty and the authority figures gathered in the lobby, pressing forward to see if we had sustained any injury, were pushed aside by a group of people conscious only of their bladders, and were left contemplating a craggy landscape of empty snack packets.

At the end of this story, which had bemused Berenice ("But what were they going to give the guests at the party?") and irritated Solomon ("I don't know why anyone would waste their time travelling to places where you might know the lifts won't work.") but amused the others, Miranda said:

"I wonder how much of that is actually true, Henry, dear."

"Enough," I said, having too much respect for Miranda to pretend it had all happened just as I described it.

Carl and Maeve had a story each. Before they began there was a flurry of movement, further topping up of glasses, trips to the loo. Theo and Vi I noticed, were showing a tendency to have conversations with each other at a level just above a whisper but below audible. I was interested to see if, having had their ten minutes in the spotlight so early in the evening, they attempted to leave before the rest of the group had had their turn. Miranda must have made the same observations, and took Vi off into the kitchen on some pretext. When they came back, Vi murmured something to Theo and they settled back down as if the idea of abandoning the party had never crossed their minds.

Maeve went first and was brief.

"I don't really have a story," she said. "Nothing interesting or exciting has ever happened to me. At least," she looked sideways at Carl, "nothing I'd want to talk about in this company."

Her eyes were beautiful, hazel, oval and thickly lashed.

"Nothing that didn't involve alcohol," Carl said.

All of us except Solomon and Berenice smiled politely.

"So I'm going to tell you about something that really pleased me, in the Home where I work," said Maeve.

"Something that pleased you is perfect," said Miranda. "And it will be a story, I'm sure."

"Well, it is, in a way."

She told us about a woman with dementia who had moved into the home, because her husband could no longer manage. At first, she was unhappy and restless. She would not participate in any of the activities organised by the home for the residents, in fact she did her best to disrupt them, throwing pieces of jigsaw on the floor, attempting to puncture the giant inflatable skittles, tearing up the pictures laid out to be the basis of memory boxes. Her husband, who visited every day, was told all this by the staff and he said, quietly, for he was a quiet man,

"She wants to be useful."

The next day he brought in a laundry basket full of socks. Individual socks, in different colours and patterns. Putting his hand on his wife's arm, he said: "Help us with these," and she did. For the first time she sat quietly for more than an hour carefully selecting a sock, searching through the basket for another sock to match it, putting them together. When she had finished, her husband kissed her.

"Thank you," he said.

The next morning, while the other residents sat in a circle singing or trying to sing or pretending to sing or just sitting while others sang, Maeve emptied the cutlery out of the drawer and muddled it up.

"Can you help me with this?" she said to the woman who had sorted the socks. "I seem to be in a mess."

The woman put the forks, the knives and the spoons back, in order, in the drawer. The husband brought something in every day for his wife to help him with – putting the right lids with the right empty jar, putting the photographs of their children growing up in the right order, sorting out the seed packets. Whenever she became angry, the staff found something for her to do that they could claim was helping them: tidying a cupboard, separating the pieces of two different jigsaws.

Maeve became slightly pink as she spoke. I could see it was not going to be easy for her to bring this little tale to a close. There could be no happy ever after for the man and his wife, yet most of her audience was watching her, maybe more fixedly than she had expected, as if hoping for something to come out of it that was more than a moment or two of peace for a damaged brain. She had not understood, I think, that her story would not be heard from her point of view, from the perspective of a carer admiring the ingenuity of the husband and the compassion of the staff. Though Theo and Vi may have seen it as she did, the rest of us were closer to the old woman and her husband in age than to Maeve, and we could not help but project ourselves forward into this ghastly future where sorting socks was the greatest pleasure we could expect from life.

"I think it shows," said Maeve, reaching for a climax, "that we have to remember the person that the person with dementia still is, when we try and help them."

It was a good call. All of us could agree wholeheartedly with it, and relax.

Carl was equally brisk with a case of mistaken identity. One of his employers had a garden full, for reasons Carl could never understand, of mislabelled plants. A lilac with purple flowers was labelled 'Madame Lemoine', when 'Madame Lemoine' has white flowers, and a clematis labelled *viticella* Polish Spirit, a late flowering cultivar, bloomed early and had pale mauve bells in place of the flat dark purple heads the name would lead anyone in the know to expect. The garden's owner was proud of his plants and had become committed to the names he believed belonged to them. He reacted badly when Carl took out his phone and offered to call up evidence that this was not that lilac, not that clematis. So, in the interests of harmony, Carl agreed to accept the employer's word and remembered, most of the time, to use the right wrong name when referring to them. All was well until the garden owner took a notion to enter a specimen rose into the local Flower Show. He selected a stem from a bush he knew, with complete certainty, was 'Whisky Mac'. 'Whisky Mac', Carl knew, and was pretty certain the judges and many of those attending the show would know, was apricot. The rose his employer picked and entered was deep crimson. It was also magnificent and duly won first prize, which resulted in a number of people asking the proud exhibitor if he knew what the rose was called. The next time Carl turned up for work he found his employer looking serious.

"Now, Carl," he said. "I'm disappointed in you. You told me that rose was called 'Whisky Mac' and now I find you were completely wrong. I was very embarrassed at the Flower Show, I have to tell you. Did you not realise that 'Whisky Mac' is apricot?"

This story provoked quite a response. Theo wanted to know how these mistakes could possibly have occurred. The correct naming of things (speaking as an academic) was absolutely vital and he could not imagine what carelessness had crept into the horticultural world. Berenice said

she could not see the point of the story. What did it matter? Miranda marvelled at the arrogance of the employer, believing it is always someone else who is wrong.

Carl looked pleased with the interest shown, though I suspect he had anticipated we would find it funny, as he clearly did, that anyone could be ignorant of such basic facts as the colour of a named rose or the flowering season of a named clematis.

Miranda took Maeve and Vi with her into the kitchen and came back with tea and coffee, plates of little buns, slices of cake, marzipan fruits and bowls of chocolates. It struck me how well choreographed this evening was turning out to be – the alcohol circulating just when it felt like the right time for another drink; tea and coffee appearing when the thought of something warm was just then forming; nuts and olives giving way to the rich little dainties. As these were handed round by Maeve (and what a pleasure it was to have the smooth arm, red curls and freckled face brought so close to my arm, and my face), Miranda turned up some of the lights so that the room stepped from cosy winter semi-darkness into brightness.

"That's nice," said Berenice, pulling the cushion behind her into a more comfortable position and placing a slice of cake on the saucer of her tea-cup. I agreed with her; it was nice. I felt settled, even though I am habitually uneasy with careful choreographing (unless I have done it myself, of course) and even though I realised Miranda had encouraged us to expose ourselves in the stories we had been telling. Including me. For all my care, the one I chose told anyone listening that I was a man who liked to hang back and observe; someone detached. Solomon and Berenice had both shown us their obsession with self – Solomon needing to believe he was always right; Berenice needing to think of her own safety above anything else. Theo and Vi, from the story they had told, felt to me to have an emptiness at the core of their lives that needed to be filled by turning whatever they did into a story. Unlike Maeve, who possibly cared too much, Theo and Vi, I thought, probably had little emotion to spare for others. Carl, like Maeve, had limited horizons, but was committed to and proud of the field he understood.

Only Miranda was as much a mystery as she had been at the beginning of the evening.

"Are you going to tell us a story now?" asked Vi.

"Indeed I am," said Miranda.

Now the lights had been turned up, we could see each other clearly as Miranda began to talk - each other and Miranda herself, her strong features, her severe haircut, her long, narrow fingers and long, narrow feet. She wore black linen trousers and a square-cut dark purple linen shirt, but these were not what held the eye.

"I am going to tell you a story," she said, "about a young man and what happened to him five years ago. His name, as it happens, was Robin, but that is not relevant to the story, you did not know him, and the story would have unrolled just the same whatever his name was. You not need to know it to follow the story I am going to tell. Just as you do not need to know about his love of cheese, his dislike of having his hair washed, his inability to swim, his skill in untangling knotted string. What you do need to know is that he was twenty-two years old and he was ill with hepatitis C. He had been in hospital, having tests which confirmed the diagnosis, and had discharged himself against the doctors' advice because he did not feel safe in hospital. Nor, for reasons again outside the scope of this story, did he feel safe at the place he was living at the time, so he set off for somewhere he would feel safe, which was a house here, in this village.

"He went from the hospital to Paddington Station and caught a train. It was this time of year, late October, and the forecasters had been warning of extreme weather conditions for some

days before this, and with increasing accuracy, of the amount of rain and the wind speeds that could be expected during the evening and overnight on this day, the day Robin left London. He had not heard any of the warnings and it would probably have made no difference to the decisions he made if he had done.

"The train was delayed again and again along the route and finally stopped, in a place a few miles from here, where there was once a station. The station was closed and the buildings converted into a house but where the train stopped there was still the remains of a platform. The train manager walked through the carriage, saying they had information a tree had come down and was blocking the track just ahead of them. They had called for a maintenance crew to clear the line but so far they had no promises for when this might arrive. Some of the other passengers in the carriage with Robin declared themselves ready to go out and manhandle the tree off the track, if it was physically possible to do that, and the train manager said that wouldn't be allowed. Robin looked out of the window and saw another member of the train staff down on the remains of the platform, which made him think that somewhere on the train, the doors were unlocked. He knew he was not far from his destination and he thought, if he could get out here he would be able to find a way of getting to the village without waiting for the train to move. Remember, he had not heard the weather forecast; he was ill and a little disorientated. Even before this happened, he had had no plan for how he was going to reach the place he was aiming for from the station where he had planned to leave the train. He had no mobile phone and no money. He was not expected at his destination. It seemed obvious, to him, that it was easier just to walk from this place, which he knew to be not far from the village, so he went along the train in the direction the manager had come from, until he found the unlocked door, then jumped out.

"The wind was a surprise to him, and caught him off balance. He stumbled to the edge of the platform and sank to his knees, trying to get his breath. When he had recovered, he looked around and saw this was an isolated place. It was nearly, but not quite dark and the only lights he could see were those in the converted station building. He turned back towards the train thinking, after all, it might be safer to stay on it, but at that moment it started to move, the driver having climbed back on board while Robin was hunched on the grass. He had no alternative now. He made his way towards the lights."

Miranda's voice was slow and deliberate. She spoke as if she expected her audience to pay attention. The rest of us had inserted asides and giggles, as we spoke, stumbled over words, repeated ourselves, looked round to make sure our audience was still with us. Miranda did none of these things. And the audience was definitely with her. All of us almost literally on the edge of our seats. As Miranda let a pause develop, Vi said: "That's where we live," and Miranda nodded before carrying on with the story.

"Robin found he could hardly stand up, once the train had left and there was no shelter from the wind. Remember, he was ill. He had thought he would walk past the lit house, if he could be sure of the direction he was going, or maybe knock and check on which way was west, but by the time he reached the door he thought he might not have the strength to go further, so he lifted the knocker and let it fall then sat down on the step, arms over his head to protect himself from the force of the gale."

" I remember that night," said Theo, "who wouldn't? It was epic. I don't think we would have heard the door if someone had knocked, would we, darling?"

"I think we did hear something," said Vi.

"Lots of things!" said Theo, and laughed, then smoothed his face at once. "I mean, there were bits of tree flying about and the shed roof completely gone in the morning."

"We must have missed his knock," said Vi, who did not look like laughing, "in the turmoil."

"Weren't you looking out of the window to see if there was any damage?" said Solomon.

"It was dark," said Theo, "and at the best of times it wouldn't have been easy to see if there was anyone outside, but as well," he shrugged, "in those conditions, it wouldn't have been possible to tell if it was a man waving his arms or a bush thrashing about in the wind."

Miranda continued as if no one had spoken.

"When there was no answer, Robin walked round the house, looking through the lighted windows, but although he thought the people inside had seen him, they made no move to let him in. There was a signpost a little further down the road and he went that way, knowing he could check his direction when he reached it. He found he was walking towards the village, although the signpost also told him he was six miles away from it. But what option did he have? He kept walking.

"After the signpost he came to a stretch of lane with cottages on each side. Only a couple of these had lights in the windows, but the buildings were shielding Robin from the worst of the wind so he thought, maybe, he could walk the six miles, arrive at the house where he knew he would feel safe without having to ask for help from strangers. So he did not knock on any of the doors. Beyond the cottages the wood grew thickly up to the verge and Robin felt his decision was the right one. He was a young man, after all. The walk was not so long. He managed a mile before the woods were replaced by open fields and the first gust that caught him, unexpectedly, knocked him sideways into a barbed wire fence which tore the flesh on the hand he put out to save himself and ripped the sleeve of the jacket he wore, already too slight a garment for the conditions, now almost worse than useless as the wind kept catching the material where it had been ripped and using it as a lever to push and pull at Robin's frail body.

"He kept going: what else could he do? Every time he passed a tree or a stretch of hedge that provided a moment of relative shelter, he paused, catching his breath. At one such pause, a branch broke off the tree he was sheltering beside and tore his ear on the way down, bruised his shoulder. After that, he only stopped where there was a gate or a piece of strong fencing he could lean against, turned with his back to the wind, while he built up enough resolution to continue his journey. At last, after another mile or so, he saw a light in a building some little way off the road. He couldn't see what sort of building it was as there were trees round it, hiding it from view, but he was sure the light was shining from a window, and this must be a place where one or more people were collected, in the shelter and warmth, and by now Robin knew he would not be capable of walking another three or four miles in these conditions, in his condition.

"As he turned off the road down the driveway, the wind, as it is in the nature of winds to do, dropped suddenly. Up until then there had been gusts of abnormal ferocity but in between these, it had still been a gale, with no respite, no moment when the hat on your head (only Robin was wearing no hat) would not have been ripped off if not securely fastened. It was still blowing hard, just not as hard, and as Robin passed into the trees round the house, it felt calm. Maybe, he thought, if whoever was inside would come to the door and let him in to rest a moment, have a drink of water, he would be able to go the rest of the way."

I did not want this story to continue. But Miranda was not looking at me, and no one was going to stop her now.

"It was a small cottage, but the windows facing the road on the ground floor were lit up, the curtains not yet drawn, and Robin saw a movement behind the glass. There was a bell and a knocker on this door, and he used them both. This time he would not leave without asking for help."

"I was living in that cottage," I said. "Five years ago. I was having work done on my house and it was easier to move out and rent. It was a holiday let, in the summer, so available all winter."

Miranda looked at me and nodded. I don't know if she was acknowledging that she knew this, or accepting what I said.

"So it was you who lent him a bike," she said.

There was a brief diversion as Solomon kicked over a cup he had set down on the floor beside his chair, and the dribble of coffee had to be mopped up, the cup cleared away.

I remembered that night. I remembered the young man at the door. I had taken him for a vagrant, wandering about in the dark, off his head on drugs or drink, with his unsteady stance, torn clothing and blood-streaked face. Had I been alone I might have taken him in and tried to establish who I could call to come and collect him. I am not timid; it would not have worried me to have him in the house. But I was not alone and I did not want it known who was with me, so the boy was a most unwelcome intrusion. If the lights had stayed on, it would have made no difference to the way I treated him but, luckily, they went out, and that made it easier to justify my actions to Miranda. To avoid, let me be frank, telling the whole truth.

"Shall I explain what happened next," I said, when the crisis with Solomon's cup had been resolved.

"If you like," said Miranda.

"I had friends staying with me, and we were talking and laughing and what with that and the almost unbearable noise of the wind thrashing about in the conifers round the property and the rattling of the windows, I might not have heard the knock or the ring. But, as Miranda has said, the wind dropped at that moment, and as it happened I was in the hallway at the time, on my way to the kitchen, so I heard both and opened the door.

"It was impossible to see clearly who was on the doorstep. It was a dark night and the cottage had no outside light, or not one that worked. I could guess this was someone young, and male, but otherwise, hand on heart, I could tell nothing about him except I didn't know him. I didn't notice his clothing was torn, or unsuitable for the conditions, or that he was ill. I know that now and of course it would have made a difference, if I'd been able to take that in at the time.

"He had just begun to explain he was trying to reach the village, when all the lights went out. A tree had fallen on a sub-station somewhere miles away and the whole district lost supply for more than twelve hours, as I'm sure we all remember. I had been on the point of inviting him in out of the weather, and had the lights stayed on I would have done. Then, of course, I would have seen the state he was in and would have driven him to the village myself. As it was, I was caught between wanting to help this stranger and being anxious to get back to my friends, who were left in the dark, and already calling out to me to ask for candles and torches.

"As I took him for a fit, young man, and the wind had dropped, and the village was only two or three miles away, I told him he could take the bicycle that was round the corner of the house, leaning against the wall. It belonged to the cottage and I hadn't used it, but it had looked to me to be in working order if not exactly shiny and new. I thought it possible I might never see it again – forgive me for saying that young men who knock on the doors of isolated properties after dark do not necessarily inspire confidence – but I could replace it easily enough, and it seemed a good way of providing assistance to a stranger and also getting back to my friends who I could hear crashing into

things in the room where I had left them. The bike was gone, in the morning, so I assumed the bicycle had been the answer. I never did see it again."

I would have liked more time to construct this story, but I felt I had done well in pitching it as I had. I had no idea, though, what Miranda had been told about what actually happened, and though I had stuck to the facts – knock at door, man on doorstep, lights out, offer of bicycle – the actual interchange between myself and Robin, as I now knew he was called, was not precisely as I had described it. Miranda's face showed no awareness of anything amiss in the story I had told. But nor did it show recognition of a set of truths she already knew.

She took up the tale again.

"The bike Robin had been lent had no lights and in the darkness it was often difficult to tell where the edges of the road lay. And the wind became once more violent, blowing not into his face, which would have made it impossible to make progress, but from the side, which made it difficult to keep his balance. It would have been hard work, in Robin's state of health, to pedal this unfamiliar, heavy bike in any conditions. He had managed only half a mile or so when he heard a car coming up behind him. He knew that, in his dark clothing on a bike without lights, he would be close to invisible, so he stopped and stood on the verge, holding the bike. The car was travelling slowly and hugging the left hand edge of the road as if the driver was nervous of straying off it. His headlights should have picked out Robin and the bike in plenty of time for the driver to alter his course to the small degree necessary to avoid them, moving the left hand wheels away from the gutter on the road's edge a foot or two to the right. By the time Robin realised the driver was not going to react, it was too late. He lifted the bike at the last minute, hoping to pull it out of the path of the car, but the wing caught the bike's handlebars and pitched it, and Robin, tangled up with it, into the ditch."

Miranda paused, catching no one's eye. No one spoke.

"The car was a vintage Jaguar," she went on. "An XK, I believe."

"Good heavens!" said Solomon, sounding like an amateur actor with four lines to speak, failing to make those lines sound natural or spontaneous. "That sounds like my car!"

"Could it have been?" asked Theo. "I mean, were you about on that night? You must remember."

"Yes, yes, I was," said Solomon. "I'd been to dinner with some old friends in town and I remember driving slowly because of the awful conditions – slower than normal, that is, because I am not a fast driver. I can never see the point of speeding up to take a matter of minutes off the arrival time. But I can't believe I would have struck a cyclist and not noticed."

"Nevertheless, someone driving a vintage Jaguar, slowly, did do so," said Miranda. "And must have been aware of the impact."

Solomon's face was mottled white and puce.

"Well, if your informant is reliable," he said, "I can only assume I thought I'd struck a tree branch fallen into the road. How dreadful." He sat, shaking his head, smoothing his trousers, and the rest of us sat, watching him. "I mean, if I'd have known, I could have helped him. Out of the ditch and in any other way necessary."

"Indeed," said Miranda. "As it was, Robin stayed in the ditch for a couple of hours. He was so exhausted it even felt like a relief, to be forced to lie down, to be able to stop pushing himself to reach the place he was travelling towards. The bike had landed on top of him and after he had made the effort to shift it, and had contemplated the new stings and aches from the new cuts and bruises, he fell into a sort of doze. He was roused by the tickling of some insect that had crawled into the tear in his trousers made by the something sharp on the bike as it fell. He became aware of rustling

which might or might not be the wind; it was still dark. Slowly and painfully, becoming tangled once again in the bicycle, Robin climbed out of the ditch. He began to walk. It began to rain. This, too, had been forecast and was as heavy as the Met Office had warned it would be, only Robin had not heard them. The water reached inside his inadequate, ruined clothing and soaked his skin. He began to shiver.

"He was walking alongside a wall which, by its orderly nature he took to be a garden wall. Where there was a garden there was likely to be a house, and even if the occupants of the previous two houses he had called at had rebuffed him, Robin was ready to try again. If the house proved inhospitable, he thought, then a garden would still be better, more comforting than the wild trees and ditches. He looked for a gate; he found a gate and though it was locked, it was possible for someone even in Robin's condition, and certainly for someone in a state of utter desperation, to climb over.

On the other side of the wall an expanse of lawn and shrubs stretched away into the darkness. There might or might not have been a house; there were deeper dark shapes in the darkness but no lights. This might have meant no house, or an empty house, or be the result of the power cut. Near at hand, though, Robin could see a structure. A sort of summer house. Shelter, accessible shelter with a door that was not locked. Inside was a pile of wooden tables and chairs, folded up, one bench and a heap of cushions, put under cover for the winter. Robin put some of the cushions on the bench and pulled the rest on top of him. He felt, for a moment, warm , comfortable, safe and well. He fell asleep.

Carl had been leaning further and further forward in his chair. Maeve had taken his hand and was holding on to it as if she was tugging against his impulse to jump into the story too early.

"I found him," Carl said. "I found him."

"I thought it was you," said Miranda.

"Oh!" Carl released his hand from Maeve's and rubbed his face. "I didn't realise he was ill. What I mean to say is, I thought he might be but I couldn't be sure if he was just drunk, you know, or on drugs? It wasn't even light, I could barely see him. I knew he needed help, that's for sure, but it wasn't a good morning, if you know what I mean. I'd been woken up by the police banging on my door asking me to go and clear a tree that had come down blocking a road, and I'd left my chain oil in the summer house at this garden I look after, out of the village, so I suppose you could say all that was lucky because otherwise I wouldn't have been there. It wasn't my day for that garden But the problem was, I had to get to this tree, and my mobile was flat – no power, you see, overnight – so I couldn't hang about and talk to this chap, well, to Robin I should say, and I couldn't call anyone to come and help him."

"So what did you do?" asked Solomon. "Leave him there?"

"I gave him a drink of tea from my flask," said Carl. "And I asked him where he was going. He said to the village and he'd be all right if he could just make it that far. I didn't offer him a lift because I was going the opposite way, but he had to pass the Care Home to get to the village, so I told him there was a shelter near the gate where he could have a rest and I said I'd get hold of Maeve, as soon as I had my phone charged up, and ask her to pop down and see if he was all right."

