Telling Tales

The AQA Anthology of Modern Short Stories

Contents

Chemistry

Graham Swift

The pond in our park was circular, exposed, perhaps fifty yards across. When the wind blew, little waves travelled across it and slapped the paved edges, like a miniature sea. We would go there, Mother, Grandfather and I, to sail the motor-launch Grandfather and l made out of plywood, balsawood and varnished paper. We would go even in the winter - especially in the winter, because then we would have the pond to ourselves - when the leaves on the two willows turned yellow and dropped and the water froze your hands. Mother would sit on a wooden bench set back from the perimeter; l would prepare the boat for launching. Grandfather, in his black coat and grey scarf, would walk to the far side to receive it. For some reason it was always Grandfather, never I, who went to the far to side. When he reached his station I would hear his 'Ready!' across the water. A puff of vapour would rise from his lips like the smoke from a muffled pistol. And I would release the launch. It worked by a battery. Its progress was laboured but its course steady. I would watch it head out to the middle while Mother watched behind me. As it moved it seemed that it followed an actual existing line between Grandfather, myself and Mother, as if Grandfather were pulling us toward him on some invisible cord, and that he had to do this to prove we were not beyond his reach. When the boat drew near him he would crouch on his haunches. His hands- which I knew were knotted, veiny and mottled from an accident in one of his chemical experiments - would reach out, grasp it and set it on its return.

The voyages were trouble-free. Grandfather improvised a wire grapnel on the end of a length of fishing line in case of shipwrecks or engine failure, but it was never used. Then one day- it must have been soon after Mother met Ralph - we watched the boat, on its first trip across the pond to Grandfather, suddenly become deeper, and deeper in the water. The motor cut. The launch wallowed, sank. Grandfather made several throws with his grapnel and pulled out clumps of green slime. I remember what he said to me, on this, the first loss in my life that I had witnessed. He said, very gravely: 'You must accept it – you can't get it back - it's the only way,' as if he were repeating something to himself. And I remember Mother's face as she got up from the bench to leave. It was very still and very white, as if she had seen something appalling.

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It was some months after that Ralph, who was now a regular guest at weekends, shouted over the table to Grandfather: 'Why don't you leave her alone?!'

I remember it because that same Saturday Grandfather recalled the wreck of my boat, and Ralph said to me, as if pouncing on something: 'How about me buying you a new one? How would you like that?' And I said, just to see his face go crestfallen and blank, 'No!', several times, fiercely. Then as we ate supper Ralph suddenly barked, as Grandfather was talking to Mother: 'Why don't you leave her alone?!'

Grandfather looked at him. 'Leave her alone? What do you know about being left alone?' Then he glanced from Ralph to Mother. And Ralph didn't answer, but his face went tight and his hands clenched on his knife and fork.

And all this was because Grandfather had said to Mother: 'You don't make curry any more, the way you did for Alec, the way Vera taught you.'

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It was Grandfather's house we lived in - with Ralph as an ever more permanent lodger. Grandfather and Grandmother had lived in it almost since the day of their marriage. My grandfather had worked for a firm which manufactured gold and silver-plated articles. My grandmother died suddenly when I was only four; and all I know is that I must have had her looks. My mother said so and so did my father; and Grandfather, without saying anything, would often gaze curiously into my face.

At that time Mother, Father and I lived in a new house some distance from Grandfather's. Grandfather took his wife's death very badly. He needed the company of his daughter and so my father; but he refused to leave the house in which my grandmother had lived, and my parents refused to leave theirs. There was bitterness all round, which I scarcely appreciated. Grandfather remained alone in his house, which he ceased to maintain, spending more and more time in his garden shed which he had fitted out for his hobbies of model making and amateur chemistry.

The situation was resolved in a dreadful way: by my own father's death.

He was required now and then to fly to Dublin or Cork in the light aeroplane belonging to the company he worked for, which imported Irish goods. One day, in unexceptional weather conditions, the aircraft disappeared without trace into the Irish Sea. In a state which resembled a kind of trance - as if some outside force were all the time directing her - my Mother sold up our house, put away the money for our joint future, and moved in with Grandfather.

My father's death was a far less remote event than my grandmother's, but no more explicable. I was only seven. Mother said, amidst her adult grief: 'He has gone to where Grandma's gone.' I wondered how Grandmother could be at the bottom of the Irish Sea, and at the same time what Father was doing there. I wanted to know when he would return. Perhaps I knew, even as I asked this, that he never would, that my childish assumptions were only a way of allaying my own grief. But if I really believed Father was gone for ever - I was wrong.

Perhaps too I was endowed with my father's looks no less than my grandmother's. Because when my mother looked at me she would often break into uncontrollable tears and she would clasp me for long periods without letting go, as if afraid I might turn to air.

I don't know if Grandfather took a secret, vengeful delight in my father's death, or if he was capable of it. But fate had made him and his daughter quits and reconciled them in mutual grief. Their situations were equivalent: she a widow and he a widower. And just as my mother could see in me a vestige of my father, so Grandfather could see in the two of us a vestige of my grandmother.

For about a year we lived quietly, calmly, even contentedly within the scope of this sad symmetry. We scarcely made any contact with the outside world. Grandfather still worked, though his retirement age had passed, and would not let Mother work. He kept Mother and me as he might have kept his own wife and son. Even when he did retire we lived quite comfortably on his pension, some savings and a widow's pension my mother got. Grandfather's health showed signs of weakening - he became rheumatic and sometimes short of breath - but he would still go out to the shed in the garden to conduct his chemical experiments, over which he hummed and chuckled gratefully to himself.

We forgot we were three generations. Grandfather bought Mother bracelets and ear-rings. Mother called me her 'little man'. We lived for each other - and for those two unfaded memories - and for a whole year, a whole harmonious year, we were really quite happy. Until that day in the park when my boat, setting out across the pond towards Grandfather, sank.

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Sometimes when Grandfather provoked Ralph I thought Ralph would be quite capable of jumping to his feet, reaching across the table, seizing Grandfather by the throat and choking him. He was a big man, who ate heartily, and I was often afraid he might hit me. But Mother somehow kept him in check. Since Ralph's appearance she had grown neglectful of Grandfather. For example - as Grandfather had pointed out that evening - she would cook the things that Ralph liked (rich, thick stews, but not curry) and forget to produce the meals that Grandfather was fond of. But no matter how neglectful and even hurtful she might be to Grandfather herself, she wouldn't have forgiven someone else's hurting him. It would have been the end of her and Ralph. And no matter how much she might hurt Grandfather - to show her allegiance to Ralph - the truth was she really did want to stick by him. She still needed - she couldn't break free of it - this delicate equilibrium that she, he and I had constructed over the months.

I suppose the question was how far Ralph could tolerate not letting go with Grandfather so as to keep Mother, or how far Mother was prepared to turn against Grandfather so as not to lose Ralph. I

remember keeping a sort of equation in my head: if Ralph hurts Grandfather it means I'm right - he doesn't really care about Mother at all; but if Mother is cruel to Grandfather (though she would only be cruel to him because she couldn't forsake him) it means she really loves Ralph.

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But Ralph only went pale and rigid and stared at Grandfather without moving.

Grandfather picked at his stew. We had already finished ours. He deliberately ate slowly to to provoke Ralph.

Then Ralph turned to Mother and said: 'For Christ's sake we're not waiting all night for him to finish!' Mother blinked and looked frightened. 'Get the pudding!'

You see, he liked his food.

Mother rose slowly and gathered our plates. She looked at me and said, 'Come and help'.

In the kitchen she put down the plates and leaned for several seconds, her back towards me, against the draining board. Then she turned. 'What am I going to do?' She gripped my shoulders. I remembered these were just the words she'd used once before, very soon after father's death, and then, too, her face had had the same quivery look of being about to spill over. She pulled me towards her. I had a feeling of being back in that old impregnable domain which Ralph had not yet penetrated. Through the window, half visible in the twilight, the evergreen shrubs which filled our garden were defying the onset of autumn. Only the cherry-laurel bushes were partly denuded - for some reason Grandfather had been picking their leaves. I didn't know what to do or say - I should have said something - but inside I was starting to form a plan.

Mother took her hands from me and straightened up. Her face was composed again. She took the apple-crumble from the oven. Burnt sugar and apple juice seethed for a moment on the edge of the dish. She handed me the bowl of custard. We strode, resolutely, back to the table. I thought: now we are going to face Ralph, now we are going to show our solidarity. Then she put down the crumble, began spooning out helpings and said to Grandfather, who was still tackling his stew: 'You're ruining our meal - do you want to take yours out to your shed?!'

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Grandfather's shed was more than just a shed. Built of brick in one corner of the high walls surrounding the garden, it was large enough to accommodate a stove, a sink, an old armchair, as well as Grandfather's work-benches and apparatus, and to serve - as it was serving Grandfather more and more - as a miniature home.

I was always wary of entering it. It seemed to me, even before Ralph, even when Grandfather and I constructed the model launch, that it was somewhere where Grandfather went to be alone, undisturbed, to commune perhaps, in some obscure way, with my dead grandmother. But that evening I did not hesitate. I walked along the path by the ivy-clad garden wall. It seemed that his invitation, his loneliness were written in a form only I could read on the dark green door. And when I opened it he said: 'I thought you would come.'

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I don't think Grandfather practised chemistry for any particular reason. He studied it from curiosity and for solace, as some people study the structure of cells under a microscope or watch the changing formation of clouds. In those weeks after Mother drove him out I learnt from Grandfather the fundamentals of chemistry.

I felt safe in his shed. The house where Ralph now lorded it, tucking into bigger and bigger meals, was a menacing place. The shed was another, a sealed-off world. It had a salty, mineral, unhuman smell. Grandfather's flasks, tubes and retort stands would be spread over his work-bench. His chemicals were acquired through connections in the metal-plating trade. The stove would be lit in the

corner. Beside it would be his meal tray - for, to shame Mother, Grandfather had taken to eating his meals regularly in the shed. A single electric light bulb hung from a beam in the roof. A gas cylinder fed his bunsen. On one wall was a glass fronted cupboard in which he grew alum and copper sulphate crystals.

I would watch Grandfather's experiments. I would ask him to explain what he was doing and to name the contents of his various bottles.

And Grandfather wasn't the same person in his shed as he was in the house - sour and cantankerous. He was a weary, ailing man who winced now and then because of his rheumatism and spoke with quiet self-absorption.

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'What are you making, Grandpa?'

'Not making - changing. Chemistry is the science of change. You don't make things in chemistry - you change them. Anything can change.'

He demonstrated the point of dissolving marble chips in nitric acid. I watched fascinated.

But he went on: 'Anything can change. Even gold can change.'

He poured a little of the nitric acid into a beaker, then took another jar of colourless liquid and added some of its contents to the nitric acid. He stirred the mixture with a glass rod and heated it gently. Some brown fumes came off.

'Hydrochloric acid and nitric acid. Neither would work by itself, but the mixture will.'

Lying on the bench was a pocket watch with a gold chain. I knew it had been given to Grandfather long ago by my grandmother. I unclipped the chain from the watch, then, leaning forward against the bench, he held it between two fingers over the beaker. The chain swung. He eyed me as if he were waiting for me to give some sign. Then he drew the chain away from the beaker.

'You'll have to take my word for it, eh?'

He picked up the watch and reattached it to the chain.

'My old job - gold plating. We used to take real gold and change it.

Then we'd take something that wasn't gold at all and cover it with this changed gold so it looked as if it was all gold - but it wasn't.'

He smiled bitterly.

'What are we going to do?'

'Grandpa?'

'People change too, don't they?'

He came close to me. I was barely ten. I looked at him without speaking.

'Don't they?'

He stared flxedly into my eyes, the way I remembered him doing after Grandmother's death.

'They change. But the elements don't change. Do you know what an element is? Gold's an element. We turned it from one form into another, but we didn't make any gold - or lose any.'

Then I had a strange sensation. It seemed to me that Grandfather's face before me was only a cross section from some infinite stick of rock, from which, at the right point, Mother's face and mine might also be cut. I thought: every face is like this. I had a sudden giddying feeling that there is no end to anything. I wanted to be told simple, precise facts.

'What's that, Grandpa?'

'Hydrochloric acid.'

'And that?'

'Green vitriol.'

'And that?' I pointed to another unlabelled jar of clear liquid, which stood at the end of the bench, attached to a complex piece of apparatus.

'Laurel water. Prussic acid.' He smiled. 'Not for drinking.'

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All that autumn was exceptionally cold. The evenings were chill and full of the rustling of leaves. When I returned to the house from taking out Grandfather's meal tray (this had become my duty) I would observe Mother and Ralph in the living room through the open kitchen hatchway. They would drink a lot from the bottles of whisky and vodka which Ralph brought in and which at first Mother made a show of disapproving. The drink made Mother go soft and heavy and blurred and it made Ralph gain in authority. They would slump together on the sofa. One night I watched Ralph pull Mother towards him and hold her in his arms, his big lurching frame almost enveloping her, and Mother saw me, over Ralph's shoulder, watching from the hatchway. She looked trapped and helpless.

And that was the night that I got my chance - when I went to collect Grandfather's tray. When I entered the shed he was asleep in his chair, his plates, barely touched, on the tray at his feet. In his slumber - his hair dishevelled, mouth open - he looked like some torpid, captive animal that has lost even the will to eat. I had taken an empty spice jar from the kitchen. I took the glass bottle labelled HNO and poured some of its contents, carefully, into the spice jar. Then I picked up Grandfather's tray, placed the spice jar beside the plates and carried the tray to the house.

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I thought I would throw the acid in Ralph's face at breakfast. I didn't want to kill him. It would have been pointless to kill him - since death is a deceptive business. I wanted to spoil his face so Mother would no longer want him. I took the spice jar to my room and hid it in my bedside cupboard. In the morning I would smuggle it down in my trouser pocket. I would wait, pick my moment. Under the table I would remove the stopper. As Ralph gobbled down his eggs and fried bread...

I thought I would not be able to sleep. From my bedroom window I could see the dark square of the garden and the little patch of light cast from the window of Grandfather's shed. Often I could not sleep until I had seen that patch of light disappear and I knew that Grandfather had shuffled back to the house and slipped in, like a stray cat, at the back door.

But I must have slept that night, for I do not remember seeing Grandfather's light go out or hearing his steps on the garden path.