"You did," said Maeve.

"Not for a couple of hours," said Carl. "I plugged the phone in the van when I set off but then I had to cut up the tree and so on. Honestly," he turned to Miranda, "if I'd known he was really ill, I would have forgotten about the tree. I mean, what's a bit of a delay, a bit of a diversion? It just seems urgent at the time when really, what does it matter?"

"It had stopped raining," Miranda said. "And the day was beginning to break. It was less dark than it had been. Robin went back over the gate into the road and carried on walking. He found the entrance to the grounds of the Care Home and the shelter, as Carl had described it, and he stopped and sat on the bench inside, and waited. To gather his strength together. For the daylight to come. To see if the promise of help arrived, and brought something to eat and drink with it."

"I saw him," said Maeve. "He was walking away down the road when I was coming down the drive to find him. He looked so lonely, so raggedy and I thought of running after him but it had been such a morning, I almost didn't have the energy. If only I'd managed to get away sooner, but, of course, it was chaos in the Home, what with the electricity being off and the windows all broken in the lounge by a tree fallen over, still lying there, some of its branches pressed up against the bedroom windows on that side. You can imagine what a state the residents were in, most of them having no idea why the light wouldn't come on and the TV wouldn't work, never mind the strangeness of the tree lifted up out of the ground and trying to reach them through the glass. I can't say some of the staff were any better. It doesn't help, does it, going on and on about what the problems are. You just need to work round it. Anyway," she lifted her hand and brushed away a tear that had been travelling down the perfect arc of her cheek, "it was at least an hour after Carl phoned before I could get away to see if the man he wanted me to help had turned up and, like I say, he was just off, down the road."

She put her hand back in Carl's and he whispered: "It's all right, precious, there most likely wasn't anything you could have done."

"After a while," Miranda said, "Robin felt he might have the strength to reach the village which was only a mile away now. He walked slowly, concentrating on setting his feet down, one after the other, pausing from time to time to lean on a tree trunk or a fence post. It was broad daylight as he went past the first houses and by the time he reached the centre, the shop was open. He had no money but the idea of something to eat, something to drink, was so tempting he stopped and leaned against the window, looking into gloom of the unlit interior. His legs were shaking and it was almost impossible to stand, unthinkable to move. The door opened and a woman came out, with bags full of groceries. The wind caught the door before she was fully through and banged it back against her arm. She dropped one of the bags and apples, oranges, bread and plastic bottles of milk spilled out round Robin's feet.

His legs began to fold beneath him and he could not be sure what his intentions were, in relation to this richness in front of him, whether he meant to pick it up and restore it to the woman who had bought it, or to grab an apple and start eating. The customer obviously suspected the latter, taking account, no doubt, of his physical appearance, not noticing, maybe, the condition of his health, and she swung the other bag against his head."

There was a pause. I assumed we all understood, by this time, that we had been invited to listen to this story, and we had been chosen to hear it because we had each played a part in it. So, naturally, we all looked at Berenice. Berenice kept on looking at Miranda, as if expecting her to carry on with what she was saying, as if it had nothing to do with her. As the pause lengthened, Berenice said, like someone just becoming aware of a coincidence:

"I went to the shop that morning, but I didn't see this incident. What a shame! I like to think I would have given him a hand if I'd witnessed it, though as a woman on my own, I am aware of being vulnerable myself."

Miranda closed her eyes for a moment.

"After the woman had gone, Robin managed to pick himself up and, by leaning on walls and hedges and lamp posts, to reach the house he had been travelling towards. This house." We all looked round at the warm, brightly lit room, as if confirming to ourselves that this house was, indeed, somewhere where a man in the state Robin was in might feel safe. "Only when he got here, it was empty. Locked up, and dark."

Miranda had been watching her audience as she spoke, up to now, but at this point in the story she looked down at the hands in her lap, talking, as it were, to herself.

"I was meant to be here, but I had let the friends I was with the day before persuade me to stay another night. It would be dangerous to drive, they said, in these conditions. Then in the morning we heard about the power cut in the village and the roads blocked by fallen trees. Best not to set out at all, they said. Stay with us where you will be warm and well fed rather than going back to a cold, dark house with no means of heating a tin of soup. I didn't argue. I didn't know it mattered.

"I reached home the following afternoon. It was nearly dark. I went into the house and put the lights on, turned the heating up, brought my bag in. But, I thought, before I unpack, prepare some food, I should check the garden for damage. I turned on the outside light and stood on the patio looking round for anything out of place. There was nothing to see except that the door on the garden shed was slightly ajar; I walked down to shut it in case the wind blew up again, and ripped it off its hinges. I so nearly left it, I was so close to going back indoors, drawing the curtains, opening a bottle of wine. But I didn't. I went down to the shed and I found Robin."

She leaned back in her chair and looked up at the ceiling. Maeve and Carl were still holding hands. Berenice was polishing the stone of a ring she wore with the cuff of her blouse. Solomon was staring at the fire. Theo was turned towards Vi; he touched her sleeve but she folded her arms and watched Miranda, steadfastly.

I was thinking there was only one question which remained unanswered about this peculiar evening. Why had Miranda waited five years before assembling in the same room all the people who had come into contact with this young man in the twenty-four hours before, I was assuming, he died?

"I'm so sorry," whispered Vi.

"There's nothing we could have done," said Theo. "But yes, of course, I'm sorry, too. If only we'd…." his voice tailed away as Vi turned her head and he caught the expression on her face.

"He was still alive," said Miranda. "That night didn't kill him. When I found him he was in a coma as a result of having taken an overdose of paracetamol. I have no idea where the paracetamol came from. He had been told they could damage his liver further if taken in quantity and he did not think he had any with him when he left London. Somewhere between the time he got on the train and his arrival in my shed he acquired three dozen pills and, deliberately or negligently, he took them, washed down with some dirty water from the rain butt. Because he was in pain and forgot how many he had already had, or because he no longer felt as if safety was available to him and the pills were a way out, he took them all. With the untreated hepatitis, the pills damaged his liver beyond repair. He has been on the list for a liver transplant ever since. None had been found, by the time last week, when he died from multiple organ failure."

Vi made a sound that might have been a sob; Theo turned away from her. Solomon looked serious and thoughtful, Berenice looked gracefully sad; so, now I knew them better, they would have expected someone watching them to describe them. Only now I knew them better, I no longer believed what I saw. Maeve got up and went to Miranda's chair, crouched down beside her and

touched her hand. Miranda turned her head and leaned her forehead, briefly, against Maeve's auburn curls.

"Thank you, dear," she said, and Maeve, the only one of us able to handle someone else's misery, got up and went back to Carl. I followed her with my eyes and found Carl was watching me. His is not an expressive face, but I think I understood what I was seeing there, and I looked away.

Miranda began to speak again.

"I will be honest with you, now. I do not know the truth about Robin's journey; he could remember very little of it; only an impression or two, a sense of being in one place or another, with one person or another. He was left with an awareness of the road travelled but no knowledge of the path the road followed. I have described it as I imagined it to be, not necessarily as it was. So I do not know if you have all been honest with me. If you have told me the truth, thank you. If you have not, maybe you have reasons why you have not, which may be important to you. Nothing in this life has ever been as important to me as Robin was. He was my son. And now he is dead and I have had five years to prepare for his going, but it was not enough."

We all left together. Most of us stuck with the time-honoured formula, expressing thanks for the hospitality, as we went out of the door, but in a subdued way, in keeping with the closing notes of the evening. Only Maeve and Vi did not mention the lovely food, the interesting company, but murmured something more personal as it came to their turn to take leave of Miranda.

It was a relief to be outside, in the chill, still darkness. Maeve and Carl walked off into the night, hand in hand. I watched Vi walking ahead of Theo, her head held stiffly erect, neither looking at nor speaking to him as she climbed into their car. I thought the lives of this couple would be changed for ever by the evening we had just spent; the hollowness at the heart of the way they lived had been exposed, to Vi if not to Theo. Berenice, elegant as ever in a carefully placed shawl, lifted a hand in farewell and drove away, untouched, I believe, by the story she had just heard; lacking even the small seed of self-knowledge needed to allow her to confront her part in it. My house lay in the same direction as Solomon Thorogood's and, though I tried to slip off ahead of him, having no appetite then or since for his company, he caught me up and walked at my side.

"You know," he said, when we were well away from Miranda's house, "that young man's death was the result of drug abuse, it was bound to be. He brought it on himself."

Unlike Berenice, he understood what he had done, and he chose to ignore it. As, if I am frank, I had planned to do until that moment. But something broke within me, as he spoke. A lifetime of playing my own game, no matter the cost to other, without fear or shame or guilt, had not prepared me for the feeling I had when Solomon voiced what I had been thinking, and I realised I was no better a man than him.

"He was the victim of his own weakness," I said. "But aren't we all?"

I have never regained my peace of mind.

Passive Strength

I am writing this on stage as you do handstands in front of me. I am part of the act. When we started this routine twenty years ago, we bought the second hand suit I am wearing and put it in a spin drier with a bagful of dust and grit to give it the look – to give me the look – of a thing unloved and unlovable. It has never been cleaned and the dust deposited in the fibres by centrifugal force is now lost below decades of animal, vegetable and mineral deposits. It smells, but who cares? No one comes close to me when I wear it. Certainly not you.

You stand near the front of the stage. I sit at my desk at the back, a dirty smudge on the negative side of the ruler measuring excitement and appeal, a counter balance to your colourful presence at the positive tip.

This is my friend Edgar, you tell the audience, *Isn't he lovely?*

I carry on writing. The audience are joyous in their certainty, reassured by the ritual.

Oh, no he isn't!

He's not? No, no you don't understand. He might look a little - Pause for the physical and facial pantomime they love - *dusty. But no, but no, listen, underneath* - tiptoeing to the edge of the stage and projecting a whisper - *underneath he's really, really good fun.*

Oh, no he isn't!

Then the acrobatics start, the pretend attempt to lure me from my work with cartwheels, press ups, handstands, dance routines. I carry on writing. You tell the audience I'm filling in my tax return and I'll be joining in the fun as soon as I've finished it. I'm not. And I won't.

For the rest of the act - your act - I am a running gag in the background. You do your routine. I sit here in this landfill of a suit, writing. I don't speak. Or move. I can be funny without having to do either. Isn't that right? (*Oh, yes it is* – the audience would back you up). I used to believe I was good at making people laugh in other ways; by moving, for example, or speaking. You were tremendously patient with me. You never stopped trying to help me improve, never missed the chance to pick up on the subtleties that made my performance fall just short of being as good as – well, as yours. However hard you tried, though, you could never, hand on heart, honest to God, Edgar, say I had reached the standard. What a pal you are, to have stuck with me. You worked out how we could carry on as a double act with my passive strength playing a key role. Yes. That's the phrase you used – passive strength.

And here I've sat ever since, being passively strong. And there you've capered, between me and the audience, being funny. It's all worked out for the best, hasn't it?

Oh no it hasn't! Can you hear me? Could you hear me if I had the lung power of a capacity audience? *Oh no, you couldn't.*

You will read this note, though. I can be sure of that. By the time you see these words, you will know much of what I am about to write, but I want you to realise how carefully I have planned this. I don't want you to think I have selfishly overlooked the effect my actions will have on you. Quite the contrary. I have become too used to holding the thought of you in the forefront of my mind; I am as assiduous in this as you are. Believe me, it was precisely because I am thinking of you that I am going to do what, by the time you read this, I will have done. When the curtain falls at the end of the show, you come out and stand in front of it, fertilising your self-esteem with the applause and adulation. Then you hold up a hand for silence and say:

Edgar's probably finished his work by now. If the curtain goes up, he'll be….no, no, let me finish….he'll be dancing the hornpipe. He will, won't he?

Oh no he won't! roars the crowd, as the curtain rises on my dusty, malodorous immobility. Even an acknowledgement of the final storm of applause would break the spell – I know that's right because you've told me - so I only look up, as if surprised, put my pen down and check my watch.

At least that's what I've done up to now. Tonight, when the curtain comes down and I'm alone on the stage, I will pull a thread I have lying here at my right hand. You haven't noticed it because you haven't come close enough. The thread leads up to the lighting gantry above my head to which, earlier in the day, I attached a sturdy rope. When I pull the thread, the loose end of the rope will drop down just far enough for the feet of a man of my height to dangle above the level of the desk when his head is in the noose – did I mention there is a noose knotted into the end of the rope? I have made sure that this will also allow the entire audience – balcony, circle and stalls – to have a clear view of the noose and its contents. I have not worked out whether the drop from the chair I propose to kick aside will be long enough to break my neck or whether I will be presented, slowly choking to death from the pressure on my windpipe. I am less bothered about that than I am about the correct positioning of the body – my body - for maximum audience impact. You see, I do have some sense of stagecraft. In fact, I would prefer to draw out the moment of my final performance; to have my purple face still gasping in its death agony as they, and you, take in the scene. I wonder, will you say *He's not dead, is he?* for the audience to shout *Oh yes he is!* as my suffused, protruding eyeballs roll up into my skull.

I have to go now. You're on the last page of the script (and so, I suppose, am I). Let me spell it out, for the avoidance of all future manipulation of the facts. I am doing this because I can no longer live with myself. I am doing it in this way in the hope that you will no longer be able to live with yourself. Oh, and by the way, I was not at all bad at comedy routines; I was just rubbish at standing up to a bully. You thought I wasn't as good as you are. Let me shout it just once, when you can't help but hear it – *OH, YES I WAS!*

The Dessert Trolley

"Don't you miss those old dessert trollies?" said Tanya.

In front of her sat a perfect orb of dark chocolate sponge, a smooth egg of ice cream, an elegant sail of biscuit fixed in a rippling sea of scattered coffee beans and red coulis.

"No," I said. I called to mind the dessert trolley rolled out at the sort of restaurant Tanya and I had been to as children: the profusion of fat, filling and decoration, all of it half-eaten, with the bowl of fruit salad self-righteous and untouched in the middle. "What exactly is there to miss?"

"The squeak," said Tanya. "The rattle."

"I don't even remember the last time I saw a dessert trolley."

"Oh, Caroline!" said Tanya, and began to cry.

It is a strange thing, that Tanya, who is a food writer, restaurant critic and co-owner of a couple of posh eating venues, struggles to be excited by actual food. I, on the other hand, am only an ornithologist, but I love food. It would be neat, I used to think, if I could interest Tanya in bird-watching as a hobby, then we could both be childishly enthusiastic about the stuff that earned the other one her living, while remaining appropriately blasé about our own speciality. But, of course, bird-watching is incompatible with high-heeled shoes, and is best carried out in places remote from the nearest coffee machine and without a reliable mobile phone signal. And the symmetry would have been spoilt by my continued enthusiasm for birds, alongside my passion for food.

Tanya and I grew up in the same village and I date the importance of food in both our lives to the day when were ten years old and a man called Guy (pronounced Ghee, like the clarified butter) Dubois moved into the Old Vicarage. He was a chef who had successfully sold on the businesses he built up, now looking for a life of food-related pleasure without the cares and boredom of running a business. He was a big, ebullient man, good on television, in demand as a public speaker, lending his name to a range of products. But he still had energy to spare and he devoted this to bringing a culture of food to our rather isolated, inward-looking village. Our traditions of Christmas cake sales and the annual WI show with its jam, marmalade, Victoria sponge and hard-boiled egg competitions were swept away. In their place, we found ourselves involved in a food-related festival for every season. In the Spring, Pancake Day – races, tossing, giant pans delivering fried batter products with fillings containing fruits we could not even spell. In summer, we had a picnic – games, sandwiches, pies, quiches, salads and an evening barbeque glowing red far into the night and making the very trees smell of burnt fat. In the autumn it was the Harvest Festival – huge joints of meat accompanied by vegetables never grown on the local allotments and loaves of bread, unsliced and unsliceable. In winter we had Christmas lunch, between Christmas and New Year – we did at least recognise most of what we ate at this event, even if there was 'something funny about the sprouts'.

"Pancetta," said Guy, smiling down at us, solid torso wrapped in a serviceable apron.

"Looks like bacon to me," said my father, who didn't like Guy, perhaps because my mother did like Guy and was part of an informal school of local ladies he assembled round him learning to cook the food we villagers were being taught to enjoy. My father did enjoy the food, and our family meals took a turn for the better after Guy's arrival, but this was not the main reason why I was pleased he had come. His festivals had introduced me to a man I had known all my life but never met. If this sounds odd, it is not. Mr Mustoe was a mole-catcher and a familiar sight, walking round the village wearing a flat cap and a coat with sagging pockets, in every season. He had a wife who

was supposedly sickly and never known to leave the house. Unless he was out catching moles, nor did he. So I had never truly met him, though when I passed him on my way to the village shop or the school bus or Tanya's house, I would say: "Hello, Mr Mustoe," and he would lift a finger to the peak of his cap.

The first summer picnic I found myself sharing a straw bale with a man I did not at once recognise. It was only when I mentally covered up the curious white area across his forehead and the crown of his bald head with a notional flat cap that I realised who this was.

"Oh! Hello, Mr Mustoe," I said.

He pointed to the crows on the electricity wire across the end of the field where the picnic was being held.

"Good news for them," he said.

It was the first time we had ever spoken and it was the first time anyone had pointed out a bird to me. He told me about the nature and habits of crows; how to distinguish them from other corvids (he didn't call them that). I must have shown I was interested because, after that, he would leave offerings of bird-related material on our garden wall as he walked past. An egg, a dead bird, a pellet, a nest. The next time he saw me, he would name whatever it was:

"Thrush egg; not hatched."

"Bullfinch. Cat got it."

"Barn owl pellet."

"Blackbird's nest. Not used this year."

This syncopated way of learning appealed to me. If he had shown me an egg and named it, I would have forgotten about it by the next morning, but finding it, having to memorise it, wait a day or more before having it identified, fixed my interest. From that first conversation with Mr Mustoe, I was destined to become an ornithologist.

As I grew older, and after Mrs Mustoe had died, Mr Mustoe and I would spend whole days together bird spotting in the woods round the village. He was the perfect companion. Largely silent, sharp-eyed, knowledgeable. Though I know now his knowledge was limited, and some of his 'facts' have since been disproved, he knew much more than I did at the time, and he was a good teacher.

While I was spending more and more time on birds and with Mr Mustoe, Tanya was elsewhere in the village, spending more of her time on food. While I was happy, ecstatic even (I have always loved food) to sample whatever turned up at seasonal events or my mother's or Tanya's offerings from Guy's latest lesson, I was totally uninterested in the ingredients and the methods used to produce the finished dish. Tanya, who could enjoy looking at a colourful bird when I pointed one out but did not care what it was called, became obsessed with the ingredients and the methods. Her mother had left when she was a baby and she lived with her father and older brother. Her father, I realised years later, was an alcoholic. Her brother was a surly, angry youth who pinched us and called us names. So there was little enough comfort in Tanya's home and she began to spend more and more time in Guy's kitchen.

My mother asked why I wanted to go around with some doubtful, dirty old man tramping through the woods, instead of learning valuable skills in the Old Vicarage, like Tanya. My father said personally he liked Mr Mustoe and thought Guy Dubois a much more doubtful character.

"Oh nonsense," said my mother.

We grew up. Our childhood enthusiasms turned into careers. Tanya's has been more successful than mine, if success is measured by fame and financial rewards, but I have achieved all I ever hoped

for in the field of ornithology and am proud of my achievements. We owe it all, I believe, to Guy Dubois, though he moved away from the village while we were at college, and if Tanya has stayed in touch with him, she has never mentioned it. We have not been back to the village, either, since our early twenties, when my parents moved and Tanya's father died. The last time we were there together was for his funeral. We went to the pub afterwards with the sparse congregation who all left early or stayed and got drunk. Tanya and I went outside and sat on a bench on a bank with a view of all the major scenes of our childhood: the field where the picnics and pancake races had been held; the Village Hall where we had packed in for the Harvest Supper and the Christmas Lunch; the church and its yew tree-lined path to the graveyard where the latest plot had just been filled; the gracious façade of the old Georgian vicarage.

It was cold, dull and depressing.

"Let's make a pact," Tanya said. "We'll eat a meal out together four times a year. Once a season. Like we did when we were children."

We shook hands on it. Then, to make sure, we wrote it down on the back of a shopping list I had in my bag, signed it and tore it in half. I still have my half.

Some years we have managed four meals, mostly it is three with Pancake Day having to wait until June, the summer feast occurring as the clocks go back and Harvest Festival rolled in with Christmas. But we have kept meeting. At first we were bright and excited about the paths our lives were taking. Then I settled down and Tanya did not. Her first marriage ended in divorce. And her second. I have never married but have been with my partner, the father of my children, since my early twenties. Tanya has no children. I began to find Tanya hard to be with, so giddy and unbalanced her life seemed to be in comparison to mine. Still, we had made the pact and we could always talk about food and birds and the people we knew at school and the people we knew in the village. And Tanya became calmer, or perhaps just sadder, more morose, as the years went by. The meals we have eaten have become more and more ornate and more expensive. My pleasure in them has remained undiminished. Tanya, on the other hand, has sunk back into cynicism and lethargy, taking less and less pleasure in food, or indeed anything else. Still, the tears were a shock. I had never before known her to cry in public.

I reached over her untouched chocolate sponge and my half-eaten lemon posset and took hold of her hand.

"What have I said?" I asked. "Why would talking about a dessert trolley make you cry?"

She wiped the tears away with the linen napkin, adding mascara to the lipstick and bordelaise sauce she had already smeared over it during the meal.

"I don't know, darling. Something to do with the feeling that when you turned your head, there would be everything you ever dreamed of laid out in front of you. The choices. Remember that? The trifles, remember those?"

She was almost aggressive in the way she asked these questions and I tackled the rest of my lemon posset, avoiding an answer.

"You know Guy Dubois has died?" she said.

"No! has he? I hadn't heard anything about him since he left the village. Is that what's making you so sad?"

"If I knew where it was," said Tanya, "I would dance on his grave."

"You can't mean that! I thought we owed him everything. I thought he was responsible for setting you on your path to the top in the world of food."

"Oh, he was. He was responsible for everything I have become. As you say, I owe him everything."

The lemon posset began to taste a little sharp. I could sense that the wrong movement or the wrong word would end this conversation before I had understood what it was about. I used my bird-watching training and sat still, said nothing. And, as a bird that no longer senses danger will come out into the open, Tanya told me the story of what happened in Guy Dubois' kitchen in our home village. While I was out in the woods learning about birds with a silent old mole-catcher in a cap and dirty overcoat, she was with a celebrity chef in designer jeans and apron, who was teaching her what in his view it meant to be a woman.

I will ask around. I'm sure there must still be a restaurant where they wheel the desserts out on a trolley. When I find it, I will book it for my next meal with Tanya and we can listen to it approaching, knowing that when we turn round, there will be trifle.