That night Father came to my bedroom. I knew it was him. His hair and clothes were wet, his lips were caked with salt; seaweed hung from his shoulders. He came and stood by my bed. Where he trod, pools of water formed on the carpet and slowly oozed outwards. For a long time he looked at me. Then he said: 'It was her. She made a hole in the bottom of the boat, not big enough to notice, so it would sink - so you and Grandfather would watch it sink. The boat sank - like my plane.' He gestured to his dripping clothes and encrusted lips. 'Don't you believe me?' He held out a hand to me but I was

afraid to take it. 'Don't you believe me? Don't you believe me?' And as he repeated this he walked slowly backwards towards the door, as if something were pulling him, the pools of water at his feet drying instantly. And it was only when he disappeared that I managed to speak and said: 'Yes. I believe you. I'll prove it.'

And then it was almost light and rain was dashing against the window as if the house were plunging under water and a strange, small voice was calling from the front of the house - but it wasn't Father's voice. I got up, walked out onto the landing and peered through the landing window. The voice was a voice on the radio inside an ambulance which was parked with its doors open by the pavement. The heavy rain and the tossing branches of a rowan tree obscured my view, but I saw the two men in uniform carrying out the stretcher with a blanket draped over it. Ralph was with them. He was wearing his dressing gown and pyjamas and slippers over bare feet, and he carried an umbrella. He fussed around the ambulance men like an overseer directing the loading of some vital piece of cargo. He called something to Mother who must have been standing below, out of sight at the front door. I ran back across the landing. I wanted to get the acid. But then Mother came up the stairs. She was wearing her dressing gown. She caught me in her arms. I smelt whisky. She said: 'Darling. Please, I'll explain. Darling. darling.'

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But she never did explain. All her life since then, I think, she has been trying to explain, or to avoid explaining. She only said: 'Grandpa was old and ill, he wouldn't have lived much longer anyway.' And there was the official verdict: suicide by swallowing prussic acid. But all the other things that should have been explained - or confessed - she never did explain.

And she wore, beneath everything, this look of relief, as if she had recovered from an illness. Only a week after Grandfather's funeral she went into Grandfather's bedroom and flung wide the windows. It was a brilliant, crisp late-November day and the leaves on the rowan tree were all gold. And she said: 'There - isn't that lovely?'

The day of Grandfather's funeral had been such a day - hard, dazzling, spangled with early frost and gold leaves. We stood at the ceremony, Mother, Ralph and I, like a mock version of the trio - Grandfather, Mother and I - who had once stood at my father's memorial service. Mother did not cry. She had not cried at all, even in the days before the funeral when the policemen and the officials from the coroner's court came, writing down their statements, apologising for their intrusion and asking their questions.

They did not address their questions to me. Mother said: 'He's only ten, what can he know?' Though there were a thousand things I wanted to tell them - about how Mother banished Grandfather, about how suicide can be murder and how things don't end – which made me feel that I was somehow under suspicion. I took the jar of acid from my bedroom, went to the park and threw it in the pond.

And then after the funeral, after the policemen and officials had gone, Mother and Ralph began to clear out the house and to remove the things from the shed. They tidied the overgrown parts of the garden and clipped back the trees. Ralph wore an old sweater which was far too small for him and I recognised it as one of Father's. And Mother said: 'We're going to move to a new house soon - Ralph's buying it.'

I had nowhere to go. I went down to the park and stood by the pond. Dead willow leaves floated on it. Beneath its surface was a bottle of acid and the wreck of my launch. But though things change they aren't destroyed. It was there, by the pond, when dusk was gathering and it was almost time for the park gates to be locked, as I looked to the centre where my launch sank, then up again to the far side, that I saw him. He was standing in his black overcoat and his grey scarf. The air was very cold and little waves were running across the water. He was smiling, and I knew: the launch was still travelling over to him, unstoppable, unsinkable, along that invisible line. And his hands, his acid-marked hands, would reach out to receive it.

Odour of Chrysanthemums

D. H. Lawrence

I

The small locomotive engine, Number 4, came clanking, stumbling down from Selston — with seven full waggons. It appeared round the corner with loud threats of speed, but the colt that it startled from among the gorse, which still flickered indistinctly in the raw afternoon, outdistanced it at a canter. A woman, walking up the railway line to Underwood, drew back into the hedge, held her basket aside, and watched the footplate of the engine advancing. The trucks thumped heavily past, one by one, with slow inevitable movement, as she stood insignificantly trapped between the jolting black waggons and the hedge; then they curved away towards the coppice where the withered oak leaves dropped noiselessly, while the birds, pulling at the scarlet hips beside the track, made off into the dusk that had already crept into the spinney. In the open, the smoke from the engine sank and cleaved to the rough grass. The fields were dreary and forsaken, and in the marshy strip that led to the whimsey, a reedy pit-pond, the fowls had already abandoned their run among the alders, to roost in the tarred fowl-house. The pit-bank loomed up beyond the pond, flames like red sores licking its ashy sides, in the afternoon's stagnant light. Just beyond rose the tapering chimneys and the clumsy black head-stocks of Brinsley Colliery. The two wheels were spinning fast up against the sky, and the winding-engine rapped out its little spasms. The miners were being turned up.

The engine whistled as it came into the wide bay of railway lines beside the colliery, where rows of trucks stood in harbour.

Miners, single, trailing and in groups, passed like shadows diverging home. At the edge of the ribbed level of sidings squat a low cottage, three steps down from the cinder track. A large bony vine clutched at the house, as if to claw down the tiled roof. Round the bricked yard grew a few wintry primroses. Beyond, the long garden sloped down to a bush-covered brook course. There were some twiggy apple trees, winter-crack trees, and ragged cabbages. Beside the path hung dishevelled pink chrysanthemums, like pink cloths hung on bushes. A woman came stooping out of the felt-covered fowl-house, half-way down the garden. She closed and padlocked the door, then drew herself erect, having brushed some bits from her white apron.

She was a tall woman of imperious mien, handsome, with definite black eyebrows. Her smooth black hair was parted exactly. For a few moments she stood steadily watching the miners as they passed along the railway: then she turned towards the brook course. Her face was calm and set, her mouth was closed with disillusionment. After a moment she called:

"John!" There was no answer. She waited, and then said distinctly:

"Where are you?"

"Here!" replied a child's sulky voice from among the bushes. The woman looked piercingly through the dusk.

"Are you at that brook?" she asked sternly.

For answer the child showed himself before the raspberry-canes that rose like whips. He was a small, sturdy boy of five. He stood quite still, defiantly.

"Oh!" said the mother, conciliated. "I thought you were down at that wet brook — and you remember what I told you —"

The boy did not move or answer.

“Come, come on in,” she said more gently, “it’s getting dark. There’s your grandfather’s engine coming down the line!”

The lad advanced slowly, with resentful, taciturn movement. He was dressed in trousers and waistcoat of cloth that was too thick and hard for the size of the garments. They were evidently cut down from a man’s clothes.

As they went slowly towards the house he tore at the ragged wisps of chrysanthemums and dropped the petals in handfuls along the path.

“Don’t do that — it does look nasty,” said his mother. He refrained, and she, suddenly pitiful, broke off a twig with three or four wan flowers and held them against her face. When mother and son reached the yard her hand hesitated, and instead of laying the flower aside, she pushed it in her apron-band. The mother and son stood at the foot of the three steps looking across the bay of lines at the passing home of the miners. The trundle of the small train was imminent. Suddenly the engine loomed past the house and came to a stop opposite the gate.

The engine-driver, a short man with round grey beard, leaned out of the cab high above the woman.

“Have you got a cup of tea?” he said in a cheery, hearty fashion.

It was her father. She went in, saying she would mash. Directly, she returned.

“I didn’t come to see you on Sunday,” began the little grey-bearded man.

“I didn’t expect you,” said his daughter.

The engine-driver winced; then, reassuming his cheery, airy manner, he said:

“Oh, have you heard then? Well, and what do you think —?”

“I think it is soon enough,” she replied.

At her brief censure the little man made an impatient gesture, and said coaxingly, yet with dangerous coldness:

“Well, what’s a man to do? It’s no sort of life for a man of my years, to sit at my own hearth like a stranger. And if I’m going to marry again it may as well be soon as late — what does it matter to anybody?”

The woman did not reply, but turned and went into the house. The man in the engine-cab stood assertive, till she returned with a cup of tea and a piece of bread and butter on a plate. She went up the steps and stood near the footplate of the hissing engine.

“You needn’t ‘a’ brought me bread an’ butter,” said her father. “But a cup of tea”— he sipped appreciatively —“it’s very nice.” He sipped for a moment or two, then: “I hear as Walter’s got another bout on,” he said.

“When hasn’t he?” said the woman bitterly.

“I heered tell of him in the ‘Lord Nelson’ braggin’ as he was going to spend that b —— afore he went: half a sovereign that was.”

“When?” asked the woman.

“A’ Sat’day night — I know that’s true.”

“Very likely,” she laughed bitterly. “He gives me twenty-three shillings.”

“Aye, it’s a nice thing, when a man can do nothing with his money but make a beast of himself!” said the grey-whiskered man. The woman turned her head away. Her father swallowed the last of his tea and handed her the cup.

“Aye,” he sighed, wiping his mouth. “It’s a settler, it is —”

He put his hand on the lever. The little engine strained and groaned, and the train rumbled towards the crossing. The woman again looked across the metals. Darkness was settling over the spaces of the railway and trucks: the miners, in grey sombre groups, were still passing home. The winding-engine pulsed hurriedly, with brief pauses. Elizabeth Bates looked at the dreary flow of men, then she went indoors. Her husband did not come.

The kitchen was small and full of firelight; red coals piled glowing up the chimney mouth. All the life of the room seemed in the white, warm hearth and the steel fender reflecting the red fire. The cloth was laid for tea; cups glinted in the shadows. At the back, where the lowest stairs protruded into the room, the boy sat struggling with a knife and a piece of whitewood. He was almost hidden in the shadow. It was half-past four. They had but to await the father’s coming to begin tea. As the mother watched her son’s sullen little struggle with the wood, she saw herself in his silence and pertinacity; she saw the father in her child’s indifference to all but himself. She seemed to be occupied by her husband. He had probably gone past his home, slunk past his own door, to drink before he came in, while his dinner spoiled and wasted in waiting. She glanced at the clock, then took the potatoes to strain them in the yard. The garden and fields beyond the brook were closed in uncertain darkness. When she rose with the saucepan, leaving the drain steaming into the night behind her, she saw the yellow lamps were lit along the high road that went up the hill away beyond the space of the railway lines and the field.

Then again she watched the men trooping home, fewer now and fewer.

Indoors the fire was sinking and the room was dark red. The woman put her saucepan on the hob, and set a batter pudding near the mouth of the oven. Then she stood unmoving. Directly, gratefully, came quick young steps to the door. Someone hung on the latch a moment, then a little girl entered and began pulling off her outdoor things, dragging a mass of curls, just ripening from gold to brown, over her eyes with her hat.

Her mother chid her for coming late from school, and said she would have to keep her at home the dark winter days.

“Why, mother, it’s hardly a bit dark yet. The lamp’s not lighted, and my father’s not home.”

“No, he isn’t. But it’s a quarter to five! Did you see anything of him?”

The child became serious. She looked at her mother with large, wistful blue eyes.

“No, mother, I’ve never seen him. Why? Has he come up an’ gone past, to Old Brinsley? He hasn’t, mother, ‘cos I never saw him.”

“He’d watch that,” said the mother bitterly, “he’d take care as you didn’t see him. But you may depend upon it, he’s seated in the ‘Prince o’ Wales’. He wouldn’t be this late.”

The girl looked at her mother piteously.

“Let’s have our teas, mother, should we?” said she.

The mother called John to table. She opened the door once more and looked out across the darkness of the lines. All was deserted: she could not hear the winding-engines.

“Perhaps,” she said to herself, “he’s stopped to get some ripping done.”

They sat down to tea. John, at the end of the table near the door, was almost lost in the darkness. Their faces were hidden from each other. The girl crouched against the fender slowly moving a thick piece of bread before the fire. The lad, his face a dusky mark on the shadow, sat watching her who was transfigured in the red glow.

“I do think it’s beautiful to look in the fire,” said the child.

“Do you?” said her mother. “Why?”

“It’s so red, and full of little caves — and it feels so nice, and you can fair smell it.”

“It’ll want mending directly,” replied her mother, “and then if your father comes he’ll carry on and say there never is a fire when a man comes home sweating from the pit. — A public-house is always warm enough.”

There was silence till the boy said complainingly: “Make haste, our Annie.”

“Well, I am doing! I can’t make the fire do it no faster, can I?”

“She keeps wafflin’ it about so’s to make ‘er slow,” grumbled the boy.

“Don’t have such an evil imagination, child,” replied the mother.

Soon the room was busy in the darkness with the crisp sound of crunching. The mother ate very little. She drank her tea determinedly, and sat thinking. When she rose her anger was evident in the stern unbending of her head. She looked at the pudding in the fender, and broke out:

“It is a scandalous thing as a man can’t even come home to his dinner! If it’s crozzled up to a cinder I don’t see why I should care. Past his very door he goes to get to a public-house, and here I sit with his dinner waiting for him —”

She went out. As she dropped piece after piece of coal on the red fire, the shadows fell on the walls, till the room was almost in total darkness.

“I canna see,” grumbled the invisible John. In spite of herself, the mother laughed.

“You know the way to your mouth,” she said. She set the dustpan outside the door. When she came again like a shadow on the hearth, the lad repeated, complaining sulkily:

“I canna see.”

“Good gracious!” cried the mother irritably, “you’re as bad as your father if it’s a bit dusk!”

Nevertheless she took a paper spill from a sheaf on the mantelpiece and proceeded to light the lamp that hung from the ceiling in the middle of the room. As she reached up, her figure displayed itself just rounding with maternity.

“Oh, mother —!” exclaimed the girl.

“What?” said the woman, suspended in the act of putting the lamp glass over the flame. The copper reflector shone handsomely on her, as she stood with uplifted arm, turning to face her daughter.

“You’ve got a flower in your apron!” said the child, in a little rapture at this unusual event.

“Goodness me!” exclaimed the woman, relieved. “One would think the house was afire.” She replaced the glass and waited a moment before turning up the wick. A pale shadow was seen floating vaguely on the floor.

“Let me smell!” said the child, still rapturously, coming forward and putting her face to her mother’s waist.

“Go along, silly!” said the mother, turning up the lamp. The light revealed their suspense so that the woman felt it almost unbearable. Annie was still bending at her waist. Irritably, the mother took the flowers out from her apron-band.

“Oh, mother — don’t take them out!” Annie cried, catching her hand and trying to replace the sprig.

“Such nonsense!” said the mother, turning away. The child put the pale chrysanthemums to her lips, murmuring:

“Don’t they smell beautiful!”

Her mother gave a short laugh.