Possessions

Duncan drove the five of them to Avebury because he had the biggest car. The biggest, newest and most expensive car. No one mentioned this, though they did comment on the space inside and the comfort of the ride, so Duncan could be confident it had been noted; if the story of the trip were to be written or narrated in the future, he would be described as the man of substance, in a position which enabled him to own the best car. He was physically the biggest, too, and thought of himself – assumed others thought of him – as the most senior. He expected to be the decision maker and he was prepared to have firm opinions on everything, from the best place to pitch a tent to the safety precautions necessary before lighting a camping gas stove.

When they had unloaded their backpacks and prepared themselves for the walk ahead, they turned their backs on the car and walked away, led by Richie, who had the newest boots. The newest, most technologically advanced and most expensive boots. Richie was the smallest of the five of them and looked, from behind, like a rucksack on which someone had drawn arms and legs, an animated cartoon advertising rucksacks. He had very curly hair and ears which stuck out so far they glowed pink with the filtered light of the sun when it shone behind him. He had long since accepted he looked absurd, and had every expectation that others would find him absurd, so he behaved to suit the physical impression he created. He capered ahead, in his new boots, to the first stile and posed in a parody of an explorer searching for clues to direction in the far distance.

Michael followed with the map and two guidebooks. He was looking anxiously down at these before they had left the car park. He had poor eyesight and wore bifocals – he had just never been able to get along with varifocals – so his head was constantly at an unnatural angle as he tried to align the right part of the lens with the far or near object he needed to check to ensure they had not strayed from the path. He was wearing sandals; his wife had dictated that his choice of footwear was boots and socks or sandals and no socks, so he had left the socks behind but had neglected to cut or clean his toenails. The others all noticed this and flinched, then filed it away as one of the amusing little anecdotes that would liven up the story of this holiday when it was re-told in years to come.

Behind Michael came Travis who was in charge of the music. He was wearing clothes they all believed they recognised from their days at university, and his curly hair was tied back with a floral scrunchy that also looked slightly familiar. Travis was, as it happened, the only one who cared about music and if he had not been with them, the others would not have provided themselves with any means of making or listening to it, and would not have felt the lack. But he was not aware of this and was happy to think that he was saving them from an absence of a fundamental necessity. He had intended to bring a guitar but when he had tried on the fully-loaded rucksack in his bedroom, he found the guitar was an outcrop too far. So he had brought a clarinet and a harmonica, as well as his ipod loaded with a playlist he thought suitable for relaxing after a day spent walking the Ridgeway, and battery operated speakers. He fished out the harmonica and improvised a few celebratory chords as he waited for his turn to cross the stile.

After him came Benjamin. The most substantial thing about Benjamin, they all thought but had never said to each other, was his name. No one ever called him Ben or Benjy but always used the full three syllables. No one could say why. He was plump and soft; a quiet, reserved and self-effacing man who never said anything much, or anything memorable. Checking through the list of those in their little group the other names came to mind first. Duncan, Richie, Michael, Travis….. Yet if Benjamin was not there on any occasion, it was hard to avoid the feeling that something was

missing. Like Michael's wedding, when Benjamin had been absent because his girlfriend was giving birth. Even when looking at the photos afterwards, they would keep scanning a shot of the guests on the hotel lawn, aware that it was somehow incomplete. Michael was the only one with a wife, Benjamin the only one with a baby, a little girl whose name, and indeed sex, the others had failed to commit to memory, asking ritually: 'How's the little one?' and not listening to the answer.

Every year they spent three or four days – Duncan could not be spared for longer – doing something they had not done before. Canoeing round the west coast of Scotland; clearing scrub on a National Trust Estate; learning how to prepare sushi in a basement in Camden. So here they were – setting off to walk the Ridgway. Richie capered along in front of Michael, who was looking down at the map and was followed by Travis, playing the harmonica, and by Benjamin, checking behind him for Duncan, who was looking back and pressing the remote control one last time for the reassurance of a flashed acknowledgement from his car that it was securely locked.

The first night, Duncan thought a better place for camping might be round the next bend or, no, the next, until Richie declared he was going no further and pitched his tent on the nearest stretch of grass. He took off his new boots and massaged his feet while Duncan pointed out that he should have broken them in first. Michael sat down beside him and tilted his head to get a view of his own feet through the bottom half of his bifocals. Duncan walked away.

Travis set up the ipod and selected an Amy Winehouse number. Michael asked him to turn the volume down so he could read out to them the significant facts about the landscape they had passed through. Benjamin put a pan of water to heat on a camping stove he had set up and lit while Duncan was looking elsewhere. When it boiled, he put in enough pasta for the five of them and, in another pan, the contents of the tins of Bolognese sauce they had all agreed to bring. Amy Winehouse gave way to the Lord of the Rings soundtrack. Michael stopped talking. Duncan opened a bottle of red wine. A feeling of well-being seized each of them. Duncan felt satisfied his gift for organisation had made this trip happen; Richie was happy to have stopped walking, and to be in the company of people he knew did not dislike him; Michael was pleased to think he had navigated them successfully to this point; Travis was listening to the music and enjoying both the music and the thought that the others were enjoying the music with him. Benjamin was relieved no one had asked him how he felt and whether he was missing being with the baby, both questions he would rather not consider. As it was, he could think of the pleasure it gave him to be friends with Duncan, Richie, Michael and Travis.

The next day they camped where Michael had decided they would camp and ate in a pub. Richie had exhausted his own supply of Elastoplast and had started on Benjamin's, but assured everyone, adopting a priest-like stance with his hands folded in front of him and his eyes cast up to heaven, that the worst was over. Michael was explaining how he had worked out, with the help of the guide books, what route they should take back to the tents but no one was listening to him except Duncan who had no idea what he was talking about but argued with him anyway to prevent himself falling asleep. Travis was trying to reproduce a bird call on his clarinet for the benefit of a barmaid who had seemed to be interested. Benjamin, aware that she had understood not a word Travis said, being, as she confided to him in a whisper, newly arrived from Hungary, tried his best to take her place as the appreciative audience for birdsong re-created by clarinet.

The following day, Michael and Duncan fell out over a pond. Michael asserted, reading from the guidebook, that the pond had been dug in medieval times to collect run off from the ridge to water stock in the fields, and was one of the oldest watering holes known to man. Duncan, looking

at the pond in question, claimed that was patently ridiculous; the pond could have been dug yesterday, for all anybody knew; and how do you date a pond, which is after all only a hole in the ground without any features capable of carbon analysis.

Travis dropped a small but essential component of the mouthpiece of his clarinet which he had taken to carrying in his hand to copy bird calls the instant he heard them. Benjamin, Travis and Duncan trudged back to look for it. Michael said his eyesight wasn't good enough and Richie said his feet hurt. Benjamin found the missing piece after half a mile, for which no one but Travis was grateful.

The five of them walked onwards, very little more in harmony with each other than the clarinet was with the song of birds. Duncan wished he was back in the real world, the world of comfortable cars and of meetings in air-conditioned rooms with bottles of chilled sparkling mineral water and glass tumblers. Richie re-imagined the whole trip as it might have been if he had not bought the boots; they were meant as a joke and had indeed been a joke but only for the first few miles. Michael rehearsed the route in his mind, unfolding it like a map, and worrying that his wife would not be satisfied with this version, but would expect observations on the countryside which he had failed to take in. Travis wondered if he should have included birdsong in his playlist, and whether, if he had owned one and knew how to play one, he might have managed to carry a ukulele. Benjamin pictured the roundness of the baby's arms, her face, her little eyes wide open with amazement at the world, and resolutely set one foot in front of the other.

On the fourth day it rained. They sheltered in an empty barn and unpacked waterproofs. Duncan and Benjamin had covers for everything: arms, legs, heads, rucksacks. Travis had an orange poncho which, being apparently designed for someone clinically obese, covered him and his belongings completely, down to his boots. Michael had his wife's pac-a-mac which was too small. Richie had not foreseen rain. For a moment, a gulf appeared to open up between the well-protected and the exposed, but then Duncan, instead of putting on his waterproof gear, suitable for anything up to hurricane conditions, placed it in a pile in the centre of the group. Benjamin added his. Travis struggled out of his poncho and dropped it on the heap. Michael threw in his wife's Size 10 pac-a-mac. Half-an-hour later, they came out of the barn, led by Duncan in Travis's poncho, followed by Richie in Mrs Michael's mac and Benjamin's trousers; Travis in Benjamin's jacket; Michael in Duncan's jacket; and Benjamin in Duncan's trousers which were so much too long they reached to his armpits. They stepped out, cheerfully, congratulating each other on the ingenuity and comradeship which had enabled all of them to be equally dry, or equally wet in parts.

They walked on, to the point where the taxi was waiting to restore them to civilization and hot baths, dripping, largely silent, variously exhausted. When the taxi had dropped them off at Duncan's car and Duncan had dropped the others off at stations, bus stops and car parks, Duncan, Richie, Michael and Travis each carried home with him a version of the story of the trip. Each one was different. Benjamin carried home with him a growth in his pancreas that killed him before the year was out. Afterwards, none of them could remember anything of the walk except the gentle presence of the friend they had lost; the hat he brought along and hardly ever wore because he kept filling it with litter he picked up from the path; the way he crossed his arms and grabbed both his elbows as he listened to you talking, as if determined no random movement of his should interrupt your flow; the things he produced from his backpack which it turned out you had forgotten or didn't have enough of, or hadn't thought to bring – bottles of water, bars of chocolate, suncream, toothpaste, bootlaces, a magnifying glass, safety pins. The responsive smile on his face when, in

retrospect, it should have been obvious that something was wrong. These things they remembered. Everything else was forgotten.

At the Mouth of the Tunnel

She reached the platform, out of breath, but the train had left, the hot air disturbed by its arrival and departure churning under the arched roof, while from the dark tunnel through which it had departed came a distant, sucking boom, so powerful it could have been visible, though there was nothing to see on the platform except the one figure the train had left behind; a figure so still, so covered, head and body, in clothes so black that, glancing that way, her eye was caught first by the reflection of the lights off the polished rails, by the colours of the posters twice, three times as high as a man pasted on the opposite wall, and she let herself see only the light spots and the bright spots, avoiding the dark, dark column of clothes until another reflection, another flash of bright metal from something that had been hidden, now coming into sight, now moving towards her, forced itself through the confusion of the lights, the noise, the hot, pressurised air and a clear thought formed in her mind. Run.

Shadow Boxing

This is a bully of a day. A day to slap you in the face and put an elbow in your ribs as you go about your business. Which is no business but just living the day through, which I will. Come midnight, fight how it will, this day will be history, but I will still be here. I'll see it out.

I'm going to the library, which is downhill and the wind is blowing uphill, fighting to get inside my coat. It won't. I bought this coat for five pounds in the cat rescue charity shop (the one where it's easy to swap the price tags round) and it would take more than this bit of wind to get past it. I could tell the wind, if I wasn't bothered about looking like a mad man, that it has no chance of making my life a misery; I can do that quite well all by myself. Which is something Old Onion Eyes at the Post Office Depot never understood. The old sadist.

He called me in to tell me he was adding a road to my round, sucking his teeth with glee. Sitting behind his desk with his hands on the flat as if he was going to start playing it like a piano the minute he had the tune sorted out in his head. Meanwhile, he was practising, pulling my strings. Smiling Bob, he said, heart problem, couldn't make it up Wellington Close. He was sure I wouldn't mind taking over. He knew I would mind. He knew I knew he knew I would mind. I knew he would have been miserable as hell if he thought I didn't mind. I'm not sure if he knew I knew that.

Of course I fucking minded. Fifty houses in a line straight up a one in four slope; houses with front gardens, paths, gates. Lived in by the sort of people who subscribe to weekly magazines and order catalogues. As if I didn't already need a trailer on the back of the bike, didn't already have the panniers stuffed full. Luckily, Sainsbury's recycling centre lay pretty nearly on my route from the Depot to Wellington Close. The Royal Mail provideth and Biffa taketh away.

Old Onion Eyes was smiling as I left. Smiling Bob was still smiling too, despite the heart condition. He told me the lovely old lady at 25 Wellington Close could be relied on for a cup of tea and a biscuit, at the end of the climb. The first day, I pushed the bike to the top, shoved a bill or two through her letterbox, got back on the bike. In my experience, lovely old ladies who rush forth with the chocolate digestives and the English Breakfast for the likes of Smiling Bob, don't, for me. Sure enough, she heaved the door open and her face fell.

"Where's Bob?"

"Spot of heart trouble. Hill's too much for him."

"Oh."

I could see her wondering whether to waste the tannin and carbohydrate on someone as unlike Smiling Bob as it was possible to be. I didn't wait to find out what decision she reached. Next day, though, she came out and offered me a cup of tea. It was too late. I'd already decided she wouldn't and I was too far down the road to hating her to be able to reverse. So I said no and hopped on the bike. Oh, but it's cold, coming down Wellington Close with the bags banging on the back wheel and the regulation jacket filling with air and the potholes setting your teeth ringing.

There was a photograph in the paper of me on my round, illustrating an article on the parking problems in residential streets. Nothing to do with me; I just happened to be pedalling along in my shorts. I never wore trousers; too much excess fabric. Some journalist pinned me on the page without bothering to ask what I thought, about having my picture in the paper or parking in residential areas, which is a topic on which I have strong opinions. I was hardly recognisable unless you knew me. Unmistakeable if you did know me. My coat unbuttoned, my hair raised up like the wings of a skewered crow, my great white knee stuck up in front in mid-pedal, the bike invisible under the burden of bags so I could have been skateboarding or hitching a lift on a passing tortoise.

I was living with Marie at the time. She was obsessed with her sex-u-al-it-y. That's the way she said it, like each syllable was a cherry she was sucking the flesh off and spitting out the stone. She felt drawn to the idea of being a lesbian. She explored her inner lesbian by reading gay magazines and going to gay clubs and bars but she couldn't make it as a lesbian because, truth be told, she didn't fancy other women. They didn't fancy her much, either, from what I could see.

Marie looked at the photo in the paper.

"You look…." she said.

"What?" I said.

"You look…."

"What? What? Like a tramp? Like a prat?"

"No, you look…."

"Like the Gruffalo?"

"No, you…."

"Like a hiatus hernia? Like a rocking chair?"

"No…."

"Like a fucking postman?"

"No, you look ordinary."

I hadn't got to the end of thinking about what she meant by ordinary when she left me for a bloke with a tandem. He sat in front, steering and braking. She sat behind, pedalling. It will never last.

I'm in the library now. In the children's section. I like the children's books best, especially the classics. Even I find it hard to be miserable when I'm half way through *Treasure Island.* I'll sit here re-reading *The Just So Stories* until it's time for Tesco to reduce the prices on the food they won't be able to sell tomorrow. I have to be careful not to look at the kiddies in case someone takes me for a paedophile and marches me out. I don't know what I'd do with my days if that happened.

Old Onion Eyes called me in again. So happy he could hardly sit still.

"We have had reports of undelivered mail," he said. If you were to write it down the way he said it, it would look like this: Undelivered Mail. He had a mole on his neck, half under his collar, and when he moved his jaw up and down, talking, it kept peeping out and ducking back. I stopped listening and concentrated on the mole.

"Hello, Mole," I said.

"Hello, Rat," it said.

"Fancy a picnic?"

"Spring-cleaning," said Mole, rubbing away at the dirt on the inside of Old Onion Eyes's collar. "Maybe later."

"I'll pack a hamper. Cold chicken. Coldhamcoldtonguecoldbeefpickledgherkins…."

I realised that:

a. Old Onion Eyes had stopped talking and

b. He was looking straight at me.

As I had never been in his office before when either a) or b) applied, let alone both at once, I guessed he was waiting for me to say something.

"The dog died," I said. "In my arms. Leukaemia."

"I'm sorry about that," said Onion Eyes, scarcely able to hide his delight. This meant he could pass the whole problem over to HR and I would be swept away into early retirement with a diagnosis of stress and a reduced pension. I would cease to be his concern. I could have said to him: 'You selfish bastard. It's all right for you to get rid of me, but how do you think I feel? I can't get rid of myself so easily, can I? I can't fill in a few forms and show myself the door; I can't hop on the back seat of a tandem and wave myself off round the corner.' I didn't say any of this.

The girl from HR was very sympathetic about the dog. She wanted to know what breed it was.

"Onion Hound," I said.

"I've never heard of that," she said.

"Have you not? They were bred in Kazakhstan to guard the onion fields against badgers."

I honestly believe she honestly believed me. Sweet little thing. She would need to have salt applied, be smoked a bit, slightly pickled, before I could stomach her.

Now I'm on my way to Tesco's. I'm hoping there'll be a half price Tesco's finest beef lasagne. But there'll probably be nothing reduced but an Everyday Value Cauliflower Cheese. I can cope with that. The day is nearly over, after all. It didn't manage to do me any harm.

Bill Flood

The next three stories are based on a re-imagining of the following Irish rhyme:

William Bloat

In a mean abode
In the Shankhill Road
Dwelt a man named William Bloat
He had a wife –
The bane of's life
Who habitually got's goat.
So one day at dawn
With her nightdress on
He slit her skinny throat.
With a razor slash
He settled her hash;
Oh, never was crime so quick.
But the steady drip
On the pillow slip
Of her life-blood made'm sick.
A sudden awe
Of the angry law
Struck's breast with a mighty chill,
So with careful art
And a contrite heart
He resolved himself to kill.
He took the sheet
From's wife cold feet
And knotted it into a rope,
And hanged himself
From the pantry shelf –
'Twas an easy end, let's hope.
In the throes of death,
With his lastest breath
He said –nothing because of the rope.
He went to Hell
But's wife got well
And is still alive and sinning,
For the razor blade
Was German made
But the sheet was Belfast linen.[141]

[141] Anonymous, 'William Bloat' in *Comic Verse* (London: Vista Books: Longacre Press, 1962), p.32

Still Alive and Sinning

I didn't much like Marina Blake when I first met her, and I liked her less after I met her again. But I didn't know her story then, and as the outsider in the place, it was some time before I found out what it was about her that made everyone else so warm and sympathetic towards someone I judged immediately to be self-seeking and two-faced. I have led a peripatetic life and I have learnt to observe; if I find someone else's opinions obnoxious, I do not make it obvious until I have understood the networks of relationships and even then, I tread cautiously. So I kept my dislike of Marina Blake very much to myself.

I met her at the Reading Group in a small northern town trapped on a coastal shelf with the sea dashing at it on one side and a range of hills isolating it from the rest of the country on the other. I had arrived in the place for a year's post as Writer in Residence. Various bodies in the town had come together with their separate little pots of money, had written a bid or two and procured themselves this exotic pet, me. They understood none of its habits but were full of expectations of pleasure from the ownership of it. At the risk of sounding arrogant, I would say they were lucky to have secured me as their example of the species. I had had four previous positions of the same kind, and knew the depths of their ignorance, the nature of their misconceptions and the extent of their unrealistic hopes. I was therefore able to avoid disappointing them completely without lasting damage to my peace of mind and creativity. Which is not the experience of other writers I have known, similarly placed. It amazes me no one has thought to write a crime novel in which the Writer in Residence murders the Chair of the Cultural Engagement Committee in an imaginative way. But this has nothing to do with the story of Marina Blake.

I was invited to the Reading Group by Fiona Cartwright, the librarian; the library was, along with the Primary and the Secondary Schools, one of the institutions involved in my residency. I knew, from snatches of conversation I had overheard in these places, that Fiona had a son serving in Afghanistan, but I had heard no one mention this to her directly. No sooner was Marina in the room than she was speaking softly in Fiona's ear: "I think of you all the time….hardly bear to watch the news….". Before I had turned round to look at her, I had already decided to dislike her. She was a lean woman in early middle age with hair that looked as if it had been styled with an egg whisk. Although I rarely saw her touching anyone, she had a physical way of interacting with them, standing too close, bending towards them, using her arms to embrace the space they occupied, reacting to what they said with exaggerated changes in posture. This is no reason to dislike her, I know, and nor was the character trait she exhibited most strongly: extreme solicitude for others. When the wine glasses needed refilling or the plates of vol-au-vents handing round, it was Marina who leapt to do it. She was concerned that Charlotte with the hip replacement should have the highest, firmest chair; that Sally with the bad back should have an extra cushion. I might have thought she was a warm-hearted fool, but it was too much of a performance; it didn't ring true. Her manner was a repellent blend of ownership and condescension.

My impression of her was reinforced when I met her on the sea front a few days later. I had a dog at this time, a terrier called Cass – short for Cassoulet. She was my third dog and I was working my way through the alphabet with food related names. Apple had been run over and Brisket had died of old age. Cass and I had been in the town long enough to develop a favourite walk along the cliffs; the beach was shingle and hard going, and Cass preferred chasing rabbits to chasing seagulls. I met Marina as I returned from this bleak and blowy outing and she made much of

Cass who was, in fact, a fairly ugly dog with a bit of an attitude. She did not justify being made much of and she did not respond to it with any gratitude.

"I'll take her for walks for you," said Marina. "You must have so much you need to do."

"Thanks, but it's thinking time," I said.

"Of course, of course," said Marina, moving round me so that she stood between me and the force of the wind which was a powerful westerly. Had I decided to like her, I would have found this manoeuvre pleasing, but as I didn't like her, it gave me the feeling that I was being managed. She delayed me some while, letting me know that Charlotte was to be pitied for failing to stand up to a bullying husband. Sally's ill health, of course, was a result of holding down two jobs in order to fund her children's addiction to computer games. She was telling me all this, she implied, so I could be as understanding and sympathetic as she was when I met them again. If only, her manner seemed to say, other people were as strong and balanced as each of us.

"I'm looking forward to getting to know everyone better," I said.

"I'm sure you will. I could see you watching everyone really closely. But I expect that's part of being a writer."

Had I had hackles, they would have been raised.

It was a sad town. I arrived in a cold, wet spring and expected that the summer would be transformational. I thought the menace I saw in the sea and hills and the narrowness of the town's situation would become delightful aspects of a secluded seaside resort, when the sun shone, surrounded by opportunities to enjoy the world of nature. I was wrong. Although the tourists came and filled the hotel and the guest houses and laid out their towels on the beach, ate their ice creams on the sea front and their fish and chips in the cafés, the town remained dreary. The tourists were so much bunting hung on the walls of a high security prison. The sun was like make-up covering pock-marked skin: the result was superficially more pleasing but at the same time a reminder of the essential ugliness it set out to conceal.

The broadband and mobile connections were patchy and slow and this was a fair reflection of the disconnected apathy of the local population. The people were like the place, or the place was like the people who lived there – which is not always true, by the way, as I can testify based on many 'residencies' in different towns. In this case, it seemed to me, it was. I wondered afterwards if this place, its situation and character, were a necessary part of Marina's story; if it could not have unfolded in such a way anywhere else.

The next Reading Group was at Marina's house. She lived in a three-storey Victorian terrace, near the sea. It was drab, on the outside, but the interior was unexpectedly pleasant. Marina's style of dress was utilitarian with a dash of misplaced boldness – grey trousers, for example, with scarlet mittens in the shape of a cat. Her house was in quite another style. It was quiet, in every respect. There was nothing discordant or blatant about the decoration, the furniture, the accessories or the lighting. The room we met in was so pleasant I would happily have spent an evening or several evenings in it. Alone, of course. Marina was not altered by the setting. The soothing and the smoothing went on as before; the sotto voce conversations about matters too deep and painful to be spoken of at full volume took place in the doorway, in the hall, and around the side table where the wine and canapés were laid out.

I wondered if the rest of the house was as pleasing as this room, so I took a trip to the loo, further down the hall. I could see the kitchen beyond, and nipped in to take a look. It was as clean

and tidy as the room I had just left; similarly uncluttered, well-lit, comforting and functional. I had turned to go back to the front room when I heard footsteps descending a staircase, and I waited, expecting whoever it was to come down the stairs into the hall. But when the sound stopped, a door beside me, which I had assumed led to a pantry or utility room, creaked open. A figure stood at the foot of a narrow wooden stair to what must once have been the servants' rooms.

I had no idea of Marina's circumstances. I did not know if she was married, had children, lived alone or with any other sort of relative or partner. The woman who was now standing in front of me was hard to put into any of the categories of live-in companions it was possible Marina might have. My first impression was how indescribably ugly this woman was. She was relatively short, overweight in a lumpy sort of way, had straight, coarse black hair and a pale blue, tent-like dress which finished at her knees. Below its hem was an oasis of mottled flesh bulging over the top of a pair of pop socks. Her face was quite ordinary but it was impossible to look at it because of the awful attraction of a hideous scar which cut into her throat below her chin like a line of illegible text inscribed across her throat with a hard nib.

She stared at me without speaking and with an expression on her face that would stay with me for days, though I could not find the words to describe it. It was easy to say what her look did not convey – it was not cheerful, or friendly, but nor was it threatening. She looked sad, perhaps terrified, but she also looked, and this kept coming back to me later, as if she was pleading with me. I told her my name, and smiled. Her mouth made chewing motions and she produced a noise that was like a two-stroke engine chugging into life.

"Why, Ariadne," said Marina, coming into the kitchen behind me. "What are you doing down here? Come on, now, come on, that's right, it'll be all right." She went up to the woman and took her elbow, urged her gently back towards the staircase and guided her to the first step. For the first time, I thought Marina's care was genuine, her gentleness unstudied. The woman, Ariadne, turned her head as if to look back at me, but the scar tissue impeded the movement.

"Sorry about that," said Marina, briskly, opening the oven. "You couldn't hand round these sausage rolls, could you? That would very helpful." By the time she had fussed with an oven glove and a serving plate the moment when I might have asked who Ariadne was had passed.

A few days later I was alone with another member of the Reading Group - Charlotte of the hip replacement - in the Primary School, gluing haiku onto a roll of lining paper to make a frieze round the classroom. Charlotte was the Assistant Head and had invited me to work with Year 6. I had introduced them to haiku and set them the task of writing these fiendish little poems – seventeen syllables, five in the first and the last line, seven in the middle; theme of nature; final line to take the reader off into a slightly unexpected direction. I like Year 6s. The children have grown out of being good for nothing much except being adorable and had not yet understood what a burden it was to be them, a realisation that normally kicks in around Year 9. This bunch had been rather more stoical and reflective than normal, and had come up with constructions expressive of a downbeat view of life.

I have woken up
to the sight of sunlight on
dirty dustbin lids

and

The scent of the rose
is a perfume as strong as

My Dad's aftershave

As we pasted and stuck we talked about the last book the Reading Group had discussed and the next one. Then we fell silent. I am, as I have said, reluctant to gossip with any but the most intimate acquaintances, and I have few of those, having experienced the emotional pain that only someone who has knowledge of what you love, hate, hope for and fear can inflict. But I was also curious about Marina Blake; was I right to loathe her or were the people I had met right to like her? So I said:

"I bumped into someone in Marina's kitchen, the other night. At Reading Group."

"You mean Ariadne. Yes, you don't see her very often. Quite a shocking sight, isn't she? Marina's such a saint, looking after her the way she does."

Charlotte reminded me of a ball of knitting wool; chunky, hint of mohair. It was hard to imagine that, under the layers of fabric and fat, was an incongruous bit of mechanical engineering. I sensed an eagerness in her now, as she sat back in her chair and tucked the hair behind her ears. "You must know the story?" she said.

"No, actually, I don't."

I expected a story of banal, maybe comical, possibly ironic mishap. A bodged operation; a random accident with a fish hook; illicit sex too close to the cliff edge. The woman in front of me, the immediate surroundings of a primary school classroom with its colourful artwork and plastic chairs, the nature of the town itself, did not prepare me for the story she told. For it was shocking. Too shocking to reproduce in the breathless, excited way she told it, so I will stick to the facts.

Ariadne used to live next door to Marina, with her husband, Bill Flood. Bill was born and bred in the town but Ariadne was an outsider. She had come to stay with an aunt and within six months had landed Bill and all the status that went with being the partner of the town's nearest thing to a celebrity. He was a wildlife photographer, winning competitions, credited in prestigious magazines. Though they had no children, and Bill was often away for long stretches of time, pursuing some elusive bird or beast, Ariadne seemed to mind neither of these things. She worked as a classroom assistant and was sunny, good-natured and well-liked. But.

Charlotte leaned towards me, dropped her voice and spoke slowly:

"Something was terribly wrong."

"What?" I asked, as there was a pause I felt needed filling, but it seemed it was included for the purpose of dramatic tension. Charlotte shut her eyes.

"No one knows," she said.

One morning, it seems, Marina heard a noise she could not explain coming from the house next door. She worked – still worked when I met her – as a nurse in the local cottage hospital, and had just finished a nightshift, arriving home about six o'clock when it was barely light. The noises she heard had never been described to Charlotte, but whatever they were, they were sufficiently strange for Marina to feel justified in using the emergency key she kept for the Floods' house, to go in and investigate. Did she not knock? I asked, and Charlotte supposed she must have done this first, but then, she used the key. Luckily, as it turned out, because in the bedroom she found Ariadne lying on her bed in her nightdress with her throat cut, the pillow already saturated with blood and a steady patter of drips falling to the floor.

Marina set about stemming the flow and calling the ambulance on the bedside phone. The trick, she realised quickly, was to keep Ariadne still to prevent the wound opening further, and this she managed to do, holding her down on the bed, with a tourniquet as tight as she could risk it

holding the two edges of the ghastly wound together. The ambulance took twenty minutes to arrive, and the hospital was twenty miles away, but Ariadne was still alive when she reached it.

The police, of course, came too, and once Ariadne had been bundled off the premises, they began the search for clues. They did not have to look far. In the cellar they found Bill, hanging from the water pipes with a blood-stained sheet twisted into a rope round his neck.

"He was dead", whispered Charlotte.

When the incident was pieced together later, from the evidence at the scene and the account Ariadne was able to give, it seems that Bill had risen early, perhaps with the intention of roaming the moorland round about to take photographs – it was a misty morning before a sunny day, Charlotte said. It appeared that he had gone into the bathroom to start shaving, and indeed did start shaving, with the cutthroat razor he always used, as his face was half shaved and half covered with foam when he was found. Then 'something must have snapped', as Charlotte put it. He went back into the bedroom and attempted to murder his wife with the razor he had in his hand. He was not by nature a violent man, and – this is all now supposition – he must have been so horrified by what he had done that he seized the bloody sheet off the bed and ran down to the cellar where he twisted it into a rope and hanged himself. He failed to kill his wife because he had not sharpened the razor for some days and it was too blunt to be fatal. He was no better at killing himself. Neither the location of the knot nor the length of the drop were adequate to break his neck, and according to the forensic evidence, it would have taken some time for the life to be choked out of him by the pressure of the sheet around his throat. If Marina had found him first, she would have been able to save him, as well as, or instead of, Ariadne.

It was two years since the attack, and Ariadne had recovered only slowly; the trauma and the wound had rendered her helpless, a timid invalid unable to care for herself. The damage to her vocal chords had left her unable to speak. But Marina stepped in. She sold her house and moved in next door, caring for Ariadne as if this was her own disabled mother or sister or child. She changed to working a permanent nightshift so she could be there during the day to tend to Ariadne's every need. Nothing, said Charlotte, fixing her eyes on mine, nothing could be more selfless than Marina's devotion. She was close to tears, emotionally charged by the story she had told.

"Do you mind," I said, "if I open a window?" The afternoon sun was heating the stale air and the atmosphere in the classroom, thick with the smell of glue, ink and children, was oppressive.

"They're all locked," said Charlotte, "I don't have the key. But we can open a few doors if you like."

We opened the door to the classroom and the one from the corridor to the playground. A breeze swept in and lifted the remaining haiku, scattering them across the floor.

"You have to admire Marina, don't you?" said Charlotte, on her hands and knees collecting paper. "I mean, she'd known Bill since childhood, and she had been very close to them as a couple, but there was nothing to make her feel responsible for Ariadne. Yet she put her life to one side and dedicated herself to looking after her." She pounced on a floating poem. "Would you do that?"

I had wanted to hear the story because my dislike of Marina made her interesting to me, but it was Ariadne I was thinking of now. What must she feel, I wondered. Did she wake each morning full of gratitude towards the woman to whom she owed each day? Was she comforted and sustained by the constant care Marina showed her? Or was her helplessness a torture to her, and the ministering angel an evil she was forced to endure? I smoothed out the rescued sheets and weighted them down with a pot of glue.

"I suppose Ariadne must be very grateful," I said.

Charlotte frowned and selected another haiku to paste on the frieze.

It is warm and dry
and the birds are all tweeting
'the forecast was wrong'

"I imagine she must be, but, you know, it's impossible to know what she's thinking. We did visit when she first came home from hospital but… well, it was hopeless trying to communicate."

Ariadne, as well as having lost her husband, her self-respect, her health and her liberty had, by losing her voice, lost her identity. She was visible only as an object of pity. I remembered the look on her face in the kitchen in what I now realised was her house.

Of course the other question was: why? What had caused so sudden an outburst of extreme violence? But this Charlotte could not answer.

"I suppose Ariadne must have some idea, but, of course, she's stopped communicating."

Of the people I had met in the town, I liked Fiona Cartwright, the librarian, best. There was a tweediness about her – not that she actually wore tweed (does anyone, nowadays?) only she had the rough-textured buttoned-up-ness I associate with tweed – but she had a wry sense of humour and straightforward attitudes. I used the library as the base for a number of my literary good works - creative writing classes, poetry readings – and came to know her well. "Charlotte told me about Ariadne and Marina," I said to her, a few days after the Haiku session. I was in the library, watching her re-shelf teenage fiction.

"Oh, yes. Poor woman!"

"You mean Ariadne?"

"Of course. I don't feel particularly sorry for Marina. I know she doesn't have much fun, and she's given up a lot for Ariadne's sake, but you've seen how Marina is. I honestly think she takes pleasure in helping people, so it isn't a tragedy for her. No, it's Ariadne I pity."

"She must be pretty isolated, from what Charlotte told me."

"I think that's right, but she does come into the library, every Tuesday. She chooses five books at a time and she's read them all by the next week."

"How do you know, if she can't talk about them?"

"Oh, we manage to communicate. I blather on and she gesticulates. It seems to work. She's quite a critical reader, actually. She can be very negative about the books she doesn't like."

"Doesn't she write things down when she wants to communicate?"

"No," said Fiona, "no, she doesn't, which is a bit curious I suppose, but Marina's always fussing over her so perhaps she doesn't want to hold things up."

"I'd love to know what she thinks about, wouldn't you? By the sound of it no one's ever heard her take on what happened to her."

"You can't push, though can you? If she doesn't want to 'talk' in inverted commas you can't make her."

"No, but I was thinking, as part of the residency, we ought to run a writing competition. What if we asked for submissions on the theme of 'Memory'? Then she can join in or not."

"Give her a voice, you mean."

"Exactly."

"I like that idea"

So we drew up the poster, and the entry form.

The next time Ariadne was expected in the library, I made sure I was there. It was just before closing time on a Tuesday when the place was always deserted. Ariadne was wearing what looked to be the same blue dress as I had seen her in before, but also a scarf to hide the scar. Marina was carrying the bag of books to return, but managed to keep the other hand on Ariadne's arm, guiding her up to the counter.

"Here we are again," she chirped.

Taking each book from the bag, Fiona talked to Ariadne as if this were a dialogue, only Ariadne's side of it was silent.

"What did you think? (Thumb up and a smile). Oh, good. I do agree, one of her best, I would say. Such a lovely, child's eye view. Now, how about this? (Thumb down) I haven't read it. So you think I shouldn't bother? (Emphatic shake), I won't waste my time then," and so on.

Marina turned her back on them and asked me my view of the latest Reading Group book. I started to tell her, but, though she appeared to be listening, she reacted at once when Fiona suggested the 'Memory' competition to Ariadne.

"No, really," she said, holding out her hand to stop Fiona giving Ariadne the form. "She mustn't do that. It would be far, far too distressing for her." Dropping her voice, though as Ariadne was only feet from her there was no chance she would miss what was said, she added: "You have no idea how difficult it can be when she is upset." Fiona looked at Ariadne, who turned away, and then at me.

When the two women had gone, she said: "I think it would be a kindness to give Ariadne the chance to tell her own story."

"I agree," I said.

"After all, if anyone has a memory worth talking about, it has to be Ariadne. Leave it with me. I'll find a way."

She was almost conspiratorial, pleased to be hatching a plan to let a little light into the life of a woman she liked, or had once liked in happier times. My motives were different. I was hoping that whatever Ariadne wrote would prove me right and expose Marina as more monster than angel."

Shortly after this, things occurred in my family which meant I had to cut the residency short and travel back to my home town. Almost overnight, Cass and I packed ourselves up and left. I was involved in my own affairs for a while and forgot about the sad figure of Ariadne in her blue tent, until Fiona, who had inherited the task of reading all the competition entries, sent me a letter.

"I'm enclosing a copy of something Ariadne put inside a book she was returning," she wrote. "There's not much of it but I'm afraid it is very upsetting. I'm at a bit of a loss what to think. I haven't shown it to Marina; you'll see why when you read it. I have no idea what I'm going to do, but I know I must do something. I just have to work out what, and how."

The enclosure was a small piece of lined paper, hand-written but so clearly that there was no risk the message could be misunderstood.

I am a prisoner in my own house and in my own body. I am bound to a woman I hate, who drove my husband to attempt murder and to commit suicide. It is thanks to her that I outlived him and I wish, I wish I had not. I endure because I am weak. The only help I need is what no one can give me – courage.

If I had an eggcup full of courage, I would kill myself.

If I had a mug full of courage, I would kill her.

If I had courage enough to fill the glass rose bowl Bill gave me when we were married, I would take back my life.

I have just enough courage to write this down.

I read Ariadne's words in a peaceful garden a long way from the sea, but as I read them, I could hear the pitiless dash of the waves on the pebble beach. The thought of the physical and emotional helplessness of her situation was a horror beyond imagining. Whenever I read of heroic rescues, of passers-by diving into freezing rivers or burning buildings, it strikes me how intimate and possessive an act it is to save someone's life. The saviour, I feel, must forever have some rights over the victim. Each is thereafter part of the other's life story even if they do not meet again, or know each other's names. Ariadne did not have the luxury of anonymity. She remained at the mercy of her saviour through crippling injury; subject to a life sentence of perpetual obligation and subordination.

I stayed in the garden until darkness fell, reading and re-reading the few sentences. It was mid-summer and darkness was a long time coming but at length, when I could no longer see the words, I stood up and went back into the house. I punched two holes in the margin of the paper and clipped it into the ring binder where the other papers relevant to the residency were filed. Then I put it back on the shelf.

The Bane of His Life

Bill Flood came into the world backwards, at the end of a labour lasting twenty-eight hours. This early failure to look life in the face was given lifelong significance by his mother, Mary Flood, for whom it worked as a definition, a motif, a philosophical creed in which lay all the answers to any question involving the word: why?

"I nearly died giving birth to you, that's why."

It seemed to Bill, growing up, that it was his mother whose back was turned. Wherever she stood, she was facing away from him, towards the sink or the stove or at the window where she would stand for hours passing comment on passers-by. If he had been asked, later in life, to draw one image to conjure up his childhood, Bill would have drawn his mother's wide back, the apron strings pulled tight and firmly knotted over a plain, blue blouse. The sound of his childhood was his mother's voice; no actual words, just the constant rise and fall of sound.

Bill's father was a fisherman, prosperous enough to buy his wife a house on the seafront of the town where they lived, with a bay window from which to scrutinise the locals and the tourists as they went about their business. Shortly after his eighth birthday, Bill's father vanished from his life. This loss occurred at more or less the same time as the disappearance of a dog called Boo, and the man and the dog were henceforth merged in Bill's mind. Both of them were large and hairy and likely to appear at unexpected moments and greet Bill with physical enthusiasm. Both of them smelt of the sea; one also smelt of fish and the other of something similarly organic but less definable, and both these odours were at once attractive and repellent. As were their exuberant and bristly embraces. He never did ask what had happened to either of them, but found later that he knew – must have been told – that his father had drowned. Boo's departure was never spoken of, and Bill was left to puzzle over his last sighting of the wagging tail as it followed his mother into the shed where the chickens were taken when they ceased to lay any eggs. The chickens never came out alive; nor, he was forced to accept, had Boo.

After his father's disappearance, Uncle Fergus came to stay. Uncle Fergus was his father's brother and, like his father, was largely silent. He spent hours on a rock, whenever he came to see them, looking out to sea with binoculars, birdwatching. He lent Bill the binoculars and named the flashes of white wing which were the object of the activity, but Bill never managed to find the right focus or the right bit of sky until it was too late.

"I brought you something," said Fergus, on this visit. "A, you know, distraction." He put a leather case on the table and sat back, lighting a cigarette.

Inside the case was a camera. Bill picked it up and held it in front of his face. Unlike the binoculars, which had failed to make sense of movement, this device clarified what he was looking at, simplified it into a composition. He loved it. He turned his back on the sea and trudged round the hills and moors inland from his birthplace, experimenting with photos of the most fixed and mundane objects: outcrops of rock, pebbles in a stream, the path worn through the grass by sheep walking in single file. When he knew what effect every change to the shutter speed, focal length and lighting would do, he began to photograph the elusiveness of a soaring skylark, a bee, a butterfly. His camera held still forever the chaotic beauty of the natural world. At fifteen, he won a national competition for amateur wildlife photography and was interviewed on the local news. Bill was ever a man of few words and would never have found a way to express what he felt when he looked at the results of his work on a screen or in a print. He was surprised to learn that words were expected of him when the picture said all that was of consequence.

As his reputation grew, the town became proud of Bill Flood. He had pictures in National Geographic, the BBC Wildlife Magazine, on television.

"It's good to see the effort I've put into that boy has finally paid dividends," said his mother," and let me tell you, just giving birth to him was effort enough."

Bill remained oblivious to his own success. In the wild places of the world where his skill was in demand, he expected to be thrilled by constant change, by beauty turning quickly to decay, or ugliness translated into beauty. He was alert for birth and death; for an abundance to be whittled away and for emptiness to be filled with abundance. But in the small town which remained his home, and particularly in the seafront house, he relied on constancy. Nothing changed. His mother's voice rose and fell, the blouses and the aprons were as they always had been.

Bill was not a man who made, or needed, friends and there was only one person, aside from his mother, who formed a significant part of his life at home. Her name was Marina Blake and they had known each other all their lives. She was an unattractive, skinny child who had grown into an angular, hard-edged woman; Bill was her only friend, as she was his. She was not a woman who was easy to like, and Bill – successful, uncritical, placid Bill – was her buttress against loneliness and lack of self-worth, and her hope for the future. She expected, in time, to marry him. The whole town expected it. It never occurred to Bill that a wife was something he needed.

Then Mary Flood died. She had used some of the money her son brought into her previously pinched life to go to Disney world with another fisherman's widow and her children. She came home in expectation of hours of enjoyment to be had from describing the outrageous clothes, behaviour and food she had met with in America, but on returning home, she felt unwell, a new sensation.

"I think I'll just go and lie down before dinner," she told Bill, busy cataloguing his slides from a recent trip to Antarctica. "Wake me up at six o'clock. The potatoes won't peel themselves and there's no point asking you to do them."

At eight o'clock Bill became aware of the unexpected silence and tiptoed up the stairs. He stood on the threshold of her bedroom, a room he had not entered for twenty years, and stared in astonishment at the inert bulk on the bed. A blood clot formed in her leg over hours and hours of unaccustomed inactivity had detached itself and floated upwards to lodge in her lung, killing her quietly, not a word spoken.

When the funeral was over, he went back to the house and sat in each room, one after the other, listening. He would have said, before his mother's death, that he longed for silence, but now it had come it felt like an absence. After a few more days and nights in the empty house, he began to miss the physical presence of another human being. He had never thought of Mary Flood as company, but she was manifest, motive, as Boo the dog had been, or his father. He might have decided to buy another dog. He might even have decided to marry Marina Blake if Marina Blake had been to hand at the time. Unluckily, for everyone, as it turned out, she was away, doing a midwifery course in Scotland. Before she came back, Ariadne arrived.

Bill was standing, as his mother had stood for so many years, looking out of the window in the front room, watching the gulls drift and soar and dive, when he noticed an almost gull-like figure on the sea wall, standing where he used to stand with Uncle Fergus. When she turned, he saw that this birdlike woman, or womanly bird, was shielding her eyes with her hand and looking skywards. He walked out, over the Promenade, to join her. Another man, approaching the figure on the wall, would have noticed that the impression of gull had been created by the wind lifting a cream cape that Ariadne was wearing. Further, that she was far from birdlike, in the conventional sense of the

epithet, but a rather plump girl wearing clothes that hung over rather than fitted close to her roly-poly body. Right up to their last minute together, he did not take in her physical appearance. He saw mankind as a uniform species that did not merit close attention.

"Are you looking at the Herring Gulls?" he asked.

"Is that what they're called? I come from Coventry. We don't have many gulls in Coventry."

Ariadne was, in every respect, a plain girl, but her voice was beautiful: soft, low-pitched, on the edge of husky. If Bill had been attracted first by the gull-like cape, he was seduced beyond saving by the voice.