“No,” she said, “not to me. It was chrysanthemums when I married him, and chrysanthemums when you were born, and the first time they ever brought him home drunk, he’d got brown chrysanthemums in his button-hole.”

She looked at the children. Their eyes and their parted lips were wondering. The mother sat rocking in silence for some time. Then she looked at the clock.

“Twenty minutes to six!” In a tone of fine bitter carelessness she continued: “Eh, he’ll not come now till they bring him. There he’ll stick! But he needn’t come rolling in here in his pit-dirt, for *I* won’t wash him. He can lie on the floor — Eh, what a fool I’ve been, what a fool! And this is what I came here for, to this dirty hole, rats and all, for him to slink past his very door. Twice last week — he’s begun now-”

She silenced herself, and rose to clear the table.

While for an hour or more the children played, subduedly intent, fertile of imagination, united in fear of the mother’s wrath, and in dread of their father’s home-coming, Mrs Bates sat in her rocking-chair making a ‘singlet’ of thick cream-coloured flannel, which gave a dull wounded sound as she tore off the grey edge. She worked at her sewing with energy, listening to the children, and her anger wearied itself, lay down to rest, opening its eyes from time to time and steadily watching, its ears raised to listen. Sometimes even her anger quailed and shrank, and the mother suspended her sewing, tracing the footsteps that thudded along the sleepers outside; she would lift her head sharply to bid the children ‘hush’, but she recovered herself in time, and the footsteps went past the gate, and the children were not flung out of their playing world.

But at last Annie sighed, and gave in. She glanced at her waggon of slippers, and loathed the game. She turned plaintively to her mother.

“Mother!”— but she was inarticulate.

John crept out like a frog from under the sofa. His mother glanced up.

“Yes,” she said, “just look at those shirt-sleeves!”

The boy held them out to survey them, saying nothing. Then somebody called in a hoarse voice away down the line, and suspense bristled in the room, till two people had gone by outside, talking.

“It is time for bed,” said the mother.

“My father hasn’t come,” wailed Annie plaintively. But her mother was primed with courage.

“Never mind. They’ll bring him when he does come — like a log.” She meant there would be no scene. “And he may sleep on the floor till he wakes himself. I know he’ll not go to work tomorrow after this!”

The children had their hands and faces wiped with a flannel. They were very quiet. When they had put on their nightdresses, they said their prayers, the boy mumbling. The mother looked down at them, at the brown silken bush of intertwining curls in the nape of the girl’s neck, at the little black head of the lad, and her heart burst with anger at their father who caused all three such distress. The children hid their faces in her skirts for comfort.

When Mrs Bates came down, the room was strangely empty, with a tension of expectancy. She took up her sewing and stitched for some time without raising her head. Meantime her anger was tinged with fear.

II

The clock struck eight and she rose suddenly, dropping her sewing on her chair. She went to the stairfoot door, opened it, listening. Then she went out, locking the door behind her.

Something scuffled in the yard, and she started, though she knew it was only the rats with which the place was overrun. The night was very dark. In the great bay of railway lines, bulked with trucks, there was no trace of light, only away back she could see a few yellow lamps at the pit-top, and the red smear of the burning pit-bank on the night. She hurried along the edge of the track, then, crossing the converging lines, came to the stile by the white gates, whence she emerged on the road. Then the fear which had led her shrank. People were walking up to New Brinsley; she saw the lights in the houses; twenty yards further on were the broad windows of the ‘Prince of Wales’, very warm and bright, and the loud voices of men could be heard distinctly. What a fool she had been to imagine that anything had happened to him! He was merely drinking over there at the ‘Prince of Wales’. She faltered. She had never yet been to fetch him, and she never would go. So she continued her walk towards the long straggling line of houses, standing blank on the highway. She entered a passage between the dwellings.

“Mr Rigley? — Yes! Did you want him? No, he’s not in at this minute.”

The raw-boned woman leaned forward from her dark scullery and peered at the other, upon whom fell a dim light through the blind of the kitchen window.

“Is it Mrs Bates?” she asked in a tone tinged with respect.

“Yes. I wondered if your Master was at home. Mine hasn’t come yet.”

“‘Asn’t ‘e! Oh, Jack’s been ‘ome an ‘ad ‘is dinner an’ gone out. E’s just gone for ‘alf an hour afore bedtime. Did you call at the ‘Prince of Wales’?”

“No —”

“No, you didn’t like —! It’s not very nice.” The other woman was indulgent. There was an awkward pause. “Jack never said nothink about — about your Mester,” she said.

“No! — I expect he’s stuck in there!”

Elizabeth Bates said this bitterly, and with recklessness. She knew that the woman across the yard was standing at her door listening, but she did not care. As she turned:

“Stop a minute! I’ll just go an’ ask Jack if e’ knows anythink,” said Mrs Rigley.

“Oh, no — I wouldn’t like to put —!”

“Yes, I will, if you’ll just step inside an’ see as th’ childer doesn’t come downstairs and set theirselves afire.”

Elizabeth Bates, murmuring a remonstrance, stepped inside. The other woman apologized for the state of the room.

The kitchen needed apology. There were little frocks and trousers and childish undergarments on the squab and on the floor, and a litter of playthings everywhere. On the black American cloth of the table were pieces of bread and cake, crusts, slops, and a teapot with cold tea.

“Eh, ours is just as bad,” said Elizabeth Bates, looking at the woman, not at the house. Mrs Rigley put a shawl over her head and hurried out, saying:

“I shanna be a minute.”

The other sat, noting with faint disapproval the general untidiness of the room. Then she fell to counting the shoes of various sizes scattered over the floor. There were twelve. She sighed and said to herself, “No wonder!”— glancing at the litter. There came the scratching of two pairs of feet on the yard, and the Rigleys entered. Elizabeth Bates rose. Rigley was a big man, with very large bones. His head looked particularly bony. Across his temple was a blue scar, caused by a wound got in the pit, a wound in which the coal-dust remained blue like tattooing.

“Asna ‘e come whoam yit?” asked the man, without any form of greeting, but with deference and sympathy. “I couldna say wheer he is —‘e’s non ower theer!”— he jerked his head to signify the ‘Prince of Wales’.

“‘E’s ‘appen gone up to th’ ‘Yew’,” said Mrs Rigley.

There was another pause. Rigley had evidently something to get off his mind:

“Ah left ’im finishin’ a stint,” he began. “Loose-all ‘ad bin gone about ten minutes when we com’n away, an’ I shouted, ‘Are ter comin’, Walt?’ an’ ‘e said, ‘Go on, Ah shanna be but a’ef a minnit,’ so we com’n ter th’ bottom, me an’ Bowers, thinkin’ as ‘e wor just behint, an’ ‘ud come up i’ th’ next bantle –”

He stood perplexed, as if answering a charge of deserting his mate. Elizabeth Bates, now again certain of disaster, hastened to reassure him:

“I expect ‘e’s gone up to th’ ‘Yew Tree’, as you say. It’s not the first time. I’ve fretted myself into a fever before now. He’ll come home when they carry him.”

“Ay, isn’t it too bad!” deplored the other woman.

“I’ll just step up to Dick’s an’ see if ‘e IS theer,” offered the man, afraid of appearing alarmed, afraid of taking liberties.

“Oh, I wouldn’t think of bothering you that far,” said Elizabeth Bates, with emphasis, but he knew she was glad of his offer.

As they stumbled up the entry, Elizabeth Bates heard Rigley’s wife run across the yard and open her neighbour’s door. At this, suddenly all the blood in her body seemed to switch away from her heart.

“Mind!” warned Rigley. “Ah’ve said many a time as Ah’d fill up them ruts in this entry, sumb’dy ‘ll be breakin’ their legs yit.”

She recovered herself and walked quickly along with the miner.

“I don’t like leaving the children in bed, and nobody in the house,” she said.

“No, you dunna!” he replied courteously. They were soon at the gate of the cottage.

“Well, I shanna be many minnits. Dunna you be frettin’ now, ‘e’ll be all right,” said the butty.

“Thank you very much, Mr Rigley,” she replied.

“You’re welcome!” he stammered, moving away. “I shanna be many minnits.”

The house was quiet. Elizabeth Bates took off her hat and shawl, and rolled back the rug. When she had finished, she sat down. It was a few minutes past nine. She was startled by the rapid chuff of the winding-engine at the pit, and the sharp whirr of the brakes on the rope as it descended. Again she felt the painful sweep of her blood, and she put her hand to her side, saying aloud, “Good gracious! — it’s only the nine o’clock deputy going down,” rebuking herself.

She sat still, listening. Half an hour of this, and she was wearied out.

“What am I working myself up like this for?” she said pitiably to herself, “I s’ll only be doing myself some damage.”

She took out her sewing again.

At a quarter to ten there were footsteps. One person! She watched for the door to open. It was an elderly woman, in a black bonnet and a black woollen shawl — his mother. She was about sixty years old, pale, with blue eyes, and her face all wrinkled and lamentable. She shut the door and turned to her daughter-in-law peevishly.

“Eh, Lizzie, whatever shall we do, whatever shall we do!” she cried.

Elizabeth drew back a little, sharply.

“What is it, mother?” she said.

The elder woman seated herself on the sofa.

“I don’t know, child, I can’t tell you!”— she shook her head slowly. Elizabeth sat watching her, anxious and vexed.

“I don’t know,” replied the grandmother, sighing very deeply. “There’s no end to my troubles, there isn’t. The things I’ve gone through, I’m sure it’s enough —!” She wept without wiping her eyes, the tears running.

“But, mother,” interrupted Elizabeth, “what do you mean? What is it?”

The grandmother slowly wiped her eyes. The fountains of her tears were stopped by Elizabeth’s directness. She wiped her eyes slowly.

“Poor child! Eh, you poor thing!” she moaned. “I don’t know what we’re going to do, I don’t — and you as you are — it’s a thing, it is indeed!”

Elizabeth waited.

“Is he dead?” she asked, and at the words her heart swung violently, though she felt a slight flush of shame at the ultimate extravagance of the question. Her words sufficiently frightened the old lady, almost brought her to herself.

“Don’t say so, Elizabeth! We’ll hope it’s not as bad as that; no, may the Lord spare us that, Elizabeth. Jack Rigley came just as I was sittin’ down to a glass afore going to bed, an’ ‘e said, ‘‘Appen you’ll go down th’ line, Mrs Bates. Walt’s had an accident. ‘Appen you’ll go an’ sit wi’ ‘er till we can get him home.’ I hadn’t time to ask him a word afore he was gone. An’ I put my bonnet on an’ come straight down, Lizzie. I thought to myself, ‘Eh, that poor blessed child, if anybody should come an’ tell her of a sudden, there’s no knowin’ what’ll ‘appen to ‘er.’ You mustn’t let it upset you, Lizzie — or you know what to expect. How long is it, six months — or is it five, Lizzie? Ay!”— the old woman shook her head —“time slips on, it slips on! Ay!”

Elizabeth’s thoughts were busy elsewhere. If he was killed — would she be able to manage on the little pension and what she could earn? — she counted up rapidly. If he was hurt — they wouldn’t take him to the hospital — how tiresome he would be to nurse! — but perhaps she’d be able to get him away from the drink and his hateful ways. She would — while he was ill. The tears offered to come to her eyes at the picture. But what sentimental luxury was this she was beginning? — She turned to consider the children. At any rate she was absolutely necessary for them. They were her business.

“Ay!” repeated the old woman, “it seems but a week or two since he brought me his first wages. Ay — he was a good lad, Elizabeth, he was, in his way. I don’t know why he got to be such a trouble, I don’t. He was a happy lad at home, only full of spirits. But there’s no mistake he’s been a handful of trouble, he has! I hope the Lord’ll spare him to mend his ways. I hope so, I hope so. You’ve had a sight o’ trouble with him, Elizabeth, you have indeed. But he was a jolly enough lad wi’ me, he was, I can assure you. I don’t know how it is . . .”

The old woman continued to muse aloud, a monotonous irritating sound, while Elizabeth thought concentratedly, startled once, when she heard the winding-engine chuff quickly, and the brakes skirr with a shriek. Then she heard the engine more slowly, and the brakes made no sound. The old woman did not notice. Elizabeth waited in suspense. The mother-in-law talked, with lapses into silence.

“But he wasn’t your son, Lizzie, an’ it makes a difference. Whatever he was, I remember him when he was little, an’ I learned to understand him and to make allowances. You’ve got to make allowances for them —”

It was half-past ten, and the old woman was saying: “But it’s trouble from beginning to end; you’re never too old for trouble, never too old for that —” when the gate banged back, and there were heavy feet on the steps.

“I’ll go, Lizzie, let me go,” cried the old woman, rising. But Elizabeth was at the door. It was a man in pit-clothes.

“They’re bringin’ ’im, Missis,” he said. Elizabeth’s heart halted a moment. Then it surged on again, almost suffocating her.

“Is he — is it bad?” she asked.

The man turned away, looking at the darkness:

“The doctor says ‘e’d been dead hours. ‘E saw ’im i’ th’ lamp-cabin.”

The old woman, who stood just behind Elizabeth, dropped into a chair, and folded her hands, crying: “Oh, my boy, my boy!”

“Hush!” said Elizabeth, with a sharp twitch of a frown. “Be still, mother, don’t waken th’ children: I wouldn’t have them down for anything!”

The old woman moaned softly, rocking herself. The man was drawing away. Elizabeth took a step forward.

“How was it?” she asked.

“Well, I couldn’t say for sure,” the man replied, very ill at ease. “‘E wor finishin’ a stint an’ th’ butties ‘ad gone, an’ a lot o’ stuff come down atop ‘n ’im.”

“And crushed him?” cried the widow, with a shudder.

“No,” said the man, “it fell at th’ back of ’im. ‘E wor under th’ face, an’ it niver touched ’im. It shut ’im in. It seems ‘e wor smothered.”

Elizabeth shrank back. She heard the old woman behind her cry:

“What? — what did ‘e say it was?”

The man replied, more loudly: “‘E wor smothered!”

Then the old woman wailed aloud, and this relieved Elizabeth.

“Oh, mother,” she said, putting her hand on the old woman, “don’t waken th’ children, don’t waken th’ children.”

She wept a little, unknowing, while the old mother rocked herself and moaned. Elizabeth remembered that they were bringing him home, and she must be ready. “They’ll lay him in the parlour,” she said to herself, standing a moment pale and perplexed.