"I live just over there," he said. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

By the time Marina Blake came back, a qualified midwife, a year later, she found the gap left in Bill's life by his mother's death had been filled by a lump of a woman with poor dress sense and a voice that was somewhere between a whisper and a song.

Ariadne perfectly filled the void Bill's mother had left. His delight in the melody of her talking did not diminish with familiarity, though, once he had secured her promise to love and hold him until death, he no longer bothered to listen to the words she said. It was enough that she said them. He was a man who had learned early in life to ask no questions, which released him from the need to listen for answers. Ariadne, whose love for Bill Flood was like a pain that never left her – unignorable and frightening – found soon enough that her questions went unanswered. If he did not want to answer questions, she would ask none. Instead, she made statements and waited for a reaction.

"I think we'll have fish tonight. I'll nip over to the fishmonger and see if there's any fresh cod. I can make a parsley sauce."

"My mother did a lovely fish pie."

"Fish pie! Good idea! We'll have that."

For the first year of their married life, they settled round each other like animals circling in the grass to make a nest.

As this first year of married life came to an end, Bill was surprised to meet Marina, coming out of the front door of the house next to his.

"Don't worry," she said, putting a hand on his arm. "I'm not stalking you. I've moved in with Mrs Carmichael – she needs a bit of companionship, and a little bit of physical help, and I need somewhere to live, so here I am!"

"That's nice," said Bill.

He left for a trip to Brazil and was away for six weeks. When he came back, he found that the two women had become friends. Marina was sitting beside Ariadne in the front room, when he came downstairs the next morning. A landscape of patterned fabric was spread across the table and Ariadne was busy with a sewing machine he had never seen before, while Marina with thimble, needle and thread, was briskly hemming.

"I was just telling Ariadne," she said, "how the red velvet curtains and the pelmets put me in mind of your mother. They made the house *hers*, if you know what I mean."

Bill looked from the bare windows to the muted floral fabric the two women were sewing. It was as if some trick of the light or temporary disturbance of his vision had momentarily obscured the red velvet. It was real; the floral fabric was not. He had not been aware that Ariadne was making

changes to the house but that evening, as they ate their supper at the kitchen table, he noticed something else.

"The calendar has gone," he said. She smiled.

"It was five years out of date, my love. I threw it away. I thought you'd just never got round to it."

"My mother liked the picture."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd be particularly partial to it. I mean… kittens in a wellington boot! I didn't think you want to keep it."

"No, of course not," and he smiled back at her, soothed by the soft voice and the reassuring presence of a woman in the chair where his mother used to sit.

Marina asked him to come in and unblock the drain in Mrs Carmichael's kitchen. As he worked to loosen the fastenings on the U bend she said:

"I couldn't help noticing how shocked you were by the curtain material Ariadne chose. You know, I did tell her you might prefer something darker, more like the old curtains, but she wants to brighten the place up for you."

"I'll get used to them," said Bill, his voice muffled by the cupboard.

"Yes, of course you will. And all the other things she's changed. But still, I hope she respects your mother's memory."

Bill went home and looked more closely at the house he lived in. He was surprised to find that, as Marina implied, much had been modified without him noticing: walls re-painted soft pastels covering over the cream he had known all his life; new plates; mugs. He had been used to a house of creams, browns, dark red. He was living in a house of eau-de-nil, rose, apricot.

"You've made a few changes round here," he said to Ariadne.

"Not without telling you first, Bill," she said. He could not know if this were true; he listened to so few of the words she spoke. He felt a tremor of unease; the first realisation that this presence which he had welcomed was, after all, a stranger.

He left again for Tibet and this time, when he returned, he looked for changes over Ariadne's head as she walked into his embrace.

"That bowl's new," he said.

She laughed. "Not so new, now, Bill. You bought it for me on our honeymoon, don't you remember? I've only just worked out where was the best place to put it."

Wrong-footed, he stayed silent about the other replacements he noticed: washing-up bowl, laundry basket, tea towels.

"I know you find it hard to accept all the changes," whispered Marina as he dug over a patch of Mrs Carmichael's garden so Marina could grow lettuces, "but you know, she's so much in love with you she's just trying to make the place cheerful."

"I rather wish she wouldn't," said Bill.

"I know that, and I did warn her. You must let her know if you don't like what she's doing. "

That evening, as he opened the door to the cupboard in their room, he said: "I don't like this colour."

"Oh!" said Ariadne. "It's the blue of the sky, and you've told me you love the colour of the sky."

He remembered their first Christmas when Ariadne had brought a Christmas tree into the house. He had tried to explain to her then how he felt about the intrusion of some debased version of nature into the essentially artificial world of indoors.

"The sky, yes," said Bill. "The sky is the colour the sky should be. This door should be brown, like it always has been."

"Well I wish you'd said that when I told you what I was going to do," said Ariadne. For the first time, her voice had a peevish edge which moved it closer to the register of his mother's voice. "I'll change it. I could strip it to the wood, perhaps. That would be more natural."

"No," said Bill. "It's changed once. Best leave it as it is."

Things started to vanish.

"There used to be a picture at the top of the stairs."

"Marina said you'd always hated it so I put it in the loft. I can get it down again."

As he carried the bags of groceries into Mrs Carmichael's hall he repeated this to Marina.

"Ariadne says you told her I didn't like the painting at the top of the stairs.".

"Which painting, Bill?"

"The bowl of roses. On the landing."

"Oh, yes. I noticed Ariadne had taken it down. I suppose she didn't know how much your mother loved it. I didn't tell her you hated it. I didn't know you did."

Bill had no opinion on the picture just as he had had no opinion on the colour scheme or the curtains or the calendar. He had not needed to have opinions because these things were etched into the house; unalterable.

He did not mention to Ariadne that Marina denied the remark about the picture. But the next time Ariadne mentioned Marina's name as an excuse for a change ("Marina said you'd never liked that mirror") he checked again with Marina. He knew Marina so much better than he knew Ariadne. He could still be glad of the melodious sound of his wife's voice and the comforting flutter of her loose clothing on the edge of his vision, but she was not as familiar to him as Marina was.

"I never said that," Marina told him. "Why would I? I've never even thought about it."

"That's what she said."

They were weeding the lettuces which were coming along nicely in the fine tilth Bill had created for them.

"I'm sorry to have to say this," said Marina, "but I do begin to suspect that Ariadne is determined to blot out every trace of the life you led before you met her. I can sort of understand it, I suppose. She can't feel secure in your house until she's made it hers."

"I 'm going to tell her to stop."

"Oh, no, I wouldn't do that. It might make her feel insecure. And, after all, do you mind so much?"

"I don't like change, Marina."

"No, of course. I'll tell you what," she stood up and brushed the soil from her knees, "I'll mention it to her. Tell her I know she means it for the best but you find it upsetting."

But the next time Bill came back from Indonesia, the old red patterned rug in the hall had gone. It was as if he had stepped over the threshold into someone else's home. Ariadne was out but Marina was sunbathing in Mrs Carmichael's garden.

"She's taken the rug away."

Marina lifted her sunglasses onto the top of her head. "I'm sorry, Bill, but I think she is honestly set on stripping the whole place of everything you've ever found familiar."

"I don't know what to do."

Marina touched his hand.

"I can't tell you, I'm afraid."

When Ariadne came home, she said: "I wasn't expecting you or I wouldn't have gone out."

"I phoned," he said. "Left a message."

"I didn't get it." She looked shifty, he thought. Uneasy.

"You've taken the rug out of the hall."

"I'm so sorry," she said, and started to cry. "I try so hard to do what will please you but I don't seem to get it right. I'm trying to make the house a lovely place for you to come home to."

"It was a home before you moved in," he said. He disliked tears.

"I don't know how everything has started to go wrong," she said, searching in her cardigan pocket for a tissue. "To begin with I thought you agreed with me about brightening the place up, then you got cross and I was going to stop but Marina kept pointing out things she thought you'd like me to do, so I did them."

"That's a lie," he shouted. "Marina has been telling you to stop!"

Ariadne took the sodden tissue from her face and stared at him. "Is that what she says?"

"It's the truth."

She took a step towards him and he took a step back.

"It is possible," she said, "is it not, that she might be the one who is lying."

"Of course she isn't."

"How can you be so sure?"

"She has never lied to me before and I've known her all my life. There's no reason why she should."

"There's no reason why I would, either."

"You want your own way. You want to change everything to suit yourself and when I challenge you, you blame someone else."

"Oh Bill, Bill!" She turned away from him and lifted the top of the rubbish bin, dropped the tissue in. The bin closed with a sharp sound and Bill looked at it. It was white. Metal. He could clearly see his mother's back turned, as Ariadne's was, dropping rubbish into a bin that was brown, and plastic.

Ariadne turned back to face him. "I don't know what you want me to do, but I can promise you I won't change anything else in this house and I will never mention Marina's name to you again. Is that enough?"

"Enough," he repeated. She was crying again, reached for the kitchen towel. "The bin's new."

"Oh, Bill, I haven't understood, I haven't understood at all. I just……Please, please, let's start again." Her mellifluous voice wrapped itself round him. "I've been trying to bring some of the brightness of outside into the inside. You seem to like being out of doors so much better than being inside the house."

"Indoors is not the same as outside. I've told you already. It is not the same at all."

"No." She walked up and put her arms round him, rested her head, which reached just to his chin, on his shoulder. The feel of her against his chest was warm and comforting.

Ariadne fetched the rug from the loft and replaced it in the hall where it was a constant reminder, not of the time when everything was in its place as it had always been but of the changes that had come upon him. And of Ariadne's falsehoods.

Marina told him that the name Ariadne was derived from the Greek for spider.

"She's wrapping you up in her web, Bill," she said. "Watch out she doesn't eat you." Marina had stopped coming to the house and Ariadne had stopped mentioning her name.

Marina said: "I'm afraid she doesn't like my friendship with you."

Ariadne said: "I think she's trying to turn you against me."

"That's ridiculous," he said.

Words had never played much part in their relationship, but even the little conversation they had exchanged had dwindled. Her manner towards him changed from loving to something he could not define. He might almost have thought she was frightened of him, but that was ridiculous. Mindful of Marina's warnings, he was perpetually fearful. Early in his career, he had converted a bedroom into a darkroom; over the years it had developed into an editing suite and an office, where he manipulated photographs and carried out his administration. Now it became his haven. When he was not up Machu Picchu or in the Amazonian rainforest, or next door at Mrs Carmichael's, he was in the room at the end of the back corridor, where he felt safe.

There was unrest in Thailand and he came home early. He turned his key in the lock and took a step into the hall, where the faded darkness of the old rug stood firm against the limpid colour of the walls. Then he stopped. Gradually, as he had spoken less and less to Ariadne, she, too, had fallen silent and the house was now as still as it had been in the time after his mother's death. But as he stood in the hall it was filled with a sound he could never remember hearing within its walls. So unexpected was it, he first searched his memory for the name of a bird which might make such a noise. But it was not a bird: it was Ariadne, laughing.

He walked through to the kitchen and she was sitting in the sunlight with two children who were giggling in harmony with Ariadne's full-throated laugh. At the sight of him, it all stopped. The children put down their plastic beakers of squash .

"Better go now, Miss," they said, and scuttled out of the back door.

"You were having fun," said Bill.

"Yes. It was nothing. Childish things."

"I don't remember seeing children in the house before."

"I help out in the school. Those two came to give me a message from the Head."

There was an envelope beside her on the table and Bill could not rid himself of the feeling that all of this – the children, the beakers, the envelope – were a trompe d'oeil. If he blinked and re-focussed, he would see something much more sinister.

"You behave towards me as if I'm a stranger," Ariadne said, watching him. "But I'm your wife, Bill. I'm your wife."

When he was a child his mother used to shut him in the cellar to pay him back for annoying her. Each time, although he knew she would finally let him out, it had felt permanent; a life sentence of darkness and solitude. Ariadne's words were like the cellar door banging shut and the scrape of the key in the lock.

He was carrying the rubbish round from the back of Mrs Carmichael's when Marina suggested he gave her a key to his house.

"I would worry about you less if I knew I could come in and help if there was….well, any need to."

"I can't think why there would be."

"No, but still. Peace of mind, you know."

He went that afternoon and had a duplicate cut for the back door.

"I assume you've told her she must stop re-modelling your house to suit herself," Marina said, when he gave it to her.

"I have."

"I expect all the misunderstanding is behind you now, then, and you can be happy together. I so much want you to be happy, Bill."

"I thought you said she was like a spider. You said she wouldn't rest until she had me all trussed up, or something. I forget exactly what you said but it was something like that."

Marina looked concerned. "I did say that, but I was hoping you'd forgotten. And I was hoping it wasn't true. You need to give your marriage a chance."

The advice came too late. The clanging of the cellar door was forever echoing in Bill's mind. When he looked at the objects in his home which had remained the same, it was with the uneasiness of a becalmed sailor who cannot enjoy the respite from a storm for the expectation of the next gale coming. When his eye fell on the unfamiliar, it was with the suspicion of a code-breaker reading an apparently innocent message which he knows might conceal a deadly meaning in its disposition of letters and symbols.

Bill noticed the items on the dresser in the kitchen had been re-arranged. Objects had always had their place, and Ariadne, for all her ardour with the paintbrush and her cavalier attitude towards the perfectly serviceable furnishings his mother had chosen, had never disrupted this. The toaster stood to the left of the kettle; Bill's coat hung on the right hand peg in the hall, Ariadne's (as his mother's had) on the left. The mugs were on the top shelf of the wall cupboard next to the hob, the plates were on the shelf below. The incident with the dresser might, after all, have been carelessness, inattention to the way things ought to be. Ariadne, who was a good housewife, might have inadvertently replaced the toast rack, the eggcups and the pot full of pens in the wrong places after dusting. So Bill did not mention it; just restored them to their correct positions.

When he could not find his gloves in the drawer where gloves were kept, he became angry. Ariadne claimed not to know, any more than he did, where his gloves were, and when they were found on a shelf that was only ever used for hats and scarves, she maintained he must have put them there himself. He put his gloves on his hands and left the house. He walked up to the cliffs and tried to feel that glory in the rightness of the natural world – the patterns and rhythms evolved over millennia – that had delighted him since childhood. He came across an Arctic Tern, dead by the side of the path, from disease or old age, starvation or exhaustion. It lay with its breast uppermost and its wings spread out uselessly by its side. He recalled the picture Ariadne had made the first time he saw her, cloaked arms held wide as if they were wings ready to lift her off from the sea wall. He walked on. In his work he was used to death and decay; it was a natural part of the natural world and even a part of its beauty. But the image of the tern's limpness in death lingered in his mind.

Walking back to the house, he saw Marina hanging out some washing in Mrs Carmichael's garden. She, too, looked like part of the natural world. A creature of reliable, foreseeable, immutable properties. He stopped at the gate and she walked up to him and laid her palm on his cheek.

"Tell me," she said. When he had told her, she said: "You have to be strong. And you have to be vigilant."

All his life, Bill had watched the natural world with intensity and patience. He had remained motionless, studying plants and wildlife until he understood the fixed and variable patterns of their lives. Indoors, he had noticed nothing. Until Ariadne came, he would have been unable to name the colours or the materials of the decoration and furnishing. He would notice a lack, but could not describe a presence. In the days after his talk to Marina, he looked at the inside of his house in the same way he looked at nature. He studied and committed to memory the details of the disposition of things. He was alert for change, however small, and so close was his observation he was unnerved by the absence of a layer of dust which he had noted on the sideboard the day before. His feeling of unease grew ever more intense. Because he had never observed so closely before, he did not know whether what struck him for the first time – an arrangement of cushions, the ordering of the books in the bookcase – was as it had been the previous week or not.

He stood at the bedroom window watching Marina pruning roses in Mrs Carmichael's garden. She looked up and raised a hand to him. Ariadne was out; she had gone to her work as a classroom assistant at the Primary School. Bill raised his hand in acknowledgement, then beckoned.

Marina walked round the house with him. He had wanted reassurance, but Marina, on crossing the threshold, became a partner in his discomfort.

"I don't know," she said. "I can't say what it is but …"

She looked under the chairs, the beds. Opened all the cupboards.

In the bathroom, she turned to him, decisive. "What you have to do," she said, "is wait and watch. You can fix all this…." taking in with the sweep of her arms the precise placement of the towels, the shampoo bottle and the open wall unit where paracetamol, soap and spare toiletries were stacked, "fix it in your mind and then you'll know when she makes a move. She's trying to unsettle you, Bill, I know she is. She wants to have power over you, or that's the only thing I can imagine, and she's set about achieving it by destroying your comfort and now by messing with your mind. Your mother would have known what to do. Remember that." She closed the cabinet door and squeezed his arm. "If ever you need me, just signal. Hang a towel out of the bathroom window and I'll come."

For the first time in his life, he took photos inside the house, recording what should have needed no such record.

It was spring and the sun, just rising, edged the early morning mist with pink. Bill lay awake watching the light growing stronger. He was due to leave, later in the day, for Cambodia to shoot the pictures for a book on birds of the Far East. He had turned down several contracts in recent months, uneasy in Ariadne's presence but fearful of turning his back on her. This job had been arranged some while ago and there was no avoiding it, so this morning was his last chance to take hold of his fears.

He slipped out of the bed and tiptoed to the bathroom. He smothered his face in shaving foam and picked up his cutthroat razor, to avoid waking Ariadne with the sound of the electric shaver. He drew the blade down the left hand side of his face, wiping away the soap. The blade was a little blunt, and he opened the door to the wall unit, looking for a safety razor. The tidy stacks of soaps, pills and other things on the left hand side of the cupboard were undisturbed. But on the right hand shelf, in front of the boxes of tissues and bottles of shampoo, was a yellow, plastic duck. It was set an angle which made its eye of black paint appear to be looking sideways at him, its bill

curved up in a sneer. It was an abomination. This anthropomorphic, reductionist rendering of the beauty and complexity of a wild bird was an insult and its presence on the shelf – in the house – was an outrage. He could not have missed it when he stood here with Marina a few days before. He could check that. He had evidence.

Still holding the razor, he walked from the bathroom to his den, and pressed the button on the tablet he had used to fix the elusive contents of his house in the way he knew best. The screen lit up and showed him an image as shocking in its way as the plastic duck in the cupboard. This, too, was a duck; a real duck he had photographed on a mere the last time he had taken the tablet with him on a walk. The pictures of the inside of the house were gone, as if they had never been taken.

Bill's mind, sliding out of control across the tilting surface of his world, came to rest against the strong, sure figure of his mother. He imagined her, walking firmly, her back towards him, leading Boo into the shed. He picked up the razor and, shaving foam still covering half his face, went back into the bedroom.

Ariadne's Story

I have spent my life living with people who wanted me there for a purpose. A purpose I have often imperfectly fulfilled. I was adopted, as a baby, by a couple in Coventry. They lived in a perfect house, perfectly maintained. They believed in their own perfection in every respect – their values, their opinions, their personalities, talents, choice of house, furnishings, holidays, clothes ……. Almost every sentence they spoke began with the phrase 'of course'. Adopting children was, so they said, in their childlessness, a right and moral choice. They were able to keep up an air of superiority in the presence of the majority who had made the selfish, messy, planet-cluttering decision to procreate in the normal way. Of course, there was no question but that a child chosen by them would turn out to be perfect. Only, as luck would have (bad luck, theirs and mine), I did not. It was almost impossible for my mother to claim I was better than the other children in her social circle in any respect. I was plain, overweight, uninteresting, academically mainstream. The only area in which I excelled, and this was truly my mother's achievement, was behaviour. I was well-mannered, quiet, obedient. I was 'no trouble at all'. I behaved as they wanted me to behave. I was to make the same mistake again.

Strange as it seems to me now, I made no effort to escape after school or university, but returned home and did temporary jobs while my mother looked around for someone to marry me. Her plans for the wedding and her starring role as mother of the bride were in place; only the groom was missing. When, after a couple of years, her designs continued to be frustrated by my determined (her word) refusal to make myself pleasant, I decided to take my future into my own hands and began to train as a teacher. In the summer of that year, I went with a group of students from my course to a large, rented house on the west coast. We were a disparate bunch but by the end of the first week coalitions had been formed; twos and threes had clumped together and I found myself solitary. I walked alone along the seafront watching the birds rising and falling over the waves. A man came up to me and named the birds. He was a tall, strong, good-looking man and he spoke to me as if he knew who I was; it was as if we were continuing a conversation already started. His words and his manner were not moulded by any social awareness; he wanted to talk to me about birds, and he did. I knew nothing about birds and would normally have attempted to disguise this. Instead I said: "I'm from Coventry. We don't have many gulls in Coventry."

"Would you like a cup of tea?" he said. "I live just over there."

His name was Bill Flood and he was a wild life photographer. He seemed to find something in me of which he approved and we embarked on a courtship. It was an odd sort of courtship. He said very little; it had been my habit to say very little, too. The words I spoke in company tended to echo in my own ears after I had spoken them. They bounced back to obliterate the sense of what other people said to me in their turn, so I found it easier not to speak. But Bill needed me to talk; even better, he appeared indifferent to what I spoke about. It was an unexpected pleasure: I could say anything at all, knowing no one would judge what I said. Now I can see that my uneasiness over what other people thought about what I said is a commonplace agony of youth. But at the time, it seemed an affliction personal to me and I thought I had found an effective salve.

We were married three months after we met. Quietly. I considered inviting my parents, because I wanted to show them that, after all, I was achieving something. I was marrying a man of undeniable good looks, with a healthy income, and an international reputation in his field. I realised in time that the news would not have made them think better of me, but only of themselves. 'Of course,' they would have said to each other, 'we are the sort of people whose

daughter marries a famous photographer, and that is a credit to us and as it should be.' So I did not invite them or indeed tell them of the step I was taking.

I moved into the seafront house where Bill had lived with his recently deceased mother and set about filling the gap she had left. I didn't think like that at the time; I was convinced we were together because I was in love with him and he with me. I tried to believe I was living happily ever after, but my marriage was too like a fairy tale to be believable. The house was heavy with velvet and polished wood and when Bill went away, as he often did, I sometimes stood by the window looking out at the activity on the front as if I was watching a film. I was a a visitor in my own life, even when Bill came home. He was so silent, and though he demonstrated affection by wanting to be wherever I was, in wanting me to talk to him, no matter on what subject, it was all, so to speak, at arm's length. Even literally at arm's length. He did not seek or respond well to physical contact. From the beginning, we made love no more than once a week, and it felt like something Bill needed rather than wanted to do.

I began to focus on the house itself, which I loved. It was orderly, and this was an environment I was used to. It was also my house, the first time I had experienced this, and I surprised myself by having a clear vision of how I wanted it to be, the colour scheme, the type of furniture, the disposition of ornaments. It was not a vision of radical change and I did not want to upset Bill by imposing it all at once. I discussed each move with him, if our conversations could be called discussion. I said, for example: "The curtains in the lounge are faded. I thought I might make new ones. Maybe we could have a paler colour."