Then she lighted a candle and went into the tiny room. The air was cold and damp, but she could not make a fire, there was no fireplace. She set down the candle and looked round. The candle-light glittered on the lustre-glasses, on the two vases that held some of the pink chrysanthemums, and on the dark mahogany. There was a cold, deathly smell of chrysanthemums in the room. Elizabeth stood looking at the flowers. She turned away, and calculated whether there would be room to lay him on the floor, between the couch and the chiffonier. She pushed the chairs aside. There would be room to lay him down and to step round him. Then she fetched the old red tablecloth, and another old cloth, spreading them down to save her bit of carpet. She shivered on leaving the parlour; so, from the dresser-drawer she took a clean shirt and put it at the fire to air. All the time her mother-in-law was rocking herself in the chair and moaning.

“You’ll have to move from there, mother,” said Elizabeth. “They’ll be bringing him in. Come in the rocker.”

The old mother rose mechanically, and seated herself by the fire, continuing to lament. Elizabeth went into the pantry for another candle, and there, in the little penthouse under the naked tiles, she heard them coming. She stood still in the pantry doorway, listening. She heard them pass the end of the house, and come awkwardly down the three steps, a jumble of shuffling footsteps and muttering voices. The old woman was silent. The men were in the yard.

Then Elizabeth heard Matthews, the manager of the pit, say: “You go in first, Jim. Mind!”

The door came open, and the two women saw a collier backing into the room, holding one end of a stretcher, on which they could see the nailed pit-boots of the dead man. The two carriers halted, the man at the head stooping to the lintel of the door.

“Wheer will you have him?” asked the manager, a short, white-bearded man.

Elizabeth roused herself and came from the pantry carrying the unlighted candle.

“In the parlour,” she said.

“In there, Jim!” pointed the manager, and the carriers backed round into the tiny room. The coat with which they had covered the body fell off as they awkwardly turned through the two doorways, and the women saw their man, naked to the waist, lying stripped for work. The old woman began to moan in a low voice of horror.

“Lay th’ stretcher at th’ side,” snapped the manager, “an’ put ’im on th’ cloths. Mind now, mind! Look you now —!”

One of the men had knocked off a vase of chrysanthemums. He stared awkwardly, then they set down the stretcher. Elizabeth did not look at her husband. As soon as she could get in the room, she went and picked up the broken vase and the flowers.

“Wait a minute!” she said.

The three men waited in silence while she mopped up the water with a duster.

“Eh, what a job, what a job, to be sure!” the manager was saying, rubbing his brow with trouble and perplexity. “Never knew such a thing in my life, never! He’d no business to ha’ been left. I never knew such a thing in my life! Fell over him clean as a whistle, an’ shut him in. Not four foot of space, there wasn’t — yet it scarce bruised him.”

He looked down at the dead man, lying prone, half naked, all grimed with coal-dust.

“‘Sphyxiated,’ the doctor said. It IS the most terrible job I’ve ever known. Seems as if it was done o’ purpose. Clean over him, an’ shut ’im in, like a mouse-trap”— he made a sharp, descending gesture with his hand.

The colliers standing by jerked aside their heads in hopeless comment.

The horror of the thing bristled upon them all.

Then they heard the girl’s voice upstairs calling shrilly: “Mother, mother — who is it? Mother, who is it?”

Elizabeth hurried to the foot of the stairs and opened the door:

“Go to sleep!” she commanded sharply. “What are you shouting about? Go to sleep at once — there’s nothing —”

Then she began to mount the stairs. They could hear her on the boards, and on the plaster floor of the little bedroom. They could hear her distinctly:

“What’s the matter now? — what’s the matter with you, silly thing?”— her voice was much agitated, with an unreal gentleness.

“I thought it was some men come,” said the plaintive voice of the child. “Has he come?”

“Yes, they’ve brought him. There’s nothing to make a fuss about. Go to sleep now, like a good child.”

They could hear her voice in the bedroom, they waited whilst she covered the children under the bedclothes.

“Is he drunk?” asked the girl, timidly, faintly.

“No! No — he’s not! He — he’s asleep.”

“Is he asleep downstairs?”

“Yes — and don’t make a noise.”

There was silence for a moment, then the men heard the frightened child again:

“What’s that noise?”

“It’s nothing, I tell you, what are you bothering for?”

The noise was the grandmother moaning. She was oblivious of everything, sitting on her chair rocking and moaning. The manager put his hand on her arm and bade her “Sh — sh!!”

The old woman opened her eyes and looked at him. She was shocked by this interruption, and seemed to wonder.

“What time is it?”— the plaintive thin voice of the child, sinking back unhappily into sleep, asked this last question.

“Ten o’clock,” answered the mother more softly. Then she must have bent down and kissed the children.

Matthews beckoned to the men to come away. They put on their caps and took up the stretcher. Stepping over the body, they tiptoed out of the house. None of them spoke till they were far from the wakeful children.

When Elizabeth came down she found her mother alone on the parlour floor, leaning over the dead man, the tears dropping on him.

“We must lay him out,” the wife said. She put on the kettle, then returning knelt at the feet, and began to unfasten the knotted leather laces. The room was clammy and dim with only one candle, so that she had to bend her face almost to the floor. At last she got off the heavy boots and put them away.

“You must help me now,” she whispered to the old woman. Together they stripped the man.

When they arose, saw him lying in the naïve dignity of death, the women stood arrested in fear and respect. For a few moments they remained still, looking down, the old mother whimpering. Elizabeth felt countermanded. She saw him, how utterly inviolable he lay in himself. She had nothing to do with him. She could not accept it. Stooping, she laid her hand on him, in claim. He was still warm, for the mine was hot where he had died. His mother had his face between her hands, and was murmuring incoherently. The old tears fell in succession as drops from wet leaves; the mother was not weeping, merely her tears flowed. Elizabeth embraced the body of her husband, with cheek and lips. She seemed to be listening, inquiring, trying to get some connection. But she could not. She was driven away. He was impregnable.

She rose, went into the kitchen, where she poured warm water into a bowl, brought soap and flannel and a soft towel.

“I must wash him,” she said.

Then the old mother rose stiffly, and watched Elizabeth as she carefully washed his face, carefully brushing the big blond moustache from his mouth with the flannel. She was afraid with a bottomless fear, so she ministered to him. The old woman, jealous, said:

“Let me wipe him!”— and she kneeled on the other side drying slowly as Elizabeth washed, her big black bonnet sometimes brushing the dark head of her daughter. They worked thus in silence for a long time. They never forgot it was death, and the touch of the man’s dead body gave them strange

emotions, different in each of the women; a great dread possessed them both, the mother felt the lie was given to her womb, she was denied; the wife felt the utter isolation of the human soul, the child within her was a weight apart from her.

At last it was finished. He was a man of handsome body, and his face showed no traces of drink. He was blonde, full-fleshed, with fine limbs. But he was dead.

“Bless him,” whispered his mother, looking always at his face, and speaking out of sheer terror. “Dear lad — bless him!” She spoke in a faint, sibilant ecstasy of fear and mother love.

Elizabeth sank down again to the floor, and put her face against his neck, and trembled and shuddered. But she had to draw away again. He was dead, and her living flesh had no place against his. A great dread and weariness held her: she was so unavailing. Her life was gone like this.

“White as milk he is, clear as a twelve-month baby, bless him, the darling!” the old mother murmured to herself. “Not a mark on him, clear and clean and white, beautiful as ever a child was made,” she murmured with pride. Elizabeth kept her face hidden.

“He went peaceful, Lizzie — peaceful as sleep. Isn’t he beautiful, the lamb? Ay — he must ha’ made his peace, Lizzie. ‘Appen he made it all right, Lizzie, shut in there. He’d have time. He wouldn’t look like this if he hadn’t made his peace. The lamb, the dear lamb. Eh, but he had a hearty laugh. I loved to hear it. He had the heartiest laugh, Lizzie, as a lad —”

Elizabeth looked up. The man’s mouth was fallen back, slightly open under the cover of the moustache. The eyes, half shut, did not show glazed in the obscurity. Life with its smoky burning gone from him, had left him apart and utterly alien to her. And she knew what a stranger he was to her. In her womb was ice of fear, because of this separate stranger with whom she had been living as one flesh. Was this what it all meant — utter, intact separateness, obscured by heat of living? In dread she turned her face away. The fact was too deadly. There had been nothing between them, and yet they had come together, exchanging their nakedness repeatedly. Each time he had taken her, they had been two isolated beings, far apart as now. He was no more responsible than she. The child was like ice in her womb. For as she looked at the dead man, her mind, cold and detached, said clearly: “Who am I? What have I been doing? I have been fighting a husband who did not exist. HE existed all the time. What wrong have I done? What was that I have been living with? There lies the reality, this man.”— And her soul died in her for fear: she knew she had never seen him, he had never seen her, they had met in the dark and had fought in the dark, not knowing whom they met nor whom they fought. And now she saw, and turned silent in seeing. For she had been wrong. She had said he was something he was not; she had felt familiar with him. Whereas he was apart all the while, living as she never lived, feeling as she never felt.

In fear and shame she looked at his naked body, that she had known falsely. And he was the father of her children. Her soul was torn from her body and stood apart. She looked at his naked body and was ashamed, as if she had denied it. After all, it was itself. It seemed awful to her. She looked at his face, and she turned her own face to the wall. For his look was other than hers, his way was not her way. She had denied him what he was — she saw it now. She had refused him as himself. — And this had been her life, and his life. — She was grateful to death, which restored the truth. And she knew she was not dead.

And all the while her heart was bursting with grief and pity for him. What had he suffered? What stretch of horror for this helpless man! She was rigid with agony. She had not been able to help him. He had been cruelly injured, this naked man, this other being, and she could make no reparation. There were the children — but the children belonged to life. This dead man had nothing to do with them. He and she were only channels through which life had flowed to issue in the children. She was a mother — but how awful she knew it now to have been a wife. And he, dead now, how awful he

must have felt it to be a husband. She felt that in the next world he would be a stranger to her. If they met there, in the beyond, they would only be ashamed of what had been before. The children had come, for some mysterious reason, out of both of them. But the children did not unite them. Now he was dead, she knew how eternally he was apart from her, how eternally he had nothing more to do with her. She saw this episode of her life closed. They had denied each other in life. Now he had withdrawn. An anguish came over her. It was finished then: it had become hopeless between them long before he died. Yet he had been her husband. But how little! —

“Have you got his shirt, ‘Lizabeth?”

Elizabeth turned without answering, though she strove to weep and behave as her mother-in-law expected. But she could not, she was silenced. She went into the kitchen and returned with the garment.

“It is aired,” she said, grasping the cotton shirt here and there to try. She was almost ashamed to handle him; what right had she or anyone to lay hands on him; but her touch was humble on his body. It was hard work to clothe him. He was so heavy and inert. A terrible dread gripped her all the while: that he could be so heavy and utterly inert, unresponsive, apart. The horror of the distance between them was almost too much for her — it was so infinite a gap she must look across.

At last it was finished. They covered him with a sheet and left him lying, with his face bound. And she fastened the door of the little parlour, lest the children should see what was lying there. Then, with peace sunk heavy on her heart, she went about making tidy the kitchen. She knew she submitted to life, which was her immediate master. But from death, her ultimate master, she winced with fear and shame.

My Polish Teacher's Tie

HELEN DUNMORE

I wear a uniform, blue overall and white cap with the school logo on it. Part-time catering staff, that's me, £3.89 per hour. I dish out tea and buns to the teachers twice a day, and I shovel chips on to the kids' trays at dinner-time. It's not a bad job. I like the kids.

The teachers pay for their tea and buns. It's one of those schemes teachers are good at. So much into a kitty, and that entitles them to cups of tea and buns for the rest of the term. Visitors pay, too, or it wouldn't be fair. Very keen on fairness, we are, here.

It was ten-forty-five when the Head got up to speak. He sees his staff together for ten minutes once a week, and as usual he had a pile of papers in front of him. I never listen to any of it as a rule, but as I was tipping up the teapot to drain I heard him mention Poland.

I am half-Polish. They don't know that here. My name's not Polish or anything. It was my mother, she came here after the war. I spoke Polish till I was six, baby Polish full of rhymes Mum taught me. Then my father put a stop to it. 'You'll get her all mixed up, now she's going to school. What use is Polish ever going to be to her?' I can't speak it now. I've got a tape, a tape of me speaking Polish with Mum. I listen, and I think I'm going to understand what we're saying, and then I don't.

'… long-term aim is to arrange a teacher exchange – several Polish teachers are looking for penfriends in English schools, to improve their written English … so if you're interested, the information's all here …'

He smiled, wagging the papers, and raised his eyebrows. I wrung out a cloth and wiped my surfaces. I was thinking fast. Thirteen minutes before I was due downstairs.

The meeting broke up and the Head vanished in a knot of teachers wanting to talk to him. I lifted the counter-flap, tucked my hair under the cap, and walked across. Teachers are used to getting out of the way of catering staff without really seeing them.

'Excuse me,' I said, pushing forward, 'excuse me,' and they did. Then I was in front of the Head. 'Excuse me,' I said again, and he broke off what he was saying. I saw him thinking, *trouble*. The kids chucking chips again. He stitched a nice smile on his face and said, 'Oh, er – Mrs, er – Carter. Is there a problem?'

'No,' I said, 'I was just wondering, could I have that address?'

'Address?'

'The Polish one. You said there was a Polish teacher who wanted an English penfriend.'

‘Oh. Ah, yes. Of course.’ He paused, looking at me as if it might be a trick question. ‘Is it for yourself?’

‘I’d like to write to a Polish teacher.’

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Yes. Of course, Mrs Carter.’

I took the address and smiled at him.

° ° ° ° °

When Steve’s first letter came I saw he’d taken it for granted I was a teacher. The person he had in his head when he was writing to me was an English teacher, a real professional. This person earned more money than him and had travelled and seen places and done things he’d never been able to do. He was really called Stefan, but he said he was going to call himself Steve when he wrote to me.

Jade saw the letter. ‘What’s that, Mum?’

‘Just a letter. You can have the stamp if you want.’

In the second letter Steve told me that he wrote poetry.

‘*I have started a small literary magazine in our department. If you want, I am happy to send you some of our work.’*

I told him about Jade. I told him about the songs my mother taught me in Polish, the ones I used to know but I’d forgotten. I didn’t write anything about my job. Let him think what he wanted to think. I wasn’t lying.

The first poem he sent me was about a bird in a coal mine. He sent me the English translation. This bird flew down the main shaft and got lost in the tunnels underground, then it sang and sang until it died. Everyone heard it singing, but no one could find it. I liked that poem. It made me think maybe I’d been missing something, because I hadn’t read any poetry since I left school. I wrote back, ‘*Send me the Polish, just so I can see it.*’ When the Polish came I tried it over in my head. It sounded a bit like the rhymes my mother used to sing.