He replied: "They're good, thick curtains. They keep the light out."

"I'll make sure the new curtains are thick enough to keep the light out. "

This was the way we approached agreements. I made a statement; he made a related statement and I qualified my first position to take into account the opinion he had expressed. Questions, I had discovered, disconcerted him. He did not always respond, when I spoke, but in the beginning, I was careful to take no steps until I was sure he had understood what I intended to do.

At this time, when we had been married about a year and the refurbishment of the house was beginning to take shape, I made a friend. Her name was Marina Blake and she had been at school with Bill, she told me, the first time I met her. Now she was a nurse, working shifts at the Cottage Hospital and had moved in with an elderly lady called Mrs Carmichael who had the house next door. Marina was a spiky sort of woman; everything about her was wiry – her hair and her body and her limbs. It would have been quite easy to make a passable imitation of her with a few pipe-cleaners and strands of wire wool. (And in time it did occur to me to do this.) She had a rather high voice and a habit of standing too close. She was either a sympathetic listener, or intrusive; I could not decide. She said very little about herself but she excavated the person she was talking to, mining them for emotions, information, opinions. It meant that after every meeting with her, I was conscious of having talked too much about myself, and, though she applauded whatever I said, it made me feel uncomfortable. But I was bereft of intimacy. I knew other people in the town, in my role as Bill's wife, and had a few female acquaintances – Fiona the Librarian, Charlotte, the Deputy Head at the Primary School – but I assumed their friendliness towards me was based on a respect for Bill, and I discounted it. I accepted the friendship of Marina Blake.

Marina was as excited as I was about the changes to the house, and she was prepared to be bolder than I would have been, to go further in throwing out the old and introducing the new. She had known Bill all his life, and she engaged with him in a way I could not. While he liked to hear me talking, he seemed to listen to her. So when she claimed knowledge of his likes and dislikes -

suggested I remove a rug and a painting and a mirror because, she said, she knew he hated them - I believed her. I wanted to believe her, of course, because I was having fun. And having her approval made me less alert to the way Bill reacted; it was easy to assume he did not mind because he was a man who displayed so little emotion. I still told him beforehand of every change, but I cannot say he had agreed; he had merely said nothing expressive of disagreement. Had I been as anxious to please him as I had been in the beginning, I might have noticed he was becoming uneasy, and slowed the pace of change. Or maybe there was never a moment when I could have made a difference to the outcome from the day Marina Blake moved in next door.

Bill did challenge a few of the changes I made – objecting to colours I had chosen or household objects I had replaced. I deferred to Marina's greater familiarity with my husband to check if I was going too far, too fast.

"No, no," she said. "It's good he's taking notice. He needs to be pulled out of himself, made to sit up and pay attention."

Despite her reassurance, I was worried about our relationship; mine and Bill's. I began to feel I was fulfilling the role of wife (or mother substitute) less adequately than Marina would have done. When he was home, he was so often next door, doing what Marina called 'little jobs' for her. When he was away, she was constantly in my house, giving advice, poking about. It began to feel as if she thought she had a better right to be there than I did. She walked in without ringing the bell; she picked up letters from the hallway and turned them over, speculating on the contents; I would leave her in one room while I went to make tea or put something away and when I came back she had taken herself off to another part of the house, opening drawers, looking in cupboards. She never showed any consciousness that this was behaviour that might be resented and although I did resent it, I was not capable of telling her so. I realise now this was not normal behaviour, on her part or on mine. She had a lack of boundaries that would have been intolerable to most people, but most people had not experienced my upbringing. I had been trained to believe that, if I disagreed with those around me, I was certainly wrong. I had avoided conflict all my life and did not have the skills to deal with it. I allowed Marina to infiltrate my marriage, although even as I yielded to her influence, I was beginning to mistrust her.

Bill came home unexpectedly, although he told me he had left a message. If he had, and he lacked the imagination to lie, it had been deleted before I listened to it. He commented at once on something I had, with Marina's encouragement, changed in the house. I told him it was Marina's idea. I had said this before, when he had made similar comments, and assumed he had believed me; I had taken his lack of response for acceptance. I should have known better. This time, he said:

"That's a lie."

"How do you know?"

"Marina has told me the truth."

It was like the moment when you step out onto what you believe is level ground and find you have overlooked a step, and are, of a sudden, off balance, certain to fall, but how far and with what impact is momentarily uncertain. I had thought, when I was first married, that there would be no bliss greater than being loved by a handsome and successful man, having a home of my own. But even at its best, it was an agonising bliss. I had felt breathless from the wonder of it and the fear of losing it. And now I knew I had. I was overwhelmed with a realisation of my own powerlessness. Marina knew him so well; if she chose to manipulate me and my husband to drive us apart, I knew I could not resist. I began to cry, something Bill hated, but even as I was sobbing into a wet tissue, I

had given up hope of going into battle against her. Just as I had accepted my role as the unsatisfactory daughter, I resigned myself to being the unsatisfactory wife. Of course, I stopped speaking to Marina; I locked the doors to keep her out, dropped any pretence of friendship. But I could do nothing to justify myself to my husband; I did not even try.

I had hoped for children from my marriage but when that had not happened, after a year and a half, I went out to look for a job with the children of others. Charlotte took me on as a classroom assistant at the Primary School. If I am mapping the contours, the heights and the depths of my life, those hours with six and seven year olds were as far above sea level as it got. In the weeks after the realisation of Marina's treachery, I began to work more hours at the school, on a voluntary basis, because it was the only time I was happy, the only time I felt safe. Inside the house, I began to be afraid. I was afraid of Marina. Even when I had not seen her for days, I could sense her malevolent presence. And I began to worry about my own sanity. Bill was becoming more and more remote, speaking less, withdrawing even those few gestures of affection he used to make. His exchanges with me were all about the misplacing of objects. It was an orderly house, as I have said, when I moved in and I like order so I had kept up the tradition of everything having a place. Now things were, repeatedly, not in their place and I could not remember having moved them. I was at a loss to explain why this was happening, and each of the explanations that occurred to me was frightening. I thought I might be sleepwalking or having blackouts and did not know what I was doing; or that Bill was moving them and pretending he had not; or that Marina was still coming into my house, through locked doors, when I was not at home, or that Marina's evil spirit had penetrated the walls and become, like a poltergeist, a moving force within them. I was terrified of the implications of any of these, and I was particularly terrified of Marina Blake. I was not frightened of Bill, though, which just shows how little I had understood, because he tried to kill me.

I can only describe what happened on that morning by what others have told me since. My own memory is restricted to a moment of terrifying pain and then a sense of being elsewhere. I have no memory of a last glimpse of Bill's face; he drew the razor across my throat as I slept. I do not remember Marina being in the room although she was there. She came into the house using a key Bill must have given her and found me bleeding to death. She called the ambulance first and then the police and only when they came did they find Bill's body, hanging from the pipes in the basement, a twisted sheet still covered in my blood round his neck.

Bill Flood was not an easy man to love and I know now that what I felt for him in the early days of our marriage was not love but an obsessive form of gratitude. Marina Blake has told me since he died that she loved him, but this is equally untrue. She felt she owned him.

She saved my life. There can be no doubt of that. She was, after all, a nurse and knew where to apply pressure, what were the right actions to take, so I made it to the hospital. I had never encountered violence before; I had never been in hospital, had hardly been ill. It may be hard to believe, but being a patient was more unsettling, more disconcerting for me than the actual incident. I was completely adrift, unable even to cry out in lamentation or in an appeal for help because my vocal cords had been damaged in the attack. I had no one to turn to. My parents did not even know my married name. I had had no gift for forming friendships and had kept up with no one from school or college. I had made no close friends locally, except Marina. So, remarkable as it may appear, I was pleased to see her when I woke up. She was in and out all the time, travelling some distance to the hospital where I was first admitted and then, when I was moved to the local hospital where she worked, she was the only thread that linked me to the world I had so nearly left.

At first I felt unwilling to live. I thought I would not survive this and, on the whole, I preferred the idea that I would not, that I need no longer endure it. Then I became aware that I had survived and, despite myself, would survive and this was the more terrifying realisation, because how on earth would I be able to carry on the business of living when I had no power of any kind? I could, I realised later, have reached out to any of the well-wishers around my bed – the chaplain, the counsellor, the few people from the town who visited and who, as later events proved, had more good will towards me than I imagined I justified. But it did not occur to me that any of these comparative strangers would do anything except shake their heads and look puzzled if, through gestures and the written word, I had sought their help. Even if I had, they would almost certainly have been taken in by Marina's assertion of her right to care for me, and would have let events follow the same course. From the moment I entered the hospital alive, I was doomed to leave it as a prisoner of Marina's apparent altruism. It did not alter the outcome that I knew it was her ill-will and cunning that had driven Bill to do what he did. I still clung to her when she appeared at my bedside. But I think it did enhance my helplessness subsequently, convinced me I was too pathetic to act on my own behalf.

She took me home to my own house and installed me in my own bedroom and kept me there, almost without effort. Just a little planning and anticipation were all that was required for me to become an invisible, voiceless object of pity. She was very clever about it. I realised that over the months as I began to reach out and found how close about me the walls had been built. She began to work permanent night shifts, which meant she was always in the house when I was awake, and I was not truly awake for much of the time. I took pills, kept by Marina, prescribed by a doctor Marina took me to see who only had her word for it how I was feeling, and who discussed the drugs I should be taking with her by name rather than by effect, so I had no idea what they were.

Whether Marina was in the house or out of it, the doors were locked. They needed an old-fashioned key to open them, and I had no keys. I also had no money and no cards. No handbag. No mobile phone. There were two computers in the house, a laptop and a desktop, but they were in Bill's study, which was locked. The only way of communicating with the outside world from inside the house was with a landline. No use at all to someone who could not speak. It took eight or nine months to find all this out which would seem absurdly long to an ordinary, healthy person. Once I had finally grasped my lack of basic tools for living, I noticed something else. Looking round for some way of confronting Marina, I realised there was no blank paper and nothing to write with anywhere that I could reach.

Marina's manner towards me, during the months I spent finding out how total her control was, how completely I was at her mercy, was kind and condescending. I was able to believe that she had not meant to put me in this position, so the next time she started scrolling through texts on her phone, I put my hand on it and pointed at myself.

"What?" she said, looking up. I repeated the gesture, and she laughed. "Don't be ridiculous, Ariadne, what use would you have for a mobile phone?" I made a texting movement with my thumbs. "Oh, really? And who are you going to send texts to? You have friends and relations do you?" I pointed at her. "Well, now," she said, leaning towards me, "you never need to text me because you have nothing to tell me I don't already know. I know exactly where you are every hour of the day, and unless I'm with you, it's inside this house. Don't think it's going to be easy to escape now you think you're better. You destroyed my life when you married Bill and you are going to have to pay for it."

I was shocked and frightened and began to cry; she reverted at once to her usual manner, soothing me as an adult would a child. This became a feature of our life together; I would, through grunts and gestures, express frustration and she would respond by reminding me how much she had lost, how large was the debt I owed, and the extent to which I was helpless. Then she would be soothing and playful, as if we were close, albeit unequal, partners in life. I still do not know what was the purpose I served in being her prisoner: whether, as she said, she was exacting revenge, or whether she was buying respect in the town for her selflessness, or whether she just could not resist the pleasure of having complete power over another person. It hardly mattered. I was her plaything, and she became an increasingly cruel playmate. When I irritated her, or her mood was soured by some circumstance I knew nothing of, she began to add physical to verbal abuse. Nothing of consequence, just a shove, a tug on my hair, a pinch on the arm. Enough to remind me how vulnerable I was.

I did see other people. We went out, together, of course, to the supermarket and the library, to the cinema. Marina, naturally, spoke for me on these occasions, interposed herself between me and whoever came forward to speak to us. I preferred this; I did not want to be noticed. I looked hideous, and not just because of the grotesque scar around my neck but because Marina had control of all aspects of my appearance. Although I have never been proud of the way I looked, I had a certain style and felt I presented myself in a way which, at the least, did not accentuate my disadvantages. Now I was forced to go out with my hair hanging limply round my face, without make-up, and wearing dresses in vile colours and materials, little better than smocks. I had no tights, only pop socks, and the hems of the dresses were not long enough to hide the tops of these. So even though I longed to escape, I also did not wish to go out. I looked, I knew, like someone without a good enough grip on things to make herself presentable. I looked as if my problems were mental as well as physical. Most of the town, I subsequently found out, believed this to be the case. My inability to tell any of the people I met of what was happening to me was not, therefore, entirely down to my loss of the power of speech. Whatever I, as it were, said about wanting to escape from Marina, would be discounted as a disorder of the mind, understandable in the circumstances.

Apart from Bill's study, I could go anywhere in the house, and I found myself again, as I had at the beginning of my marriage, standing in the front room looking out at the seafront, watching people passing, the gulls rising and diving. I watched as the seasons changed and the sparkle of the sun on the sea gave way to high tides and high winds lifting the waves to break over the railings; as the frost lying thickly in the shadow of the benches melted and the spring bedding plants in the municipal planters began to unfold their orange, pink and purple petals. For well over a year I did nothing to free myself. I let it happen as I had let my parents subdue and belittle me, and as I had let Marina tell Bill stories about me. I hated myself almost as much as I hated Marina. I thought about suicide, but hopelessly, sure I would never have the courage to go through with it. I thought about taking a kitchen knife – she was not careful with those – and stabbing Marina, but my only experience of violence had rendered me forever incapable of inflicting it. I could, I convinced myself, do nothing except endure it. And I did. Until – how to describe it – I had the strangest moment.

Marina had her Reading Group in the house; she was not much of a reader but liked being part of the group. I was upstairs in my room, but remembered, early in the evening, that I had left the book I was reading – and reading was almost my only pleasure – in the kitchen, so I went down the back stairs to retrieve it, not wanting to risk meeting anyone in the hallway. When I reached the

kitchen there was a woman standing looking at me. I had never seen her before. Strangers in the street tried to pretend they had not seen me, but she looked straight at me, with apparent interest. The idea came into my head that maybe I could tell a total stranger what was going on more easily than I could speak to people I knew. I believe I made some sort of noise, as if I had, for a second, forgotten I could not pour it all out to her. Then Marina came in and led me away. In that moment, though, I had finally understood that I had only myself to blame. It was up to me to take action, on my own behalf, and, whatever the consequences, I would do so.

The first thing I had to do was to stop swallowing the pills. I knew she was giving me sleeping pills and anti-depressants; I was asleep for all of the night and much of the day and felt disorientated and listless when I was awake. I was properly awake for just a few hours in the afternoon when, whether she was working or not, Marina was sure to be with me. I needed time alone, and a clear head, to have any chance of helping myself.

I did not know which pills were which, and it was beyond me to manipulate into my sleeve or hold in my cheek all dozen of them, so I experimented. By cutting out first one, then another, I was able to identify the anti-depressants and the sleeping pills. Failing to take these made me anxious, slightly dizzy and unable to sleep. But I persevered, spitting them out when Marina's back was turned. I embraced the discomfort as evidence I was making an effort, suffering in the cause of freedom. It felt like my first triumph, overcoming the side effects. And gradually, it worked. I began to feel alert, and ready to take the next steps. Now I could stay awake after Marina had gone, I could prowl around the house at will, but this only confirmed what my previous wanderings, in a drugged state, had shown me. There was nothing to find to help me escape, no spare keys, no means of communication. For this, I had to access Bill's study.

Marina used a red handbag of soft leather, the shape and texture suggestive of a giant tomato on the point of going rotten. (Of all the things I hated about Marina, not the least was the jarring note she struck against the colours and shapes I had chosen for the house I wanted to live in.) Had she felt less contempt for me than she did, she would have kept this bag, or at least the keys in it, somewhere out of my reach, but she didn't. She left it on the hall table. I formulated a plan. In the dead of night, when she was out at work, I practised moving about without making a sound. I went down the stairs from my bedroom to the hall, up the stairs from the hall to the study, down the stairs from the study to the hall, up the stairs from the hall to my bedroom. At first I concentrated on controlling my movements, which had become heavy and clumsy during more than a year and a half almost entirely indoors. When I had learnt to step lightly again, from foot to foot, I began to memorise the route, eliminate the possibility of a misstep or a stumble.

Bedroom door to first stair, five steps, left hand onto newel post, twelve treads down to the hall, four steps to the hall table, four steps back, right hand on the newel post, eight treads to the landing, eight steps along the corridor to the study door, eight steps back, left hand on newel post, twelve treads down, four steps to table, four steps back, right hand on newel post, twelve treads up, five steps to bedroom door. There were loose boards on the second and fourth treads from the top; a curl in the edge of the rug on the corridor to the study which could trip me up; the coats hanging on the wall at the bottom of the stairs could catch my shoulder and a belt buckle might strike the mirror as they settled back in their places. I mapped these hazards, in my mind, as I travelled down, and as I travelled back. I fell into a routine. Five, newel post, keep left, twelve, newel post, keep left, four. Four, keep right, newel post, keep right, twelve, newel post, keep left, eight. Keep right, eight, newel post, keep left, twelve, newel post, keep left, four. Keep right, four, newel post, keep right, twelve, newel post, five. At last I was ready, and while Marina slept during the day, I went

downstairs, removed her keys from the bag, went back to the study door. Now I had to do something I had not been able to practice – turn the key in the lock. I listened for sounds from her bedroom on the floor above. There were none. The key went in smoothly; the lock turned without a sound. By the time she woke up, her keys were back in the bag and I was in bed. If she tried the study door before I had a chance to lock it again, she would almost certainly assume she had forgotten to turn the key the last time she left. She would never imagine I was capable of having done it.

She did not try the door that day, and when she had gone to work I was able to enter Bill's study for the first time since his death. Beneath the dust and the stale air, it still held the distinctive odour from the days when Bill worked in here, when I sat on the other side of the desk doing accounts on the desk top while he manipulated images on the laptop. For a moment, I was overwhelmed with sorrow for the lost promise of our first year together, but the menace of Marina, miles away as she was, was more powerful than the memory of my husband, and I wanted to be gone from there as soon as I could. I checked the laptop first, but she had changed the password and I could not open it. She had not touched the PC, though. The password had not been changed and the last security scan was on the day before Bill died. I had an e-mail account I could access through that machine. It was available to me, as I sat there, close to midnight, alone in the house. I could use it to tell someone outside the house what was happening to me. But who? And what would that lead to? They would e-mail back, perhaps, in the morning, when they had read what I wrote, and I would not reply, because by then I would be locked out of the room. They would come round – say it was the police I had e-mailed, or Fiona, or Charlotte – to see if I was all right, and Marina would spin her web round them. And then – I could hardly bear the thought – she would find out I had made the attempt to escape. I had no idea what she was capable of, in the circumstances. I shut the machine down.

The desk was locked but there were papers in a tray, and the one on top was a bank statement. It was for an account I had held before Bill died, in my own name, and it showed significant sums of money had been paid in, during the last month, and then withdrawn. They went in from various sources, I could not work out where, and went out again to 'client account'. I could have learnt more online, but for that I needed a debit card, and a security device, and I had neither. The statement did clear up one other mystery, though. No post was delivered to my house and when I looked at the address for the account – my account – it was next door. Mrs Carmichael's house where Marina used to live, now empty, because the old lady had moved into a nursing home.

By now I was beginning to shake; it was cold and at the back of my mind was the awful fuzzy, sticklike outline of Marina appearing in the doorway, come home early for some reason, creeping up the stairs as I had crept down them the night before. I had no idea what she would do, but I could imagine violence, and my flesh cringed from it. My hands were unsteady as I straightened the pile of papers, checked the positioning of the laptop and the mouse, locked the door behind me.

Next day, I waited for Marina to go to sleep, then set off on my journey. Five newel post keep left twelve newel post keep left four. Now I had the keys in my hand. Four keep right newel post keep right twelve newel post keep left eight. The study door was locked. Keep right eight newel post keep left twelve keep left four. The keys were back in her bag. Four keep right newel post keep right twelve…….I had not given myself enough time, in the last few days and nights, to sleep. I was weary and tense and I stumbled. Marina was at once on the landing.

"What are you doing? Why aren't you in bed?"

I sat down on the top step and moaned, shaking my head from side to side, as if I was unhappy and confused, as indeed I had been for so long.

"Back to your room," she said. "You're such a trial."

I lay in bed, gripping the edge of the sheet, terrified yet triumphant.

After this it was Marina's nights off and I was not alone in the house for four days. During this time, I thought about what I had achieved and what I should do next. There must be, I reasoned, another set of keys, for Bill and I each had a set. I had looked everywhere; the only place left was the locked desk in Bill's study.

Meanwhile I met, for the second time, the woman from that night in the kitchen. She was in the library, talking to Fiona, the librarian. Fiona was, of all the women I had known in former times, the one who managed to come closest to treating me now as she had then. She selected books I might like to read and talked to me about them as if she believed I had as good a brain, and as sharp a judgment, as she did. She told me the stranger – her name, curiously, was Hope, which I took as a good omen, though I never found out if this was her first or last name – was a writer organising events in the town, and one of these was to be a writing competition, on the theme of 'Memory'. She offered me an entry form and I put out my hand for it but Marina was, in the instant, at my side, taking it away, whispering about my supposedly precarious mental state. I watched Fiona and Hope watching me and the feeling of resurgent power such as I had felt in the kitchen, the sudden rush of energy a man might feel as he realised he was at risk of drowning, came to me again. Marina bent down to put the books I had chosen in a bag; I made eye contact with Fiona and nodded.

Marina went back to work and I stole her keys again when she was asleep in the morning: five newel post keep left twelve newel post keep left four, keys in my hand. Four keep right newel post keep right twelve newel post keep left eight door unlocked. Only this time, I opened the door and unlocked the desk. I could hear Marina snoring; I almost convinced myself I was not frightened. Keep right eight newel post keep left twelve newel post keep left four. Keys back in the bag. Keep right four newel post keep right twelve newel post five. I was back in bed. It was done. The door and the desk were at my disposal when she went to work that night. I started with the bottom drawer and there, right at the back, was a complete set of keys. I made a noise which, in a person with undamaged vocal chords might have been a whoop, but which came out as a growl. I looked round at once, as if even this slight noise might have been heard by Marina, far away as she was. Then I held the keys in both hands, savouring the moment. I was free; I had access to everything in the house, and to the street outside, if ever I had the courage to open the front door. Next, the middle drawer: there was a notebook in which she had written all her passwords, so I had access to the laptop, as well. Finally the top drawer: I found a power of attorney, signed by me – and it was my signature, albeit shaky, witnessed by a nurse in the hospital where I had first been admitted – giving her complete control of my financial affairs. So I had access to the world outside the house, and to information, but I still had no access to my own money.

I was shaking again, and it took me a long time to satisfy myself that I had left no sign of my visit, no indent in the chair cushion, no stray dark hairs, no disturbance of the surface of the desk. Just a few days before, there had been a small but telling escalation in the violence. She was reading the local paper at the kitchen table and stood up to put a mug in the sink. I reached across to move the paper so I could read an article on the page she had open. She turned round at the movement and smashed the mug against my knuckles.

"Get off that!" she shouted. "I haven't finished. Who do you think you are?"

I whimpered, holding my bruised knuckles, keeping my eyes down, my posture cowed., but inwardly formulating an answer to that question: ' You will find out soon enough who I am.'
This incident convinced me that I had to find a hiding place for my set of keys which she would never discover. The house was (my influence) uncluttered and Marina, I must admit, was a tireless little body when it came to keeping it looking neat, so there were no corners or containers likely to remain undisturbed. But she only ever cooked a limited range of dishes, being uninterested in food, and there were jars in the cupboard left over from the days when I decided what I would eat. I hid the keys in a storage jar full of lentils. I was quite sure Marina would have no notion what to do with a lentil.

When Marina was there, I was trying to be exactly as I had been,: submissive, slow-witted, half-asleep, occasionally truculent. With the keys safely hidden in the lentils, it became easier to act like this because, strange as it may seem, this was how I felt. Deeply uncertain. I was too aware of the unanswered and unanswerable questions: what should I do now? What would Marina do in reaction to what I did next? I was, suddenly, in a position of some power. I could undermine her as she had undermined me in the last weeks of Bill's life. I could change the password on the laptop so she could not access it. I could have the locks changed (if I stole money from her purse and wrote down my instructions). I could walk out, vanish, go to Coventry, for example. When I was at school I attended some sessions designed to make us better citizens or some such thing. We were told to work out what success looked like, before putting a plan into action. According to the theory, it was important to imagine yourself in the post-implementation sunlight, able to look around and say 'yes, this is how I wanted it to be.' I had no ambitions at the time so it had no application to me, but I remembered it now. What did I want my life to be like, in an ideal world? I did not know if I was capable of living on my own, physically or emotionally. I had never done so. When I started to prowl round the house I was obsessed with hatred for Marina, for her manipulative nature, her nastiness, her jarring presence. But, after all, could I cope without her? If I had money as well as keys, it might be possible to avoid confrontation, she might accept our changed relationship and we could co-exist. Then I remembered the blows she had already inflicted and realised how weak I was; I was imagining a calm and peaceful outcome that was never going to be possible. It was unimaginable that she would leave without being forced, physically, to do so. It was more likely that she would kill me, or, if I survived, I would be permanently damaged, more even than I had been by Bill's attack. Having faced this, and understood it was the price I might have to pay if I carried on trying to escape, I was calmer, and I made my next visit to Bill's study during the night, to see if I could understand the financial transactions.

Marina was orderly in her management of information on the laptop. There was a file folder called *Finance*, with several sub-folders. I looked in one – *Investments* – which was mainly statements of profit and capital growth on different portfolios. It meant nothing to me. I downloaded the folder onto a memory stick I found in the drawer, and opened her e-mail account. Here, too, there were folders. I opened *Bill's Estate* and began to go through the exchanges of messages. Two things gradually became clear. The first was that Bill had left everything to me, had made a will since our marriage leaving everything to me, which surprised me as we had not spoken of it, though given the assignments he went on, it was a sensible precaution. The second was that he had been a man of considerable wealth, according to my view of these things. The royalty payments on pictures reprinted in books and periodicals I had been aware of, and knew they

represented an income I could live on, but in addition there was accumulated capital, not to mention the value of the house, that looked like riches to me. I downloaded this folder, too, and uploaded both to the Desktop, erased them from the stick and returned it to precisely the same position it had been in before.

All this took time; it was late and I was tired by the time I left the room and put the keys back in the jar. This must have made me careless, because next morning, there was a scattering of lentils on the kitchen floor, little orange discs on the oatmeal tiles. If they had been arranged to spell out the word DEATH they could not have terrified me more.

"What's this?" said Marina, kneeling to sweep them up. "What on earth have you been up to in the night? Or are you going to tell me it was mice?" I shrugged, trying to indicate it was a matter of indifference to me where the lentils had come from. She opened the cupboard beside her and looked inside, then back at the contents of her dustpan. "Everything is in jars!" she said. "It can't have been mice. Have you been fiddling in this cupboard?" She reached out a hand to pick up the nearest jar. The lentil jar.

Beside me on the table was the teapot, full of freshly brewed tea. As Marina's hand approached the jar, my hand moved to the teapot, two co-ordinated actions carried out in a second that lasted a lifetime. Before she had lifted the jar from the shelf, the teapot landed on the floor and broke apart, spraying tea over Marina's legs as she crouched by the open cupboard, splashing onto the nurse's uniform she still wore. I started to bellow, as if in pain or frustration, wagging my head from side to side, trying to divert her, at all costs, from the cupboard beside her. She leapt to her feet, grabbed my arm, and hit me. It was a hard blow; I suspect it would have been harder if she had hit her first target, my face, but she changed the direction at the last moment and caught me on the shoulder. I staggered back, only her grip on my arm preventing me from falling, then she let me go, and as I started to crumple, she kicked my legs. I fell to the floor, at eye level with shards of china, a slick of tea and a tell- tale red lentil. Marina stood over me, breathing heavily. I tensed in expectation of another kick, but she had, it seemed, done enough to satisfy her punitive instincts. She had underestimated me again, she had no suspicion that the lentils and the broken teapot indicated anything more than clumsiness on my part.

"Get this cleaned up," she said. "I'm going to bed."

I snatched the keys out of the lentil jar as soon as her footsteps reached the top landing. This time, I put them in the pocket of my thick winter coat hanging in the hall. By the time winter came, I would be free of her. The blow she had just struck made me certain of that. I would be free, one way or another.

The following week we went to the library again and when I opened one of the books Fiona had selected, I found she had slipped in an entry form for the writing competition, and three or four sheets of lined paper. It was the first time anyone had made a gesture implying understanding. Fiona must have understood Marina had made a choice for me, in respect of the competition, and I had had no power to overturn the decision she had made. It gave me hope.

Over the next few nights I wrote a paragraph for Fiona that was emotional, not factual. The facts were too many and too complicated; the emotions were so strong it was much easier to express them and, I thought, it would at least give Fiona a sense of the despair I felt. I put my e-mail address on the back of the form and walked to the library to put it through the letter-box. I waited until the streets were empty, around midnight, unlocked the front door and went out onto the pavement. It was a fine night, the sea gently murmuring on the other side of the wall, the distant

beat of a party being held in a cove round the headland. It was half a mile to the library and I felt every step to be a positive action, an assertion of freedom. I met two young people walking close together, her hand in the back pocket of his jeans, his hand in the back pocket of her jeans, enjoying an adolescence that I had missed entirely. I met a drunk, vomiting into a drain. I might once have felt nervous on these streets, at this time. If someone had attacked me now, I would have been furious at this interruption to my plans, but I had no serious fears that anyone would.

I received an e-mail from Fiona.

'I found your submission quite shocking,' she wrote. 'Do you want to come round for coffee and a chat? (Paper and pencils provided!)'

'I need to explain,' I wrote back, and told her everything I have written here about the level of control Marina was exercising over my life and over my financial affairs. 'I realise it was weak of me to let this happen, but I am determined it cannot go on. Will you help me?'

'I have to ask,' she replied, 'are you sure? This sounds like extreme behaviour and Marina has always seemed to be such a caring person. I am puzzled about what her motive would be. I'm sorry if I sound like a Doubting Thomas, but you must admit it is a shocking story and I am having difficulty taking it all in.'

This e-mail was alarming. Even though Fiona's reaction was what I expected – in fact less sceptical than I had always assumed anyone in the town would be if I shared my side of the story. But there was a risk she would talk to Marina. I e-mailed back.

'It is hard to believe, but it is all true. I know this might seem as if I am being as devious as I claim she is being, but please, please don't confront her with these accusations. I am truly fearful of what she might do.'

Before I could access any reply to this, Charlotte, the Deputy Head from the Primary School, called at the house when Marina was there. This was not unusual. Marina's friends often dropped in. They would be courteous to me, on these occasions, but once the greetings were over, the conversation would go on as if I was not in the room. How would it not, when I could not join in? This time, though, Charlotte told Marina she had come to see me.

"I wonder," she said, smiling at me, "if you would like to come to the Year 6 Concert on Friday afternoon? You'll remember the children from when you helped out, and I thought you might enjoy seeing them again before they escape to Secondary School."

"I'll have to check," said Marina. "Let me look at the calendar." She stood up to take it down from the wall. Charlotte continued to look at me and I nodded, attempted a smile. "No, I'm sorry," Marina said, sitting back down, "my mother has a hospital appointment on Friday afternoon and I need to take her. That's a shame," and she patted my hand as if regretting having to deny me a treat.

"Well, it's a pity you'll miss it," said Charlotte. "But that doesn't stop Ariadne coming, does it?" Turning to me, she said: "If you don't fancy walking over there on your own, I'll get a member of staff to come and collect you."

Marina sighed and looked sorrowful. "I suppose I could try and re-arrange the appointment. If Ariadne really wants to go. You see," she shifted slightly so her back was half turned towards me and lowered her voice, "I really don't like to risk letting her go anywhere alone. She is still in a very fragile state."

"Don't you trust me to look after her, if any looking after is needed?" said Charlotte. She was a fluffy, twittering sort of woman, unlike Fiona who was tough and forthright. But she was

capable of squaring up to a classroom of children and presenting a solid front, a not-to-be-messed-with manner at odds with her normal, fussy imprecision. She looked at Marina now as if she were that classroom, failing to settle down when told. Before Marina could speak, she looked at me and said: "I'll send an escort at two o'clock on Friday."

When she had gone, Marina pinched me. "Do-gooders," she said. "I hate them."

Later, I heard her phoning the hospital to change her mother's appointment.

I had another e-mail from Fiona.

'I'm beginning to believe you,' she said. 'It seems to me you need to cancel the power of attorney so you can access your own money. I can put you in touch with a solicitor who could do that for you. I also think he should look at the financial transactions, to see what he can make of them.'

I zipped up the files I had downloaded from the laptop and sent them to the solicitor she named. His name was Edgar, and I remembered having met him, before Bill's death, and being overawed by the height and the hairiness of him.

Just at this time, Marina's mother fell ill. Her father was dead but her mother still lived in a cottage further up the hill. She was a sorry little woman, who never spoke except to express disagreement. I suspect she had had a negative or maybe even tormented life, so who can blame her for being sour in old age? it was unthinkable that Marina, with her reputation as the most caring woman in the world, should not step in to look after her, and suddenly I had time during the day to sit at the computer and exchange e-mails with Fiona and with the firm of solicitors, as if I was a woman like any other, a woman with control over her own life. The solicitor asked for a meeting and Fiona offered to go with me. I found some of my old clothes to wear for this occasion, took trouble with my hair, with the disposition of the scarf hiding the scar. We walked to his office – it is a small town – and Fiona greeted people she knew as we passed. Many of them stopped to tell me how pleased they were to see me out, looking well. I was unsettled by this; uncertain how to respond, yet aware of a feeling of well-being I would be able to take out and treasure later, at the kindness of these acquaintances.

I had never spoken to Edgar for more than a few minutes, so it surprised me how warm his greeting was, how much concern he showed for me, before I had even sat down. He took my hand in both of his huge hands, bending his head to look at me with an expression such as a doctor might have, looking for evidence of returning health. I think he was checking how resilient I seemed to be, because, while I thought I had come to sign the paperwork to regain control of my bank account, he had something else to tell me. Marina, he said, was systematically defrauding me. The money going into the account was all mine; the money leaving it was going to accounts she controlled. The investments were slowly being shifted into her name. She was investigating, so the information I had provided indicated, whether it was possible to transfer the ownership of the property. She was robbing me of money, as well as freedom and self-respect, and I was actually heartened by this discovery. Embezzlement is a crime, and the force of the law was much greater than anything I could deploy.

"We have to decide," said Edgar, "what you are going to do now. The relevant authorities have been informed but in the meantime, she is still living in your house, and I imagine that is a situation you would like to change. I think I would advise you to ask her to leave before she finds out we have uncovered her fraud."

Fiona said: "You could ask her to leave, now, couldn't you?"

I hadn't told Fiona of the lentil incident; I hadn't mentioned my fear of violence. I was trying to be the sort of woman a woman like Fiona would respect. Now I was forced to confront both how frightened I was and how vindictive I wanted to be. For so long, in the days of crushing misery, I had dreamed of all the ways in which I could expose, humiliate and shame her, but now I had to wonder if I would feel better or worse for indulging myself in this way. I could just change the locks and exclude her (I could imagine with acute pleasure the look of bafflement on her face as she looked up at the house where so much of her malicious energy had been invested, realising she was locked out of the nest she had so painstakingly feathered for herself.) But if things were as anyone seeing our relationship from the outside would assume them to be, this would look petty and mean. I was resolute that I did not want to look petty and mean, so I said I would, as they suggested, ask Marina, politely, to leave. Thank her for what was, by now, more than two years of care and say I no longer needed to put her to the trouble of providing it.

Of course, I could say none of this; I would have to write a letter, which pretended we stood fairly on the ground others believed we stood on, suggesting that she might want to return to living with her mother, or, as I knew she had access, to the house next door.

Fiona touched my hand when this had been decided. "I think you should have someone with you, when you give it to her," she said.

"We'll both be there," said Edgar.

I hugged them both before we left.

We sat at the kitchen table as Marina let herself in.

"Ariadne!" she called, as was usual. As usual, I grunted to indicate where I was.

We heard the rattling of her keys as she locked the door behind her.

"God, I wish that woman would hurry up and die," she said. "I'm fed up to the back teeth with her moaning. At least you can't do that." And she walked into the kitchen, smiling.

It took a moment for her to realise I was not alone, and the upward tilt of her lips, the creases in her cheeks only faded away slowly as if she had simply forgotten to rearrange her face.

"Hello, Marina," said Fiona. "How is your mother?"

"Not good, I'm afraid." Her eyes were everywhere, taking in the three of us, the paper on the table, the cups of coffee. "I'm sorry, I'm a bit puzzled as to how you got in. It's not that I'm not pleased to see you, but I always make sure Ariadne is safe by locking the doors. She is my responsibility, you see, and I do worry she might wander off and goodness knows what harm it would do, in her condition, if she met with situations she couldn't handle."

"What is her condition, exactly?" asked Mr. Edgar.

"Well that's a little hard to sum up, in layman's terms. But there is the throat trauma, obviously, with its associated neuropathy, and she also suffers from confusion and clinical depression."

'No I don't,' I wrote on a piece of paper and pushed it towards her.

She smiled and patted my hand. "You're so brave, Ariadne. Think positive, good girl. But it is a fact nevertheless."

I picked up the letter and handed it to her She took it reluctantly and paused before looking down at it, still moving her eyes around as if she would be able to work out exactly what had happened, how far her power had been eroded, by some clue in the room. She was, I imagine, running through ways to react which might limit the damage, but she was not in possession of enough information to be able to select an approach.

She dropped her eyes and started to read. Not one of us spoke. She sat looking at the paper long after she must have finished reading it while we waited to find out how she was going to play it. Eventually she looked up, straight at me, with tears in her eyes.

"Is this the thanks I get, Ariadne? Is this the payback for months and months of putting you first, of working nights to be with you during the day, of attending to your every need." Her voice started to rise. "I can't believe you could be so ungrateful for everything I've done for you. Where would you have gone, if I hadn't been here for you? How would you have managed the everyday business of living? And after all that, you're simply saying – Go. I hadn't thought you could be so cruel." Then she gave herself a shake, wiped the back of her hand across her eyes and stood up. "I will leave at once, of course." And she walked out of the room.

I didn't realise I was shaking until Fiona put her arms around me and held me still. What Marina had said was true. She had come to my aid when I needed someone; she had put me first – everything she did was shaped around me. If the others had not been there, who knows if Marina would have had to use violence to induce me to let her stay – for a week, a month, forever? My ability to resist her, so steady when she was not with me, could be undermined so easily by her distorted truths which I could not help recognising, nevertheless, as true.

We sat in silence, listening to her moving about upstairs. It was not long before she came back.

"Ariadne, have you taken my laptop?" she asked. "I'm afraid I need that back. It has private, personal information on it."

"I have it," said Mr. Edgar. "It is Ariadne's property, in fact, but if you would care to make an appointment to come into my office, it would be very helpful to go through what is on there together. Ariadne needs to take back control of her financial affairs, as I'm sure you realise, and I'm hoping you can explain where the money is and how she can access it."

This was the moment. This was the point where the expression on her face as she looked at him was pure rage and frustration, just as I had imagined in my powerless days.

"I'll see you in court," she said, eventually.

"I expect so," said Edgar but by the time he had finished speaking she had left the room and gone back upstairs.

I had spent such a long time imagining the moment when I would stand in front of Marina and she would have to recognise I had got the better of her - me, weak, lumpen Ariadne , good for nothing but abuse. It had not been as I imagined it, of course. I was always unimportant in Marina's story. I was an impediment, then a consolation prize but never, as Ariadne Flood, of any consequence at all. She had wasted no time in pondering how she had misjudged me, she had been thinking only of how she could manage the situation to her own advantage.

We heard her footsteps descending the stairs and the front door slamming.

When I went up into the bathroom I found she had scrawled JUST WAIT on the mirror, with lipstick. I was no longer frightened of her, but I changed the locks, just in case. In fact she vanished, realising that it was only a matter of time – now I had taken back control of my finances – before she was exposed. Not as a bully, but a thief. She might have wanted to stay and take revenge, make my life a misery one last time, but it was not worth the risk. So she ran away. Once the authorities had the evidence they needed, though, she proved easy to find. Running away was not her style and she was not good at it. She was not, as the prosecuting Barrister pointed out to me, with a suspicion of a sneer, a criminal mastermind. Though she was, it turned out, a serial offender; I was not her only

victim. Mrs Carmichael had also been deprived of her assets, her freedom and almost, but not quite, her sanity, through the loving ministrations of Marina Blake.

I have a feeling prison will suit Marina. She is tough; she is a bully; she has none of the feelings that would make prison hell for most of us – she will miss no one, she has no sense of shame. I am pleased to think it is so. Her mother died during her trial, and I am pleased about that, too. Her life appeared to be a burden to her but, more importantly, she will not be available as the only person left Marina can attach herself to when her sentence finishes.

I have been back to hospital for operations to improve both my vocal chords and my appearance. Mrs Carmichael has moved back in next door and we are the best of friends. She is helping me with the vocal exercises I have to do, to help regain my voice. Or at least, as I whisper to her, my whisper. She is endlessly patient.

I wave to people passing, now, when I sit in my window, and when I am able, I will go out and speak to them. Meanwhile, I am as happy as I have ever been, sitting here watching the gulls rising and falling over the waves. I have Bill's books on birds beside me, and am learning to tell one species of sea-bird from another.

A Balanced Diet

They had been together for five years and as Rob had remembered this and mentioned it to Lily, they agreed to book a table in the best restaurant they could afford. Each of them had something to say to the other, and both had resolved it should be said before the night was over. They decided to go by taxi; if neither of them drove, neither of them need hold back on the wine, which Lily thought might be helpful in smoothing the way to what she had to say. Rob thought a drink or two would make it easier for him to say what he had determined he would.

Inside the restaurant, a smiling woman took their coats and a smiling man led them a sinuous path between the polished tables over the polished floor to the place that had been reserved for them, up a few steps, against a window.

"Oh, lovely," said Lily to the smiling man. "The very table I would have chosen." And she sat down with her back to the window, looking round at the other people talking and eating and looking round.

Rob took the seat facing the window. He would have preferred to have had his back to a wall: he could never shake the feeling that something embarrassing or awkward was occurring behind his back and, because he could not see it and react appropriately, he was implicated; the joke was on him. But there again, for what he planned to say, no audience was needed, or desirable. He could lean across, when the moment came, and whisper in Lily's ear. He caught sight of his reflection in the glass and thought how foolish he looked, with his curly hair and the tips of his ears red from the cold. Lily, smoothing her napkin over her knees, was like the surface of a lake on a sunny day, calm, beautiful, enigmatic, redolent of adventure and untold depths. He could feel his confidence starting to ebb. Was she not – had he not always known she was – out of his league? But five years. Surely that was enough to confirm she would accept the offer he was planning to make.

Lily decided to save what she had to say for the taxi home, or for the moment when the front door had been opened and closed behind them, the cat greeted. She relaxed, having made this decision, and looked at Rob, the familiar, slightly startled innocence of his round face. Phrases formed in her mind she could use when the moment came. Soft and regretful phrases. It had been good but……it was not because of anything he had said or done…..it was just restlessness, a sense of time passing. But it was too early to say any of this yet.

The *bonne bouche* was a little column of Jerusalem artichoke soup with truffle oil, in a shot glass; not cold, not hot. Lily tasted, then swallowed the velvety earthiness of it.

"Just perfect," she said.

"I'm not sure," said Rob, who had wanted everything about this evening to be just perfect and was beginning to fear it would not be. "Too strong, if you ask me."

Their attention was distracted by a man on the next table dropping a spoon on the floor and fumbling under his chair leg to retrieve it. At once, so it seemed, the waitress who had taken their order was at his side with a clean spoon which she silently placed beside the man's plate, stooping to recover the one he had dropped, all in one smooth movement. For the whole time the waitress was within earshot, the customer kept apologising and asserting his belief that the spoon off the floor would have been as adequate to his needs as the one that had replaced it.

"Such a fuss about nothing," he said, to his companion, although the fuss had been his.

Lily turned back to Rob who had never been known to make such a display. She smiled.

"Apparently," she said, "the more artichokes you eat, the more tolerant your gut becomes and they stop giving you wind."

Rob had ordered a starter of fish soup and when it came, he was daunted by the complexity of the food in his bowl, the pattern made by the half-submerged fish and seafood, the delicate colour of the surrounding liquid. The first mouthful confirmed his uneasiness; the flavours were too much for his brain to process. He looked across to where Lily was teasing apart a creamy disc of goat's cheese on a colourful mound of beetroot in a little moat of dark brown sauce.

"This is fantastic," she said. Beetroot slicked red across her teeth and tongue.

"Mind you don't get the juice on your dress," he said.

She lifted her napkin and wiped her lips: it came away stained with the clashing tones of beetroot and fiery red lipstick.

"It would be worth it," she said. "Can I try your soup?" He passed a spoonful over the table; she closed her eyes as she tasted and swallowed. "A perfect balance," she said.