At first we wrote every week, then it was twice. I used to write a bit every day then make myself wait until the middle of the week to send it. I wrote after Jade was in bed. Things would suddenly come to me. I’d write, ‘*Oh, Steve, I’ve just remembered …*’, or ‘*… Do you see what I mean, Steve, or does it sound funny?*’ It made it seem more like talking to him when I used his name.

He wrote me another poem. It was about being half-Polish and half-English, and the things I’d told him about speaking Polish until I was six and then forgetting it all:

‘Mother, I’ve lost the words you gave me.

Call the police, tell them
there's a reward, I'll do anything …'

He was going to put it in the literary magazine, '*if you have no objection, Carla*'. That was the way he wrote, always very polite. I said it was fine by me.

One day the Head stopped me and said, 'Did you ever write to that chap? The Polish teacher?'

'Yes,' I said. Nothing more. Let him think I'd written once then not bothered. Luckily, Mrs Callendar came up to talk about OFSTED.

'Ah, yes, OFSTED. Speaking of visitors,' said the Head, raising his voice the way he does so that one minute he's talking to you and the next it's a public announcement, 'I have news of progress on the Polish teachers' exchange. A teacher will be coming over from Katowice next month. His name is Stefan Jeziorny, and he will be staying with Mrs Kenward. We're most grateful to you for your hospitality, Valerie.'

Mrs Kenward flushed. The Head beamed at nobody. Stefan Jeziorny, I thought. I had clicked, even though I was so used to thinking of him as Steve. Why hadn't he said he was coming?

I dropped Jade off to tea with her friend. There was a letter waiting when I got home. I tore it open and read it with my coat still on. There was a bit about my last letter, and poetry, and then the news.

'You will know from your school, Carla, that I will come to England. I am hoping to make many contacts for the future, for other teachers who will also come to English schools. I hope, Carla, that you will introduce me to your colleagues. I will stay with an English family who offer accommodation.'

I felt terrible. He sounded different, not like Steve. Not just polite any more, but all stiff, and a bit hurt. He must have thought I'd known about his visit from the other teachers, and I hadn't wanted to invite him to stay with me. But what was worse was that he was going to expect to meet me. Or not me, exactly, but the person he'd been writing to, who didn't really exist. '*I have been corresponding with a colleague of yours, Carla Carter*,' he'd say to the other teachers. Then he'd wait for someone to say, '*Yes, of course, Carla's here, she's expecting you.*'

Colleagues don't wear blue overalls and white caps and work for £3.89 an hour. Somebody'd remember me asking the Head for his address, and there'd be a whisper running all round, followed by a horrible silence. They'd all look round at the serving-hatch and there I'd be, the big teapot in my hand and a plate of buns in front of me. And Steve'd look too. He'd still be smiling, because that's what you do in a foreign place when you don't know what's going on.

He'd think I was trying to make a fool of him, making him believe I was a teacher.
Me, Carla Carter, part-time catering assistant, writing to him about poetry.

I could be off sick. I could swap with Jeannie. She could do the teachers' breaks. Or I could say Jade was ill.

No. That wouldn't work. Steve had my name, and my address. I sat down and spread out his letter again, then I went to the drawer and got all his other letters. I'd never had letters like that before and I was never going to again, not after Steve knew who I really was.

I didn't write, and Steve didn't write again either. I couldn't decide if it was because he was hurt, or because he knew he'd be seeing me soon anyway. The fuss Valerie Kenward made about having him to stay, you'd think the Pope was coming for a fortnight. I never liked her. Always holding up the queue saying she's on a diet, and then taking the biggest bun.

'If you're that bothered,' I said, 'he can come and stay in my flat, with me and Jade.' But I said it to myself, in my head. I knew he'd want to be with the other teachers.

I couldn't stop looking for letters. And then there was the poetry book I'd bought. It seemed a shame to bin it. It might come in use for Jade, I thought.

A week went by, eight days, ten. Each morning I woke up and I knew something was wrong before I could remember what it was. It got worse every day until I thought, *Sod it, I'm not going to worry any more*.

The next morning-break the buns were stale. Valerie Kenward poked them, one after another. 'We ought to get our money back,' she said. But she still took one, and waited while I filled the teapot from the urn.

'How's it going?' Susie Douglas asked her.

'*Hard work*!' stage-whispered Valerie, rolling her eyes.

'He's not got much conversation, then?'

'Are you joking? All he wants to talk about is poetry. It's hell for the kids, he doesn't mean to be funny but they can't keep a straight face. It's the way he talks. Philippa had to leave the room at supper-time, and I can't say I blame her.'

You wouldn't, I thought. If ever anyone brought up their kids to be pleased with themselves, it's Valerie Kenward.

'And even when it's quite a well-known writer like Shakespeare or Shelley, you can't make out what he's on about. It's the accent.'

'He *is* Polish. I mean, how many Polish poets could you pronounce?' asked Susie.

'And his *ties*!' went on Valerie. 'You've never seen anything like them.'

I looked past both of them. I'd have noticed him before, if I hadn't been so busy. He was sitting stiffly

upright, smiling in the way people smile when they don't quite understand what's going on. The Head was wagging a sheaf of papers in front of him, and talking very loudly, as if he was deaf. Steve. Stefan Jeziorny. He was wearing a brown suit with padded shoulders. It looked too big for him. His tie was wider than normal ties, and it was red with bold green squiggles on it. It was a terribly hopeful tie. His shoes had a fantastic shine on them. His face looked much too open, much too alive, as if a child Jade's age had got into an adult's body.

'Isn't that tea made *yet*?' asked Valerie.

I looked at her. 'No,' I said. 'It's not. Excuse me,' and I lifted the counter-flap and ducked past her while her mouth was still open. I walked up to where Steve was sitting. He looked round at me the way a child does when he doesn't know anyone at a party, hoping for rescue.

'Hello,' I said. He jumped up, held out his hand. 'How do you do?' he asked, as if he really wanted to know. I took his hand. It was sweaty, as I'd known it would be. He was tense as a guitar string.

'I'm Carla,' I said.

'Carla?' He couldn't hide anything. I saw it all swim in his eyes. Surprise. Uncertainty. What was he going to do? And then I saw it. Pleasure. A smile lit in his eyes and ran to his mouth.

'Carla! You are Carla Carter. My penfriend.'

'Yes.'

Then he did something I still can't quite believe. He stood there holding on to my hand right in the middle of the staffroom, his big bright tie blazing, and he sang a song I knew. It went through me like a knife through butter. A Polish song. I knew it, I knew it. I knew the words and the tune. It was one of the songs my mother used to sing to me. I felt my lips move. There were words in my mouth, words I didn't understand. And then I was singing, stumbling after him all the way to the end of the verse.

'Good heavens. How very remarkable. I didn't realise you were Polish, Mrs … er …' said the Head as he bumbled round us flapping his papers.

'Nor did I,' I said. But I wasn't going to waste time on the Head. I wanted to talk about poetry. I smiled at Steve. His red tie with its bold green squiggles was much too wide and much too bright. It was a flag from another country, a better country than the ones either of us lived in. 'I like your tie,' I said.

Korea

John McGahern

'You saw an execution then too, didn't you?' I asked my father, and he started to tell as he rowed. He'd been captured in an ambush in late 1919, and they were shooting prisoners in Mountjoy as reprisals at that time. He thought it was he who'd be next, for after a few days they moved him to the cell next to the prison yard. He could see out through the bars. No rap to prepare himself came to the door that night, and at daybreak he saw the two prisoners they'd decided to shoot being marched out: a man in his early thirties, and what was little more than a boy, sixteen or seventeen, and he was weeping. They blindfolded the boy, but the man refused the blindfold. When the officer shouted, the boy clicked to attention, but the man stayed as he was, chewing very slowly. He had his hands in his pockets.

'Take your hands out of your pockets,' the officer shouted again.

The man slowly shook his head.

'It's a bit too late now in the day for that,' he said.

The officer then ordered them to fire, and as the volley rang, the boy tore at his tunic over the heart, as if to pluck out the bullets, and the buttons of the tunic began to fly into the air before he pitched forward on his face.

The other heeled quietly over on his back: it must have been because of the hands in the pockets.

The officer dispatched the boy with one shot from the revolver as he lay face downward, but he pumped five bullets in rapid succession into the man, as if to pay him back for not coming to attention.

'When I was on my honeymoon years after, it was May, and *we* took the tram up the hill of Howth from Sutton Cross,' my father said as he rested on the oars. 'We sat on top in the open on the wooden seats with the rail around that made it like a small ship. The sea was below, and smell of the sea and furze-bloom all about, and then I looked down and saw the furze pods bursting, and the way they burst in all directions seemed shocking like the buttons when he started to tear at his tunic. I couldn't get it out of my mind all day. It destroyed the day.'

'It's a wonder their hands weren't tied?' I asked him as he rowed between the black navigation pan and the red where the river flowed into Oakport.

'I suppose it was because they were considered soldiers.'

'Do you think the boy stood to attention because he felt that he might still get off if he obeyed the rules?'

'Sounds a bit highfalutin' to me. Comes from going to school too long,' he said aggressively, and I was silent. It was new to me to hear him talk about his own life at all. Before, if I asked him about the war, he'd draw fingers across his eyes as if to tear a spider web away, but it was my last summer with him on the river, and it seemed to make him want to talk, to give of himself before it ended.

Hand over hand I drew in the line that throbbed with fish; there were two miles of line, a hook on a lead line every three yards. The licence allowed us a thousand hooks, but we used more. We were the last to fish this freshwater for a living.

As the eels came in over the side I cut them loose with a knife into a wire cage, where they slid over each other in their own oil, the twisted eel hook in their mouths. The other fish – pike choked on hooked perch they'd tried to swallow, bream, roach – I slid up the floorboards towards the bow of the boat. We'd sell them in the village or give them away. The hooks that hadn't been taken I cleaned and stuck in rows round the side of the wooden box. I let the line fall in its centre. After a mile he took my

place in the stern and I rowed. People hadn't woken yet, and the early morning cold and mist were on the river.

Outside of the slow ripple of the oars and the threshing of the fish on the line beaded with running drops of water as it came in, the river was dead silent, except for the occasional lowing of cattle on the banks.

'Have you any idea what you'll do after this summer?' he asked.

'No. I'll wait and see what comes up,' I answered.

'How do you mean *what comes up?'*

'Whatever result I get in the exam. If the result is good, I'll have choices. If it's not, there won't be choices. I'll have to take what I can get.'

'How good do you think they'll be?'

'I think they'll be all right, but there's no use counting chickens, is there?'

'No,' he said, but there was something calculating in the face; it made me watchful of him as I rowed the last stretch of line.

The day had come, the distant noises of the farms and the first flies on the river, by the time we'd lifted the large wire cage out of the bulrushes, emptied in the morning's catch of eels, and sunk it again.

'We'll have enough for a consignment tomorrow,' he said.

Each week we sent the live eels to Billingsgate in London.

'But say, say even if you do well, you wouldn't think of throwing this country up altogether and going to America?' he said, the words fumbled for as I pushed the boat out of the bulrushes after sinking the cage of eels, using the oar as a pole, the mud rising a dirty yellow between the stems.

'Why America?'

'Well, it's the land of opportunity, isn't it, a big, expanding country? There's no room for ambition in this poky place. All there's room for is to make holes in pints of porter.'

I was wary of the big words. They were not in his own voice.

'Who'd pay the fare?'

'We'd manage that. We'd scrape it together somehow.'

'Why should you scrape for me to go to America if I can get a job here?'

'I feel I'd be giving you a chance I never got. I fought for this country. And now they want to take away even the licence to fish. Will you think about it anyhow?'

'I'll think about it,' I answered.

Through the day he trimmed the brows of ridges in the potato field while I replaced hooks on the line and dug worms, pain of doing things for the last time as well as the boredom the knowledge brings that soon there'll be no need to do them, that they could be discarded almost now. The guilt of leaving came: I was discarding his life to assume my own, a man to row the boat would eat into the decreasing profits of the fishing, and it was even not certain he'd get renewal of his licence. The tourist board had opposed the last application. They said we impoverished the coarse fishing for tourists – the tourists who came every summer from Liverpool and Birmingham in increasing numbers

to sit in aluminium deck-chairs on the riverbank and fish with rods. The fields we had would be a bare living without the fishing.

I saw him stretch across the wall in conversation with the cattle-dealer Farrell as I came round to put the worms where we stored them in clay in the darkness of the lavatory. Farrell leaned on the bar of his bicycle on the road. I passed into the lavatory thinking they were talking about the price of cattle, but as I emptied the worms into the box, the word *Moron* came, and I carefully opened the door to listen. It was my father's voice. He was excited.

'I know. I heard the exact sum. They got ten thousand dollars when Luke was killed. Every American soldier's life is insured to the tune of ten thousand dollars.'

'I heard they got two hundred and fifty dollars a month each for Michael and Sam while they're serving,' he went on.

'They're buying cattle left and right,' Farrell's voice came as I closed the door and stood in the darkness, in the smell of shit and piss and the warm fleshy smell of worms crawling in too little clay.

The shock I felt was the shock I was to feel later when I made some social blunder, the splintering of a self-esteem and the need to crawl into a lavatory to think.

Luke Moran's body had come from Korea in a leaden casket, had crossed the stone bridge to the slow funeral bell with the big cars from the embassy behind, the coffin draped in the Stars and Stripes. Shots had been fired above the grave before they threw in the clay. There were photos of his decorations being presented to his family by a military attaché.

He'd scrape the fare, I'd be conscripted there, each month he'd get so many dollars while I served, and he'd get ten thousand if I was killed.

In the darkness of the lavatory between the boxes of crawling worms before we set the night line for the eels I knew my youth had ended.

I rowed as he let out the night line, his fingers baiting each twisted hook so beautifully that it seemed a single movement. The dark was closing from the shadow of Oakport to Nutley's boathouse, bats made ugly whirls overhead, the wings of ducks shirred as they curved down into the bay.

'Have you thought about what I said about going to America?' he asked, without lifting his eyes from the hooks and the box of worms.

'I have.'

The oars dipped in the water without splash, the hole whorling wider in the calm as it slipped past him.

'Have you decided to take the chance, then?'

'No. I'm not going.'

'You won't be able to say I didn't give you the chance when you come to nothing in this fool of a country. It'll be your own funeral.'

'It'll be my own funeral,' I answered, and asked after a long silence, 'As you grow older, do you find your own days in the war and jails coming much back to you?'

'I do. And I don't want to talk about them. Talking about the execution disturbed me no end, those cursed buttons bursting into the air. And the most I think is that if I'd conducted my own wars, and let the fool of a country fend for itself, I'd be much better off today. I don't want to talk about it.'