Rob remembered teasing her when they were first together, about the word 'perfect' and the word 'rubbish'; there was never, he had pointed out, anything in between. She had been upset and he had apologised, claiming that her ability to be absolute in her opinions, negative or positive, was one of the things he loved about her.

Lily chose a chicken dish for her main course.

"Why not have the lamb?" said Rob. "You always love lamb."

"Yes, but the chicken comes with celeriac mash and I so rarely get to eat celeriac."

"You could invent a new approach to eating," said Rob. "Tuberism. A diet based entirely on root vegetables."

"What?" said Lily.

"Jerusalem artichokes, beetroot, celeriac. With parsnips and a bit of carrot to brighten it all up. You'd love that, wouldn't you?"

She laughed. "It's true. What a shame aubergines grow above ground. I'd have to have those on my tuber de-tox days."

Rob ordered the lamb. He had it in mind that Lily really wanted the lamb and that he was doing it for her, in case she wanted to swap when the food came.

They picked a chardonnay from the Macon; it was one of the cheapest but not actually the cheapest on the wine list. The waitress brought the bottle and poured some for Rob to taste. He knew he was going to approve it, and he also knew there was scope for looking a prat while pretending to put it to the test, so he downed his taster swiftly and nodded. The girl selected the smaller of the pairs of large wine glasses in front of each place at the table. Rob could never understand wine glass etiquette, either.

Lily was struck, when the main dishes arrived, with the aesthetic contrast. The chicken dish was gold and brown; tanned flesh and sunshine. The lamb was dark, dense; muscle and soil. She reached across and laid her hand on Rob's in instinctive response to the symmetry and its relationship to their relationship. Then regretted the gesture. The chicken was delicious. She offered Rob a mouthful and he declared it to be dry. She felt he was not enjoying this meal as much as she was and she wondered if he had some inkling of what it was she planned to tell him, later.

Rob knew before he tasted it that the lamb was too rich. Somewhere in the sauce was a note of sweetness and the whole dish called to mind the dry, stringy roasts Rob's mother served up with a glistening blob of redcurrant jelly. The comparison was grossly unfair: everything about this meal from the quality of the ingredients to the skill and care employed in preparing it was as far

from his mother's cooking as an RSC production from a Primary School Nativity play. It must be the pressure of what he planned to say that was robbing him of the pleasure he would normally have had from such food. He could not help himself thinking that he was, after all, no closer to Lily's level than his mother's best efforts were to this dish.

"Try a bit of lamb," he said. Lily said it was so good that if only they could afford it, she would like to come back the next night and have the lamb herself. Then she looked guilty, for some reason. Perhaps, Rob thought, she thought she ought not to make any reference to the fact she earned more than he did. The wine had been good but the bottle was now empty.

"I should think we could stretch to another bottle," said Rob.

Lily had chosen, for dessert, a fruit tart. It came with a ball of ice-cream and everything about it – the contrasting textures of the pastry and the filling, the sweetness and warmth of the pie brought to life by the ice-cold sharpness of the ice-cream – was a melody played by a full orchestra, percussion included. Opposite her, Rob sank a spoon into his lemon posset and looked unhappy.

"Is it too sharp?" she asked.

"No, no, it's lovely. Would you like to taste it?"

But for once she refused, not wanting to interrupt the closing bars of the perfect tart. At the last moment she spared Rob a tiny spoonful incorporating each of the three chiming elements. He thought it was an affront; at once too sweet, too sour, too warm, too cold, too bland, too powerful. But he did not say so.

There was a wait before the coffee arrived. It would have been possible for Rob to say what he had to say during these fifteen minutes. Only he had decided to wait for the coffee to come, and the couple at the table beside them made some sort of fuss about the bill, albeit a quiet fuss, quietly and calmly dealt with by the smiling man who had led them to their table, no longer smiling. When that was past, the coffee came with four little squares, two chocolate, two chewy.

Lily leaned back in her chair and turned her head to right and left, reviewing the room, the number of diners, Rob. Full of wine and good food, as she was, it was hard to call to mind what it was about their relationship that had determined what she had planned to say. She had time yet to consider the words; perhaps even to review the decision she had taken. Nothing need be said. Yet.

Rob noticed that Lily's face was less under control than usual. The mouth more relaxed, the eyes bright but less focussed. The second bottle was empty and he did not remember having drunk so much of it. If ever there was a time to say what he had to say it was now. And yet. He reached his hand into his jacket pocket to check that, if the words were to be spoken, what was necessary to them was within reach. It was not. He had left the box in the pocket of his coat which had been taken from him by the smiling lady at the door.

"What have you lost?" asked Lily, noticing the movement of his hand.

"Just checking for my keys," he said. "But I remember now, I've left them in my coat."

Absurdly he felt close to tears with all that, if he had answered the question honestly, he could say that he had lost. The moment, yes. Without the ring, what point was there in speaking the words? He had lost the pleasure he had expected to have from the evening, from the food, the atmosphere, the occasion created by the smiling staff, the polished wood, the attention paid to the right glass, the cleanliness of the cutlery. The fault in this was all his. The food, he knew, had been as good as Lily said it was, the occasion had been as good as the staff were able to make it. He had denied himself the enjoyment of it all by letting the words he was saving for later obliterate the evening. And now, he had lost the urge to speak them. Was no longer sure it would have been the right thing to do.

"Shall we get the bill?" he said.

It was a cold night but bright and Lily suggested they pay off the taxi and walk the last few streets to their house.

"It's been the most perfect evening," she said, as they walked.

"You chose well," said Rob. "I could tell you really enjoyed what you ate."

"I did," she said. And of course, she thought, she should not have done. Knowing what she had planned to say would be a bitter blow to Rob. But perhaps, knowing she was going to say it, had helped her to relax, to enjoy everything that was right, about Rob, about their relationship. So now, with this new perspective, there was no need for her to speak. She put her hand through Rob's arm and rubbed her cheek on his shoulder.

As they reached the door, Rob said:" I've been thinking. Perhaps we should get an allotment. Grow all those roots you like so much."

"That's extraordinary!" said Lily. "I was going to say the same thing."

A Compassionate Man

Martin's mother phoned at 6.30 in the morning to tell him his grandmother was dying. It was an unfortunate day for her to have chosen, Martin thought (his grandmother, that is; he did not blame his mother), for two reasons. Firstly, it was the day after a particularly good party. Secondly, it was hot; a close, breathless, hugging type of heat lasting for days. Despite both of these compelling reasons for staying in bed, Martin caught the 7.36 train from Paddington to Didcot Parkway.

The train was packed. Martin stood, together with three other adults and two teenagers, in the lobby of the quiet coach. It was hotter here than in the air-conditioned carriages, but the aisles of the carriages either side of them were already festooned with standing passengers looming over the lucky seated. Had Martin been one of the lucky ones, he would have fallen asleep. As well as Buck's Fizz, sangria and whatever drink was available in a screw-top bottle, the party had given him the opportunity to indulge in skateboarding round the underground parking at the block of flats where it was being held. Where there were brilliant ramps but rather too many cars. He was aware of bruises waiting until the headache and the heat had subsided to deliver their full quota of discomfort.

Of course it was possible his grandmother was not dying. This was not the first time he had been summoned, in these circumstances. Whenever her medical attendants or, more commonly, his grandmother herself, declared the end to be near, his mother called him and he came.

"Why?" asked Zoe, when he woke her up looking for his socks. "I thought you detested her."

It was true that, as long as he could remember, his grandmother had been the pebble in his shoe that prevented him walking straight. She, for her part, hated all mankind and he had no reason to believe that did not include him. He had no expectations of an inheritance. If his grandmother had any money left - and she would probably make sure she didn't die until she had spent every penny she had on the fees for the Home and could feel safe in the knowledge that she was not conferring any benefit on anyone through her departure – if she had by chance any money left, it would go to his mother, who deserved and needed it.

"You just want to be there at the end," said Zoe. "Make sure she's gone."

Martin thought maybe this was true.

The man on the flip-down seat next to Martin had a bald head beaded with droplets of sweat like a blush-pink rose after rain. The woman opposite him tugged at the top of her blouse, pulling it away from her breasts and blowing down her front. The man beside her wore a white shirt damp enough and tight enough to show every filament of his curly chest hair. The teenagers were playing with their phones. Martin shut his eyes. Before he was aware of having fallen asleep, the man with the bald head shoved him awake. The woman laughed.

"Trains always send me to sleep," she said. "I once slept all the way from Prague to Copenhagen. Think of the wonderful scenery I missed!"

"I'm only going to Didcot Parkway," Martin said.

His grandmother had chosen to live in a Nursing Home in Didcot entirely, Martin believed, because it was as badly run and colourless an example of the category as could be found in the Home Counties. His grandmother lived to complain. If there was nothing to complain about, her life would be impoverished. Maybe, Martin thought, the Home had been taken over by a team with vision and energy; by staff who cared, who employed cooks capable of cooking and cleaners with

enough know-how and dedication to eliminate the smell of urine and the stains on the upholstery. If that was so, his grandmother would have nothing left to live for.

"Mind you don't miss your stop," said the man.

Martin's mother would have explained the purpose of the journey to these strangers.

"My mother is dying," she would have said. "I hope I reach her in time." The other passengers would have responded to his mother as strangers always did, with compassion and interest. Her smile, her faded yet cheerful appearance, her way of implying that whoever she was speaking to was a person she looked up to, whose opinion she would cherish, meant she met with friendship wherever she went. Long before the train reached Didcot, this small group of random travellers would have shared their thoughts and experiences on parents and grandparents, childhood, nursing homes and death.

Martin could never understand how his grandmother had had so little influence on her own child. While his mother reached out and drew people to her, his grandmother would come no closer to anyone outside her family than was necessary to detect the faults which enabled her to complain about them. She never complained about Martin or his mother; she rolled her eyes instead. She was a maestro in the art of eye-rolling, able to convey a burden of contempt, frustration and disappointment in the orbit of the pale blue iris round the veined globe of white.

In the train, no one spoke. If the woman wanted to tell them the purpose of the journey from Prague to Copenhagen she wasn't bold enough to do so without being asked, and no one asked. Martin felt his eyes beginning to shut. To keep awake, he began to recite to himself the names of all the places beginning with P from which his journey could have started, instead of from Paddington. Or Prague.

Plotz, Potsdam, Paris, Pitlochry, Preston, Perm, Penzance……

The conductor came down the train and checked tickets. He was a curly-headed dwarf of a man with a mouthful of white, white teeth peeping chaotically through his plump lips. His smile was a thing of such sweetness it was as welcome as a breeze. Or a soft pillow.

"No chance you could let us sit in First Class, I suppose," said the man with the white shirt.

"You'd have to pay the extra," said the conductor, looking sad.

"It's outrageous," said the white shirt, but without conviction.

"Wait until Reading," said the conductor, looking more cheerful. "There'll be seats then. You'll be all right."

"If I sit down," said Martin. "I'll fall asleep and miss my stop."

"Don't you worry," said the conductor. "I'll watch out for you."

Pretoria, Portsmouth, Panama City, Plockton, Plymouth, Port Stanley, Passchendale (was that a place or just a battle?)…….

The train stopped at Reading and the schoolboys got out. The white shirt, the blouse and the bald head dispersed to empty seats.

"Not long to go now," said the curly, smiling conductor. "Give yourself a break. Sit down for five minutes."

"What time do we reach Didcot?"

"8.16"

"OK," said Martin, "I'll sit down at 8.11."

Penzance, Portadown, Park Royal, St Petersburg (was that cheating?) Pennsylvania, Palo Alto…..

He had been brought up by his mother and grandmother; he was the iron filings clumping now at the positive now at the negative end of the familial magnet. As an adult, he vowed, he would adopt the middle ground. He would become a man who cared, without being soft. Who recognised faults but was compassionate. He had a year of training left, then he would become a GP; he could picture himself leaning towards patients in distress, mental or physical, and making them feel, mentally or physically, better. Zoe was planning to become a paediatrician.

"Children smell better than adults," she said.

He went into the quiet coach and stood by the luggage rack. Although it was cooler in here, it was not cool. The papers pressed into use as fans were like a flock of birds weaving in and out of the seated passengers. Martin felt his eyes closing.

Palma, Philadelphia, Plymouth, Pretoria (had he had that already?), Port Stanley, Peterborough…..

He went back to the lobby and rested his head on the window glass until it steamed up, then walked on the spot until his watch hands crawled round to ten past the hour. Then he went into the quiet coach and sat down.

There were steps down from the platform; white, uneven steps jiggling about as he tried to put his foot on them, shaking him from side to side and making a noise that sounded like…..

"Sir! Sir! Sir!"

He was face to face with the conductor's uneven teeth in the centre of the conductor's endearing smile.

"Didcot Parkway," said the conductor, as one might claim 'housey! housey!" at the bingo. Then his smile vanished and a look of compassion swept across his face.

"Tell me you didn't need to be in Didcot at a quarter past eight?" he pleaded. "Not an important meeting, was it?"

"It wasn't a meeting," said Martin, struggling upright and wondering what felt so different from a moment ago, when he fell asleep. "Visiting my grandmother."

The smile broke through again. "Well, now! She'll still be there, waiting for you."

A flash from outside the carriage illuminated the sparkling teeth. Within seconds there was a clap of thunder and the rain began to drum on the roof and bounce, gleaming, off the rails.

"Hurry along, now," said the conductor. "Don't keep Granny waiting. She'll have expected you hours ago."

"What do you mean? Has the train been delayed?"

"Not by as much as a minute!" said the conductor. "We kept to the timetable, all the way to Cheltenham, all the way back. Here we are, just as expected, 12.02 at Didcot."

"Why didn't you wake me?" asked Martin. "You knew I wanted to get off at Didcot!"

"Oh, I tried. I stopped short of a bucket of water and physical force, I grant you. But they could have heard me yelling as far away as Swindon. I thought the cleaning staff would do it, at Cheltenham, but no! They might as well have sung you lullabies, bless you, sir. So back you came with us to Didcot, and here you are, all ready to visit Granny. She will be pleased."

"Actually," said Martin, "I think she may be dying. She may be dead." As he spoke it struck him that that might, after all, be true. But the conductor shook his head.

"She'll wait for you," he said. "Only, you must hurry."

Martin staggered onto the platform, breathed in the smell of rain on hot, dry surfaces. He had no umbrella and no coat, but the Nursing Home was only a few streets away. He started to run.

Hope

The valley lies in the embrace of rolling uplands to the south and rocky slabs of cliff to the north. Approaching from the south, anyone travelling on the drovers' road running along the ridge above could look down on its fields and river. He would be able to see where the next three hours of walking will take him: a gentle slope down to a flat plain, across a ford to food, drink and company. After this, the journey north will be harder; a steep climb up a narrow track cut deep into the rock where the sun never reaches. But this path is hidden in a fold of cliff, and from here there is only the prospect of an easy journey to the settlement – for where there is a valley, and a river, a ford across that river, and a layer of soil for grass to grow, there will be a settlement.

The one laid out before the tired traveller is built mainly of stone, for stone is plentiful. The largest and the finest of the stone buildings is a church. It sits on a ledge of land where the valley floor starts its long, gentle journey up to the peaks of the northern hills. It is a plain design, in comparison to the great cathedrals built elsewhere in the same century. In comparison to the houses the craftsmen who built it built for themselves and their neighbours, it represents skill and energy beyond the ordinary. It has a square tower, domed window openings, and the doorway is shaped by concentric arches tapering into the thickness of the wall. There is no decoration in the stonework, but the door is a slab of oak elaborately carved with the descent of the damned into hell. A column of naked men, women and children writhes across the surface from the top outside edge to the bottom hinge, each individual figure twisted and open-mouthed in terror. Around the column, so that every inch of the door is covered with carving, are devils, laughing.

The entrance to the church faces west and the door blocks the light of the setting sun. Inside, it is dark. It is always dark; the windows are small and the glass is thick. Only at that hour of the morning when the sun first rises and shines directly through the distorting prism of the window above the altar does some brightness fall on the pews and the monuments. Now, it is evening. The sun is lingering over the tormented souls on the door but inside the church there is not enough light to show clearly what sort of creature it is pacing the cold stone floor in the centre of the nave. Only the pitch of the cries she utters as she walks, suggest this is a woman.

Her name is Alice and she is in labour. She has chosen this place to give birth because it is a holy place and she is so full of hopes and fears for the child she carries she wants the spirits to be gathered close around her to bless the first breath it takes. She is a sinner, so they say, and if by giving birth alone, in the hard, cold dark of a sanctified building she can acknowledge and expiate the sin, maybe the baby will be spared punishment for her wickedness. She is praying, as she walks, that her hopes may be fulfilled and her fears washed away with her guilt.

She hopes that the child will live; fears that it might not. She hopes it will have two arms. The father has only one arm and though she has heard it was an accident that deprived him of the other in childhood, she cannot look at him and imagine him as a person once formed as other men are. It is as hard to imagine that a child of his – especially if it is a boy – will be so unlike him in this respect.

She hopes the child will be loved. She has little experience of this but she knows how it feels to be unloved and the cries she utters as she walks to and fro are partly from physical pain and partly from the anguish she feels at the thought of her own child being left without a soul to speak softly to it, to cradle it and soothe it. She has no hope that she will be able to love the child because she expects that she will die in giving birth. This is not a fear, it is a belief.

She hopes, without much hope, that the child will live its life through without knowing hunger, or extreme, long-lasting pain or cold. She stops walking, lifts her head, arches her back, stretches herself. She is a vessel and must be straight and strong and sound until she is no longer needed.

In a niche in the stonework to her right is a carved wooden statue of Christ on the cross. The craftsman is the same as he who made the doors; she knows this because his life is on the edge of living memory and he is spoken of still. If her baby lives, and is whole, it is possible he could be or do something which would mean he, too, would be spoken of long years after his death. But she cannot reach so far beyond her own life to hope for so much.

The Christ, like the souls on the door, has a face and figure expressive of agony, but without the terror. Alice turns her head to the wooden figure of the Virgin Mary in the niche on the opposite side of the quire. The wooden folds of her robe are wonderfully wrought, but the carver was less skilful in depicting love and sympathy than he was in expressing pain and fear. The virgin's face is peevish, her eyes cast down as if in disgust at the dirt on the floor.

On the wall is a slab of stone bearing an inscription praising the lives led by the men of the de Chace family whose bones are interred below the place where Alice stands. Across the top of this stone is a shield bearing the family coat of arms, and on either side of the shield is a dog. The stone carver does not have the wood carver's skills and has failed to convey the menace and aggression of a hunting dog, as these are surely meant to be. They look domestic. Although their mouths are open, they look more likely to lick than to bite. Insofar as a type of dog can be detected in the crude stonework, they would appear to be one with the rough coated, floppy-eared village mongrels. Alice cannot read, so the words on the slab mean nothing to her, but she likes dogs. She would feel closer to the animals than the noble lords, if they were all to come alive and step down off the wall or out from under the stone to join her. She holds her position, waiting for the next contraction, sharing the moment with them.

The light fades completely. She kneels then crouches, elbows on the floor, forearms stretched out, whimpering her way through the surge of pain. As it fades, she hears the creak of the wood and the groan of the heavy metal hinges as the door of the church opens. She tries to stand but falls back and curls up on the hard stone, watching it swing slowly inwards until there is a figure silhouetted against the night sky by the newly-risen moon. It is lopsided, lacks a left arm.

"Alice?" he says. "Alice?"

He kneels beside her and puts his one hand on her shoulder. It is only the second time he has touched her, the first time since the May Day celebration when she had fallen, overwhelmed by need, and by compassion. Afterwards, it felt as if this was an act committed by her alone, as if she and he had been performing a dance and the movements she made were quite separate from the movements he made. The music she heard was in her ears only. She accepted that the sin and the consequences of the sin were hers and she had not named him or let the thought of him come between her and the knowledge of her wickedness. She had stepped aside when he approached, turned her head away when he spoke to her.

Now here he is, beside her in the dark. A contraction comes and she cries out, concentrating on managing the pain. When it has gone he is no longer within reach but she can hear him somewhere far off in the church. There is the scraping sound of a tinderbox and then a spark and then light. There are four candles in the church, beside the altar, the priest's chair, on the pulpit. He lights them all. The flames make swaying patches of brightness and deep, deep shadows beyond their reach. She rolls herself onto her back and lifts herself up on her arms. He comes back to her

side with the embroidered kneelers from the boxed pews where the de Chace family sit, and piles them up behind her back. Then he brings armfuls of cloth, vestments and coverings for the altar.

"They'll be spoiled," she says.

"They can be made clean again, afterwards."

He lays them out on the floor beneath her and the relief from the cold of the stone is like a mouthful of bread after more than a day without food.

She had thought to sacrifice herself to her sin and do this thing alone, but now he has come it seems hardly possible she could. She puts a hand into the pocket sewn inside her skirt and pulls out a knife.

"What will you do with that?" he asks.

"Cut the cord. If I can't do it, you must."

"I'll do whatever you tell me."

"You must be ready," she says. "Catch him. Don't let him die too."

"No one will die." She looks at his left side where the candle flame wavers over an empty sleeve. She fears he will not manage to do what he has to do with the one hand left to him.

"You must hold his head," she says. "Don't let him fall."

"I haven't lost many lambs. I've never lost a ewe."

The pains keep coming. She thinks it would be a relief to die now, but she cannot let herself go without seeing the baby safely into the world so she buries herself in the pain. She lets herself think of nothing but the pain and its purpose for which she is the necessary vessel. She loses all sense of time passing, of the man at her side, the guttering candles, the cold of the floor seeping through the priest's robes. She is a glass jar such as the woman she lives with keeps over the mantle filled with spills to take a flame from the fire to light the rush lamps. She is the jar and the spills and the flame.

He whispers her name: "Alice, Alice."

She knows it is time for the baby to be born and she must think not of the hurting but of the effort: the push, push, push to make this thing happen.

"Not long now," she says.

"I'm ready."

When the moment comes it is a mountain she cannot cross or a river she cannot ford, until, of a sudden, she is over the top, on the other side and the child has been born. In the instant, he has lifted it onto her breast and she is looking into a face she feels she has known for all eternity. He cuts the cord and bundles the afterbirth up in one of the cloths, wrapping the infant in another, as the tiny mouth opens to let out the first cry.

The baby has two arms. It has a strong voice and a look to it that says he is determined to survive.

"I'll name him Connor," she says. "After you."

"She's a girl," he says, his one hand covering hers as it rests on the baby's back.

"Then I'll call her Hope."

The sun rises above the hills and reaches in over the altar to the nave where the little family is gathered. It leaves the faces of the Christ and the Virgin in shadow but lights up the smiling dogs on the wall. It is a new day. Time for the traveller to leave the shelter of the valley and find the steep, narrow, rocky track that leads onwards.

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