I knew this silence was fixed for ever as I rowed in silence till he asked, 'Do you think, will it be much good tonight?'

‘It's too calm,' I answered.

‘Unless the night wind gets up,' he said anxiously.

‘Unless a night wind,' I repeated.

As the boat moved through the calm water and the line slipped through his fingers over the side I'd never felt so close to him before, not even when he'd carried me on his shoulders above the laughing crowd to the Final. Each move he made I watched as closely as if I too had to prepare myself to murder.

A Family Supper

Kazuo Ishiguro

Fugu is a fish caught off the Pacific shores of Japan. The fish has held a special significance for me ever since my mother died through eating one. The poison resides in the sexual glands of the fish, inside two fragile bags. When preparing the fish, these bags must be removed with caution, for any clumsiness will result in the poison leaking into the veins. Regrettably, it is not easy to tell whether or not this operation has been carried out successfully. The proof is, as it were, in the eating.

Fugu poisoning is hideously painful and almost always fatal. If the fish has been eaten during the evening, the victim is usually overtaken by pain during his sleep. He rolls about in agony for a few hours and is dead by morning. The fish became extremely popular in Japan after the war. Until stricter regulations were imposed, it was all the rage to perform the hazardous gutting operation in one's own kitchen, then to invite neighbours and friends round for the feast.

At the time of my mother's death, I was living in California. My relationship with my parents had become somewhat strained around that period, and consequently I did not learn of the circumstances surrounding her death until I returned to Tokyo two years later. Apparently, my mother had always refused to eat fugu, but on this particular occasion she had made an exception, having been invited by an old school friend whom she was anxious not to offend. It was my father who supplied me with the details as we drove from the airport to his house in the Kamakura district. When we finally arrived, it was nearing the end of a sunny autumn day.

'Did you eat on the plane?' my father asked. We were sitting on the tatami floor of his tea-room.

'They gave me a light snack.'

'You must be hungry. We'll eat as soon as Kikuko arrives.'

My father was a formidable-looking man with a large stony jaw and furious black eyebrows. I think now in retrospect that he much resembled Chou En-lai, although he would not have cherished such a comparison, being particularly proud of the pure samurai blood that ran in the family. His general presence was not one which encouraged relaxed conversation; neither were things helped much by his odd way of stating each remark as if it were the concluding one. In fact, as I sat opposite him that afternoon, a boyhood memory came back to me of the time he had struck me several times around the head for 'chattering like an old woman'. Inevitably, our conversation since my arrival at the airport had been punctuated by long pauses.

'I'm sorry to hear about the firm,' I said when neither of us had spoken for some time. He nodded gravely.

'In fact the story didn't end there,' he said. 'After the firm's collapse, Watanabe killed himself. He didn't wish to live with the disgrace.'

'I see.'

'We were partners for seventeen years. A man of principle and honour. I respected him very much.'

'Will you go into business again?' I asked.

'I am – in retirement. I'm too old to involve myself in new ventures now. Business these days has become so different. Dealing with foreigners. Doing things their way. I don't understand how we've come to this. Neither did Watanabe.' He sighed. 'A fine man. A man of principle.'

The tea-room looked out over the garden. From where I sat I could make out the ancient well which as a child I had believed haunted. It was just visible now through the thick foliage. The sun had sunk low and much of the garden had fallen into shadow.

'I'm glad in any case that you've decided to come back,' my father said. 'More than a short visit, I hope.'

'I'm not sure what my plans will be.'

'I for one am prepared to forget the past. Your mother too was always ready to welcome you back - upset as she was by your behaviour.'

'I appreciate your sympathy. As I say, I'm not sure what my plans are.'

'I've come to believe now that there were no evil intentions in your mind,' my father continued. 'You were swayed by certain - influences. Like so many others.'

'Perhaps we should forget it, as you suggest.'

'As you will. More tea?'

Just then a girl's voice came echoing through the house.

'At last.' My father rose to his feet. 'Kikuko has arrived.'

Despite our difference in years, my sister and I had always been close. Seeing me again seemed to make her excessively excited and for a while she did nothing but giggle nervously. But she calmed down somewhat when my father started to question her about Osaka and her university. She answered him with short formal replies. She in turn asked me a few questions, but she seemed inhibited by the fear that her questions might lead to awkward topics. After a while, the conversation had become even sparser than prior to Kikuko's arrival. Then my father stood up, saying: 'I must attend to the supper. Please excuse me for being burdened down by such manners. Kikuko will look after you.'

My sister relaxed quite visibly once he had left the room. Within a few minutes, she was chatting freely about her friends in Osaka and about her classes at university. Then quite suddenly she decided we should walk in the garden and went striding out onto the veranda. We put on some straw sandals that had been left along the veranda rail and stepped out into the garden. The daylight had almost gone.

'I've been dying for a smoke for the last half-hour,' she said, lighting a cigarette.

'Then why didn't you smoke?'

She made a furtive gesture back towards the house, then grinned mischievously.

'Oh I see,' I said.

'Guess what? I've got a boyfriend now.'

'Oh yes?'

'Except I'm wondering what to do. I haven't made up my mind yet.'

'Quite understandable.'

'You see, he's making plans to go to America. He wants me to go with him as soon as I finish studying.'

'I see. And you want to go to America?'

'If we go, we're going to hitch-hike.' Kikuko waved a thumb in front of my face. 'People say it's dangerous, but I've done it in Osaka and it's fine.'

'I see. So what is it you're unsure about?'

We were following a narrow path that wound through the shrubs and finished by the old well. As we walked, Kikuko persisted in taking unnecessarily theatrical puffs on her cigarette.

'Well. I've got lots of friends now in Osaka. I like it there. I'm not sure I want to leave them all behind just yet. And Suichi – I like him, but I'm not sure I want to spend so much time with him. Do you understand?'

'Oh perfectly.'

She grinned again, then skipped on ahead of me until she had reached the well. 'Do you remember,' she said, as I came walking up to her, 'how you used to say this well was haunted?'

'Yes, I remember.'

We both peered over the side.

'Mother always told me it was the old woman from the vegetable store you'd seen that night,' she said.

'But I never believed her and never came out here alone.'

'Mother used to tell me that too. She even told me once the old woman had confessed to being the ghost. Apparently she'd been taking a short cut through our garden. I imagine she had some trouble clambering over these walls.'

Kikuko gave a giggle. She then turned her back to the well, casting her gaze about the garden.

'Mother never really blamed you, you know,' she said, in a new voice. I remained silent. 'She always used to say to me how it was their fault, hers and Father's, for not bringing you up correctly. She used to tell me how much more careful they'd been with me, and that's why I was so good.' She looked up and the mischievous grin bad returned to her face. 'Poor Mother,' she said.

'Yes. Poor Mother.'

'Are you going back to California?'

'I don't know. I'll have to see.'

'What happened to – to her? To Vicki?'

'That's all finished with,' I said. 'There's nothing much left for me now in California.'

'Do you think I ought to go there?'

'Why not? I don't know. You'll probably like it. 'I glanced towards the house. 'Perhaps we'd better go in soon. Father might need a band with the supper.'

But my sister was once more peering down into the well. 'I can't see any ghosts,' she said. Her voice echoed a little.

'Is Father very upset about his firm collapsing?'

'Don't know. You can never tell with Father.' Then suddenly she straightened up and turned to me.

'Did he tell you about old Watanabe? What he did?'

'I heard he committed suicide.'

'Well, that wasn't all. He took his whole family with him. His wife and his two little girls.'

'Oh yes?'

'Those two beautiful little girls. He turned on the gas while they were all asleep. Then he cut his stomach with a meat knife.'

'Yes, Father was just telling me how Watanabe was a man of principle.'

'Sick.' My sister turned back to the well.

'Careful. You'll fall right in.'

'I can't see any ghost,' she said. 'You were lying to me all that time.'

'But I never said it lived down the well.'

'Where is it, then?'

We both looked around at the trees and shrubs. The light in the garden had grown very dim. Eventually I pointed to a small clearing some ten yards away.

'Just there I saw it. Just there.'

We stared at the spot.

'What did it look like?'

'I couldn't see very well. It was dark.'

'But you must have seen something.'

'It was an old woman. She was just standing there, watching me.'

We kept staring at the spot as if mesmerized.

'She was wearing a white kimono,' I said. 'Some of her hair had come undone. It was blowing around a little.'

Kikuko pushed her elbow against my arm. 'Oh be quiet. You're trying to frighten me all over again.' She trod on the remains of her cigarette, then for a brief moment stood regarding it with a perplexed expression. She kicked some pine needles over it, then once more displayed her grin. 'Let's see if supper's ready,' she said.

We found my father in the kitchen. He gave us a quick glance, then carried on with what he was doing.

'Father's become quite a chef since he's had to manage on his own,' Kikuko said with a laugh. He turned and looked at my sister coldly.

'Hardly a skill I'm proud of,' he said. 'Kikuko, come here and help.'

For some moments my sister did not move. Then she stepped forward and took an apron hanging from a drawer.

'Just these vegetables need cooking now,' he said to her. 'The rest just needs watching.' Then he looked up and regarded me strangely for some seconds. 'I expect you want to look around the house,' he said eventually. He put down the chopsticks he had been holding. 'It's a long time since you've seen it.'

As we left the kitchen I glanced back towards Kikuko, but her back was turned.

'She's a good girl,' my father said quietly.

I followed my father from room to room. I had forgotten how large the house was. A panel would slide open and another room would appear. But the rooms were all startlingly empty. In one of the rooms the lights did not come on, and we stared at the stark walls and tatami in the pale light that came from the windows.

'This house is too large for a man to live in alone,' my father said. 'I don't have much use for most of these rooms now.'

But eventually my father opened the door to a room packed full of books and papers. There were flowers in vases and pictures on the walls. Then I noticed something on a low table in the comer of the room. I came nearer and saw it was a plastic model of a battleship, the kind constructed by children. It had been placed on some newspaper; scattered around it were assorted pieces of grey plastic.

My father gave a laugh. He came up to the table and picked up the model.

'Since the firm folded,' he said, 'I have a little more time on my hands.' He laughed again, rather strangely. For a moment his face looked almost gentle. 'A little more time.'

'That seems odd,' I said. 'You were always so busy.'

'Too busy perhaps.' He looked at me with a small smile. 'Perhaps I should have been a more attentive father.'

I laughed. He went on contemplating his battleship. Then he looked up. 'I hadn't meant to tell you this, but perhaps it's best that I do. It's my belief that your mother's death was no accident. She had many worries. And some disappointments.'

We both gazed at the plastic battleship.

‘Surely,' I said eventually, 'my mother didn't expect me to live here forever.'

'Obviously you don't see. You don't see how it is for some parents. Not only must they lose their children, they must lose them to things they don't understand.' He spun the battleship in his fingers.

'These little gunboats here could have been better glued, don't you think?'

'Perhaps. I think it looks fine.'

'During the war I spent some time on a ship rather like this. But my ambition was always the air force. I figured it like this. If your ship was struck by the enemy, all you could do was struggle in the water hoping for a lifeline. But in an aeroplane – well – there was always the final weapon.' He put the model back onto the table. 'I don't suppose you believe in war.'

'Not particularly.'

He cast an eye around the room. 'Supper should be ready by now,' he said. 'You must be hungry.'

Supper was waiting in a dimly lit room next to the kitchen. The only source of light was a big lantern that hung over the table, casting the rest of the room into shadow. We bowed to each other before starting the meal.

There was little conversation. When I made some polite comment about the food, Kikuko giggled a little. Her earlier nervousness seemed to have returned to her. My father did not speak for several minutes. Finally he said:

'It must feel strange for you, being back in Japan.'

'Yes, it is a little strange.'

'Already, perhaps, you regret leaving America.'

'A little. Not so much. I didn't leave behind much. Just some empty rooms.'

'I see.'

I glanced across the table. My father's face looked stony and forbidding in the half-light. We ate on in silence.

Then my eye caught something at the back of the room. At first I continued eating, then my hands became still. The others noticed and looked at me. I went on gazing into the darkness past my father's shoulder.

'Who is that? In that photograph there?'

'Which photograph?' My father turned slightly, trying to follow my gaze.

'The lowest one. The old woman in the white kimono.'

My father put down his chopsticks. He looked first at the photograph, then at me.

'Your mother.' His voice had become very hard. 'Can't you recognize your own mother?'

'My mother. You see, it's dark. I can't see it very well.'

No one spoke for a few seconds, then Kikuko rose to her feet. She took the photograph down from the wall, came back to the table and gave it to me.

'She looks a lot older,' I said.

'It was taken shortly before her death,' said my father.

'It was the dark. I couldn't see very well.'

I looked up and noticed my father holding out a hand. I gave him the photograph. He looked at it intently, then held it towards Kikuko. Obediently, my sister rose to her feet once more and returned the picture to the wall.

There was a large pot left unopened at the centre of the table. When Kikuko had seated herself again, my father reached forward and lifted the lid. A cloud of steam rose up and curled towards the lantern. He pushed the pot a little towards me.

'You must be hungry,' he said. One side of his face had fallen into shadow. ·

'Thank you.' I reached forward with my chopsticks. The steam was almost scalding. 'What is it?'

'Fish.'

'It smells very good.'

In amidst soup were strips of fish that had curled almost into balls. I picked one out and brought it to my bowl.

'Help yourself. There's plenty.'

'Thank you.' I took a little more, then pushed the pot towards my father. I watched him take several pieces to his bowl. Then we both watched as Kikuko served herself.

My father bowed slightly. 'You must be hungry,' he said again. He took some fish to his mouth and started to eat. Then I too chose a piece and put it in my mouth. It felt soft, quite fleshy against my tongue.

'Very good,' I said. 'What is it?'

'Just fish.'

'It's very good.'

The three of us ate on in silence. Several minutes went by.

'Some more?'

'Is there enough?'

'There's plenty for all of us.' My father lifted the lid and once more steam rose up. We all reached forward and helped ourselves.

'Here,' I said to my father, 'you have this last piece.'

'Thank you.'

When we had finished the meal, my father stretched out his arms and yawned with an air of satisfaction. 'Kikuko,' he said. 'Prepare a pot of tea, please.'

My sister looked at him, then left the room without comment. My father stood up.

'Let's retire to the other room. It's rather warm in here.'

I got to my feet and followed him into the tea-room. The large sliding windows had been left open, bringing in a breeze from the garden. For a while we sat in silence.

'Father,' I said, finally.

'Yes?'

'Kikuko tells me Watanabe-San took his whole family with him.'

My father lowered his eyes and nodded. For some moments he seemed deep in thought. 'Watanabe was very devoted to his work,' he said at last. 'The collapse of the firm was a great blow to him. I fear it must have weakened his judgement.'

'You think what he did – it was a mistake?'

'Why, of course. Do you see it otherwise?'

'No, no. Of course not.'

'There are other things besides work.'

'Yes.'

We fell silent again. The sound of locusts came in from the garden. I looked out into the darkness. The well was no longer visible.

'What do you think you will do now?' my father asked. 'Will you stay in Japan for a while?'

'To be honest, I hadn't thought that far ahead.'

'If you wish to stay here, I mean here in this house, you would be very welcome. That is, if you don't mind living with an old man.'

'Thank you. I'll have to think about it.'

I gazed out once more into the darkness.

'But of course,' said my father, 'this house is so dreary now. You'll no doubt return to America before long.'

'Perhaps. I don't know yet.'

'No doubt you will.'

For some time my father seemed to be studying the back of his hands. Then he looked up and sighed.

'Kikuko is due to complete her studies next spring,' he said.

'Perhaps she will want to come home then. She's a good girl.'

'Perhaps she will.'

'Things will improve then.'

'Yes, I'm sure they will.'

We fell silent once more, waiting for Kikuko to bring the tea.

Invisible Mass of the Back Row

Claudette Williams

I stand in the middle of the room, surrounded by anxious faces. It is my turn to recite the day's lesson. The Inspector's ruler points to me.

"Stand up. Recite the adventures of Columbus. What was the date of Columbus' landing in Jamaica? What were the names of his ships? Why was he in the Caribbean?"

My heart pounds. The heat of the morning sun, soaking through the galvanised roof, is magnified inside the schoolroom. The stench of fear is in everyone's nostrils. Something tells me that my days of being hidden, disposed of, dispatched to the invisibility of the back row, are numbered.

I stand up, my limbs shaking uncontrollably, sweat dripping from my armpits, my eyes inflamed. My belly aches. I am petrified. Words fail to come out. They are formed in my head, but my lips do not speak them. The Inspector's eyes pierce me through. They demand a response, demand to be respected and obeyed.

"What was Columbus doing here anyway?" The trapped words inside my head tumble out. The rebel inside me is alive. The schoolroom becomes even quieter, if that is possible.

"You in for it," Patricia, sitting next to where I stand shaking, mutters without moving her lips. I know she is speaking the truth.

The Inspector's face is frozen. Miss Henderson, form six teacher, pounces with the ruler. Her face says she is sure she could not have heard what she thought she heard.

"What did you say, Hortense?"

From I don't know where, a power surges through me. My fists clench. My teeth lock into each other. Miss Henderson reads challenge in my face. I stand still, not daring to say any more.

"What did you say?" she commands, challenging me to repeat my *facetiness.* And again it happens. Words gush out of my mouth. "Is what Columbus did want? Who invite him here?"

Before the last word has left my lips, the sharp sting of the ruler cracks my knuckles. Stupidly, I had left my clenched fist on the desk in front of me. The blow brings me back to the steam bath. Sweat now drips from my face, floods my armpits, drips from between my legs.

I could kill this woman with her sharp pointed nose, mean eyes and frightened face. We cross eyes, and for an instant I see the fear which has trapped us in this rank, smelly room. Miss Henderson is afraid. She is as much afraid of the Inspector as I am.

My brains, what brains I have left, are bouncing around in my skull, goading me on. I will get more of the ruler. It is written across Miss Henderson's wrinkled forehead. My life is at an end! At least in this school. If Miss Henderson does not kill me with this ruler, my aunt is sure to finish me off when she hears how I back-chat the Inspector and Teacher Henderson.

My parents are in England and living with my aunt is like walking a tight-rope. One little slip and I am in big trouble. Dis look and smell like big trouble to me.

The lunch bell echoes throughout the school. My salvation? For now, anyway. Hungry bellies rumble in the steam bath, but we are still transfixed by the Inspector, paralysed by Miss Henderson's stare. Feet shuffle, fingers scratch prickly skin. From outside there is the freedom of released bodies bouncing against the partition and liberated voices rising. They magnify our imprisonment. But the walls have been breached. The jailers are quick to realise that this battle is lost. For now.

"Class dismissed," the Inspector grudgingly commands. Miss Henderson lowers her eyes.

"Good afternoon, Inspector. Good afternoon, Miss Henderson," we recite. Miss Henderson steps aside, stiffly. Fifty tense bodies scurry past, politely, straining to taste the fresh, if hot air of the noon-day world and feed themselves from the lunch women under the cotton tree. But first there is Lorna Phillips to take care of. Somebody has to pay for this.

"Yo red pickney always sit a de front of de class. Unno t'ink is because yu pretty. Is only 'cause teacher frighten fi yu pupa," I curse Lorna, as we bundle down the steps, out of earshot of Miss Henderson and the Inspector.

"Is 'cause yu black and stupid why teacher meek yu sit a de back all de time," Lorna chirps in.

"Is who you calling stupid? Yo want yu bloody nose right here?"

This is always the outcome of a tense morning in school. A fight often follows the Inspector's visits.

Lorna pushes past me and tries to make a break for the school gate. But I give chase, followed by Samuel, Tim, Patricia, Maud and Yvonne. Today she will pay for being teacher's favourite, for being "red", for being rich, for having everything I don't have.

"Look how fast she moving on dem marga foot," taunts Yvonne.

"Come, let we beat her up," I shout, and we surge forward, pursuing Lorna out of school.

I might not know the answers, but I can fight.

Just then, from behind the school gate, Teacher Edwards comes into view. He is big, sturdy and beautifully dark, with a baby moustache. He is handsomely dressed in his Dashiki suit. There is a kindness about this man that is not usually found among teachers. He would always listen to you, and not just take the teacher's side. He only beat you if he really feel you was out of order, rude, or you get catch with something you thief. We respected and even liked him.

The running stops, slows to a polite walk. The hot pursuit melts into fixed grins and prim steps.

"Good afternoon, children."

"Good afternoon, Teacher Edwards," we still the vengeance in our voices long enough to chant in unison.

Lorna makes the most of Teacher Edwards' presence.

Walking as fast as she could, she says her polite good afternoon and makes a beeline for the hill which distances her from the rest of us. She is safe this time. We turn down the hill.

"Meek she gone. We'll get her tomorrow," we plot. My voice and limbs quiet down. For the first time that day, my heartbeat falls back into its normal silent rhythm. There is always tomorrow.

It is the pain of the Inspector that has fuelled my blood; the pain of the ruler was nothing. Chu, mi use to beatings. One little ruler slap a nothing. But dat renking, facety man. A way him come from? Dis warra warra man, jus' a bother people head. Him 'now de score. After all him is suppose to be black.

My uncle say all a dem collude to humiliate, not just me, but all a we, all de people who look like me. All de poor black people dem. Meek him no pick pan de red pickney dem, a meek him t'ink say is we alone no know nothing.

I walk silently down the hill with the others. Each of us is distracted by our own thoughts and anger at the morning. Food hunger is temporarily forgotten. Lorna Phillips and de Inspector dem all de same. Have plenty of money and hate we.

At the bottom of the hill, we are nourished by a wealth of warm, familiar sights and smells. The lunch women come into view. They are always there, big and strong, jutting out from the base of the towering cotton tree. Miss Ivy, as always, has on her red tie-head. In the afternoon sun, as she sits on her three-legged stool, it makes her face glow. Her food box is secured between her legs.

Aunt Dine always smells of cinnamon. You know her smell, because if you dare to make her laugh and expose her bare toothless black gums, in quiet moments she will give you a big smothering hug. Her missing teeth give her face a funny, quaint look. She is never scary to us because she lives in our district and we know her.

Miss Mavis always sits to the right of Aunt Dine, because, she says, she is practising to be on the right hand side of her Maker. Miss Mavis has the most beautifully oiled, ivory coloured skin in the whole world, and white, white eyes which twinkle and wink at you when she talks. She is never cross for long, but will cuss you out one minute and tell you scriptures the next. Her face is electric, whirling and changing as she speaks. Her eyes search your face for understanding.

And then there is one-foot Herby who is always late with his sky-juice and snowball. He can argue, always on about "de dam hot sun," which is "good for nothing, and only melting him ice, quick, quick, o'clock."

The boxes are unwrapped. Our senses are assaulted by saltfish fritters, fried dumplings, red herring, cornmeal pudding, sweet potato pudding, oranges, plums, mangoes or sugar-cane, snowball and sky-juice. Smells mingle and whirl, creating a comfortable oasis under the gigantic cotton tree. That same tree serves as a lover's nest and gambling spot at nights. If trees could talk, what stories this one would tell!

We go down the hill. The gloom of humiliation, the pain of the assault on all of us, lifts. We search for our lunch money and think of food. Like swarming bees we descend, shouting our orders to the lunch women.

"Unny stop de noise and wait. How many han' yu t'ink we have?" Miss Mavis quietly reprimands.

The shouts subside only for a moment as we change our orders and surge again.

"Two penny worth of dumpling and saltfish, please Miss Mavis."

"Mi only want one fritters."

"Mi jus' want a piece of cornmeal pudding today."

"But Aunt Dine dat red herring so little bit."

"Yu have no crackers again Miss Ivy?"

"How come Herby teck so long fi share de ice?"

The clutter and bustle carry on until the sweat is running down the women's faces. Wash-rags, carried on shoulders like a uniform, mop brows, as they try to keep track of orders and change.

"Lord unny pickney is somet'ing else. Unny gone like nobody no feed unny. Dem mus' a wok unny hard a school today."

The chatter waves and heaves. The banter and retort goes backwards and forwards until the lunch money secured in pockets and knotted in handkerchiefs has been spent for the day.

Boxes are empty. We mingle, swap and taste each other's purchases, eat, talk with mouths full. As we drift away, so do Aunt Mavis, Aunt Dine and Miss Ivy. Herby is the last to pack up and vacate the cotton tree. The forces have been spent for the day.

Will I one day move from the back row? Would I be let off from reciting the day's lesson, because I know it, just once? Would it ever be my turn to sit at the front, and not have to answer the Inspector's questions?

The house is buzzing. A letter and a big, big parcel have arrived from England. "Me mother sending for we. Me and me two brothers going to England." I sang, "Me a go a Englan'. Me mumma and puppa send fi we." Oat will show Lorna Phillips. She have no people in a Englan'. Columbus can get lost. No more standing up in the middle of the class. No more hot, sweaty classroom. No more Teacher Henderson. No more Inspector. Me a go a Englan'.

November sixteenth. It is dark outside. Night creatures are going to sleep. Day animals still don't know it is time to wake up. Inside, the lamp is lit, casting its honey glow on our faces still dazed with sleep.

"Unno go wash, and put on unno clothes," Salna orders. Sleepily, we obey.

The sun is creeping over Easington hills, reflecting the honey glow inside. Its full power is still waiting to wake up. I cannot drink any tea, cannot eat what is to be my last piece of hard-dough bread and butter. My stomach is tight. My jaws are refusing to chew on this familiar taste.

"If yu don't want de tea, lef' it an go put on yu clothes. Dem all dey pon de chair, and don't mess up de hair," I am ordered again. I do as I am told. No time for backchatting.

Now there is much coming and going. In the dim light of morning, not yet fully awake, neighbours come to say farewell. They bring parting gifts of mangoes, and presents for relatives in England, not seen or heard from in many years.

Like a stranger, I greet my new clothes, gingerly feeling, inhaling the new cloth smells. I try to work out which piece to put on first without disturbing my newly crafted hairstyle.

I dress in silence, only now beginning to fully realize. Today, my every action, in this dim morning light, is to be registered in the cosmos as my last in this familiar, tiny, two-roomed house.

We pile into the van just as the morning sun claims its place in the sky. It releases its passions and bums away the last stillness of the night. The silence of parting quiets the most active tongue. The drive to the airport is long and hot. Still, the pain of parting traps us in our silent world.

Who will look after Cousy's grave? Who will make sure that the weeds do not choke her roses?

Cousy had not moved, as she always did, when the sun peeped over the hill top. Had not roused me to do my morning chores when night kiss morning awake. I thought Cousy's coldness was just the passing of night. So I slept on, not noticing that her "old bones", as she often referred to herself, had not stirred, that her limbs were stiff, that she got colder as the morning got warmer.

Lloyd banging on the door, ordering me to get up and feed de chickens, alerted the yard. I woke to find Cousy's gentle face tight and still, a trickle of tears running from her opened eyes.

"Why are you crying Cousy?" I asked as I crept sleepily out of bed. There was no reply. And I found myself crying too. Her stillness, her unfocused stare, signalled a change.

I opened the door to find the whole yard gathered outside, waiting. They understood the signals. Death had crept under the door and taken Cousy away in her sleep.

"I want Cousy," I hollered, as I fell into Miss Olive's arms.

Does this mean I won't ever again share Cousy's bed and snuggle into her warm bosom? Won't smell her old mysterious smells, and watch her crinkled face?

Now, this thought forces out the hot salty tears which well up inside. I am leaving her behind. The tears flow freely, soiling my newly polished face. Bringing me back to the speeding van taking me

away from Heartease, from Cousy, from my goats, from Lorna Phillips. Towards ... the gigantic, shimmering aeroplanes.

The sun releases all its enormous strength. The sea retaliates. It shimmers its bluest blue, a blue that envelops the airport and the parked aeroplanes.

The following hours are filled with a numbness. The only parallels I can think of are visits to the dentist with anaesthetic injected to deaden the pain or when you freshly buck your toe on a big rock stone. My inside is dead. I am cold in the blazing sunshine.

Now, everybody is crying, some pretending that they aren't. Handkerchiefs flap goodbye and wipe streaming eyes. My brothers and I are ceremoniously handed over to a pretty, chocolate-coloured woman dressed in a blue uniform. We follow her, reluctantly, into places of strangeness, places with strange lights and strange demands. People smile knowingly and gather up our belongings.

Then we are sitting in the belly of the gigantic metal bird, which we have only seen before from the ground, looking upwards. This is it. We are going to England.

England brings my mother and father back to me. It drags them forward from the fragile recesses of my young memory. I remember snippets of incidents which had told me of their existence. How long have we been separated? Well, it is hard to know. It was hard, those days long ago, to understand what was going on. I cannot count how many days I was without my father's company, nor am I positive of the many years without my mother's embrace. But memory surges suggest seven years, perhaps, without father and five without mother.

I was not to know then, that although I would return many times, that first departure was the beginning of my exile from Heartease.

Paraffin heaters
smell
always just coming
into cold dark places
afraid and
excited at the same
time
cold
smell
wanting to be elsewhere
in fact Jamaica

"Yes, Salna," I replied for the tenth time, to my mother's call from the kitchen. A pokey, steamy place at the back of a cold, cold house.

All the houses I see are stuck together, with no place to play outside, no yard. Do children not play outside in this England? Is it always so cold? Does it ever get warm? Does the sun shine here?

"Now, listen to me child," my mother's dark, youthful face smiles down at me, brings me back to the steamy place. I sit huddled in strange clothes, close to the paraffin heater. "You had better decide what you are going to call me. You can choose from Mother, Mummy, Mum. The same goes for your father. You've got Dad, Daddy or Father to choose from."

This little talk put an end to days of nervous tension about deciding what to call my England parents. Having arrived, what do you call these newly acquired people? I dreaded answering to my mother's call. What do you answer when strangers call to you, but they are not strangers really, they are your mother and father? I fell back on old responses, familiar language.

No one told me I would need a new language in dis England.

"My mother who dey a England; my mother who a send fa me in a England." Here I was without a language to reply to her calls. Lorna Phillips, I still hate you, but oh I wish you were here. At least I know your name.

Mum came with me for my interview at Devon Spencer School. She sat right next to me as I read for the Headmistress. I read but did not know the words of this new language, could not read the words of this strange book. I did my best. I read until I was told to stop, being corrected by the Headmistress. The Headmistress was impressed. I was impressed. My Mum was impressed. My impressive reading enrolled me in one five, the hottest, baddest stream in the first year, only second to one six, the remedial stream.

My strategic location in one five has a familiar feel about it. There is no Lorna Phillips. In this group we have all recently arrived, from one island or another but mostly from Jamaica and all poor, clearly black and one rung from the back row, the bottom stream. This is home away from home. I simply settle down to school life and cultivate the culture of the back row. We graduate in hair plaiting, make up and cussing. Our section of the common-room is dominated by the smell of hair pomander, face powder and Woolworth's latest perfume fragrances.

"You know say Columbus enslave de Indian dem fine in the islands. De same one dem who save him life, and help him restock him ships and tell him say him no reach India yet." Joycelin is feeding us information as she leafs through her latest book, discovered at the local library.

"You lie!" The challenge comes from Fay Green. "Because is Africans dem enslave and ship to de islands, to slave on sugar plantations, fi make sugar fi white people tea in a England."

The hair on the back of my neck stands up. The room is suddenly very hot. This man, Columbus keeps coming back to haunt me.

"With all de tea dem drink in dis place, is we still a fi meek sugar fi dem fi sweeten it," says Joycelin as she continues to leaf through the book, stopping every so often to throw out morsels about the exploits of slavers, life on plantations and the fights slaves and the indigenous Indians waged for their freedom. Conversations weave and heave. We move back and forth between anger, total disbelief and downright outrage.

"Is who write dat book you reading? 'Cause is foolishness you telling me. I don't believe a word of it," Fay Green finally bursts out.

Each new piece of information is challenged and questioned. We discover heroes, rebels, guerrilla fighters. They help us assert our right to be. Toussaint L'Ouverture, Sojourner Truth, Nanny, Cudjoe, Paul Bogle. The books tell us they all come from our own back yard. Thoughts of them mingle with the hair oils, face powder, and self-affirmation lessons which claim space in our section of the common-room.

Group humiliation replaces individual humiliation here in England schools. This bottom from remedial class gets the meanest, most feared teachers in the school. Their sole intention seem to be to ensure that we know and keep our place. And Columbus keeps coming up. Today's lesson is to make sure we have learnt the lesson of conquest.

Things mingle and whirl in my mind. Easington heat. Easington sweat. English cold. English ice. Frozen faces, frozen information, frozen places.

"Why did Columbus sail to the Indies in 1493, Hortense?" The frozen face cracks momentarily. "And while you are thinking of the answer, Fay Green you can be thinking of the commodities which Hawkins traded with the Portuguese of the Gold Coast of Africa."

Indignantly, the back row comes into its own. "Columbus was looking for a new route to India, so that when he landed in the Caribbean he was good and lost; he thought he was in India. The people who befriended him were massacred and the rest enslaved to mine gold and cultivate sugar. When they died from diseases Europeans brought to the islands, they were replaced by Africans stolen from the Gold Coast of Africa, Miss."

I said all of this slowly, so that I would say it well. Some of it came out just as I had read it in a book that one of the others had taken from the local library. Slowly, but quickly, because my head was hot and heavy. I can feel the others in the back row feeling proud. We watch the frozen face thaw out. We watch her eyes travel right along the two rows at the back. We watch a stream of red blood rush from the neck to the top of her head.

Fay Green cannot hold her voice back. "Hawkins traded trinkets for black African people, who were enslaved and shipped to the Caribbean to slave on sugar plantations, to make sugar for English people's tea, Miss."

All eyes are on the teacher. The back row is tense, wanting an explosion.

The school pips signal the end of the lesson and class five, unusually dignified, stands up and leaves the room. Miss remains fixed to her chair.

Whoops and slaps are heard down the corridor. The back row claims a victory. "She won't be asking us those stupid questions again, will she?"

Voices are raised, claiming, proclaiming, learning the new language in dis here England.

The Darkness Out There

PENELOPE LIVELY

She walked through flowers, the girl, ox-eye daisies and vetch and cow parsley, keeping to the track at the edge of the field. She could see the cottage in the distance, shrugged down into the dip beyond the next hedge. Mrs Rutter, Pat had said, Mrs Rutter at Nether Cottage, you don't know her, Sandra? She's a dear old thing, all on her own, of course, we try to keep an eye. A wonky leg after her op and the home help's off with a bad back this week. So could you make that your Saturday afternoon session, dear? Lovely. There'll be one of the others, I'm not sure who.

Pat had a funny eye, a squint, so that her glance swerved away from you as she talked. And a big chest jutting under washed-out jerseys. Are people who help other people always not very nice-looking? Very busy being busy; always in a rush. You didn't get people like Mrs Carpenter at the King's Arms running the Good Neighbours' Club. People with platinum highlights and spike-heel suede boots.

She looked down at her own legs, the girl, bare brown legs brushing through the grass, polleny summer grass that glinted in the sun.

She hoped it would be Susie, the other person. Or Liz. They could have a good giggle, doing the floors and that. Doing her washing, this old Mrs Rutter.

They were all in the Good Neighbours' Club, her set at school. Quite a few of the boys, too. It had become a sort of craze, the thing to do. They were really nice, some of the old people. The old folks, Pat called them. Pat had done the notice in the library: *Come and have fun giving a helping hand to the old folks. Adopt a granny.* And the jokey cartoon drawing of a dear old bod with specs on the end of her nose and a shawl. One or two of the old people had been a bit sharp about that.

The track followed the hedge round the field to the gate and the plank bridge over the stream. The dark reach of the spinney came right to the gate there so that she would have to walk by the edge of it with the light suddenly shutting off the bare wide sky of the field. Packer's End.

You didn't go by yourself through Packer's End if you could help it, not after tea- time, anyway. A German plane came down in the war and the aircrew were killed and there were people who'd heard them talking still, chattering in German on their radios, voices coming out of the trees, nasty, creepy. People said.

She kept to the track, walking in the flowers with corn running in the wind between her and the spinney. She thought suddenly of blank-eyed helmeted heads, looking at you from among branches. She wouldn't go in there for a thousand pounds, not even in bright day like now, with nothing coming out of the dark slab of trees but birdsong – blackbirds and thrushes and robins and that. It was a rank place, all whippy saplings and brambles and a gully with a dumped mattress and bedstead and an old fridge. And, somewhere, presumably, the crumbling rusty scraps of metal and cloth and … bones?

It was all right out here in the sunshine. Fine. She stopped to pick grass stems out of her sandal; she saw the neat print of the strap-marks against her sunburn, pink- white on brown. Somebody had said she had pretty feet, once; she looked at them, clean and plump and neat on the grass. A ladybird crawled across a toe.

When they were small, six and seven and eight, they'd been scared stiff of Packer's End. Then, they hadn't known about the German plane. It was different things then; witches and wolves and tigers. Sometimes they'd go there for a dare, several of them, skittering over the field and into the edge of

the trees, giggling and shrieking, not too far in, just far enough for it to be scary, for the branch shapes to look like faces and clawed hands, for the wolves to rustle and creep in the greyness you couldn't quite see into, the clotted shifting depths of the place.

But after, lying on your stomach at home on the hearthrug watching telly with the curtains drawn and the dark shut out, it was cosy to think of Packer's End, where you weren't.

After they were twelve or so the witches and wolves went away. Then it was the German plane. And other things too. You didn't know who there might be around, in woods and places. Like stories in the papers. Girl attacked on lonely road. Police hunt rapist. There was this girl, people at school said, this girl some time back who'd been biking along the field path and these two blokes had come out of Packer's End. They'd had a knife, they'd threatened to carve her up, there wasn't anything she could do, she was at their mercy. People couldn't remember what her name was, exactly, she didn't live round here any more. Two enormous blokes, sort of gypsy types.

She put her sandal back on. She walked through the thicker grass by the hedge and felt it drag at her legs and thought of swimming in warm seas. She put her hand on the top of her head and her hair was hot from the sun, a dry burning cap. One day, this year, next year, sometime, she would go to places like on travel brochures and run into a blue sea. She would fall in love and she would get a good job and she would have one of those new Singers that do zig-zag stitch and make an embroidered silk coat.

One day.

Now, she would go to this old Mrs Rutter's and have a bit of a giggle with Susie and come home for tea and wash her hair. She would walk like this through the silken grass with the wind seething the corn and the secret invisible life of birds beside her in the hedge. She would pick a blue flower and examine its complexity of pattern and petal and wonder what it was called and drop it. She would plunge her face into the powdery plate of an elderflower and smell cat, tom-cat, and sneeze and scrub her nose with the back of her hand. She would hurry through the gate and over the stream because that was a bit too close to Packer's End for comfort and she would …

He rose from the plough beyond the hedge.

She screamed.

'Christ!' she said, 'Kerry Stevens you stupid so-and-so, what d'you want to go and do that for, you give me the fright of my life.'

He grinned. 'I seen you coming. Thought I might as well wait.'

Not Susie. Not Liz either. Kerry Stevens from Richmond Way. Kerry Stevens that none of her lot reckoned much on, with his black licked-down hair and slitty eyes. Some people you only have to look at to know they're not up to much.

'Didn't know you were in the Good Neighbours.'

He shrugged. They walked in silence. He took out an Aero bar, broke off a bit, offered it. She said oh, thanks. They went chewing towards the cottage, the cottage where old Mrs Rutter with her wonky leg would be ever so pleased to see them because they were really sweet, lots of the old people. Ever so grateful, the old poppets, was what Pat said, not that you'd put it quite like that yourself.

'Just give it a push, the door. It sticks, see. That's it.'

She seemed composed of circles, a cottage-loaf of a woman, with a face below which chins collapsed one into another, a creamy smiling pool of a face in which her eyes snapped and darted.

‘Tea, my duck?’ she said. ‘Tea for the both of you? I’ll put us a kettle on.’

The room was stuffy. It had a gaudy lino floor with the pattern rubbed away in front of the sink and round the table; the walls were cluttered with old calendars and pictures torn from magazines; there was a smell of cabbage. The alcove by the fireplace was filled with china ornaments: big-eyed flop-eared rabbits and beribboned kittens and flowery milkmaids and a pair of naked chubby children wearing daisy chains.

The woman hauled herself from a sagging armchair. She glittered at them from the stove, manoeuvring cups, propping herself against the draining-board. ‘What’s your names, then? Sandra and Kerry. Well, you’re a pretty girl, Sandra, aren’t you. Pretty as they come. There was – let me see, who was it? – Susie, last week. That’s right, Susie.’ Her eyes investigated, quick as mice. ‘Put your jacket on the back of the door, dear, you won’t want to get that messy. Still at school, are you?’

The boy said, ‘I’m leaving, July. They’re taking me on at the garage, the Blue Star. I been helping out there on and off, before.’

Mrs Rutter’s smiles folded into one another. Above them, her eyes examined him. ‘Well, I expect that’s good steady money if you’d nothing special in mind. Sugar?’

There was a view from the window out over a bedraggled garden with the stumps of spent vegetables and a matted flower bed and a square of shaggy grass. Beyond, the spinney reached up to the fence, a no-man’s-land of willowherb and thistle and small trees, growing thicker and higher into the full density of woodland. Mrs Rutter said, ‘Yes, you have a look out, aren’t I lucky – right up beside the wood. Lovely it is in the spring, the primroses and that. Mind, there’s not as many as there used to be.’

The girl said, ‘Have you lived here for a long time?’

‘Most of my life, dear. I came here as a young married woman, and that’s a long way back, I can tell you. You’ll be courting before long yourself, I don’t doubt. Like bees round the honeypot, they’ll be.’

The girl blushed. She looked at the floor, at her own feet, neat and slim and brown. She touched, secretly, the soft skin of her thigh; she felt her breasts poke up and out at the thin stuff of her top; she licked the inside of her teeth, that had only the one filling, a speck like a pin-head. She wished there was Susie to have a giggle with, not just Kerry Stevens.

The boy said, ‘What’d you like us to do?’

His chin was explosive with acne; at his middle, his jeans yawned from his T-shirt, showing pale chilly flesh. Mrs Rutter said, ‘I expect you’re a nice strong boy, aren’t you? I daresay you’d like to have a go at the grass with the old mower. Sandra can give this room a do, that would be nice, it’s as much as I can manage to have a dust of the ornaments just now, I can’t get down to the floor.’

When he had gone outside the girl fetched broom and mop and dustpan from a cupboard under the narrow stair. The cupboard, stacked with yellowing newspapers, smelt of damp and mouse. When she returned, the old woman was back in the armchair, a composite chintzy mass from which cushions oozed and her voice flowed softly on. ‘That’s it, dear, you just work round, give the corners a brush, if you don’t mind, that’s where the dust settles. Mind your pretty skirt, pull it up a bit, there’s only me to see if you’re showing a bit of bum. That’s ever such a nice style, I expect your mum made it, did she?’

The girl said, ‘Actually I did.’

‘Well now, fancy! You’re a little dressmaker, too, are you? I was good with my needle when I was younger, my eyesight’s past it now, of course. I made my own wedding dress, ivory silk with lace insets. A *Vogue* pattern it was, with a sweetheart neckline.’

The door opened. Kerry said, ‘Where’ll I put the clippings?’

‘There’s the compost heap down the bottom, by the fence. And while you’re down there could you get some sticks from the wood for kindling, there’s a good lad.’

When he had gone she went on, ‘That’s a nice boy. It’s a pity they put that stuff on their hair these days, sticky-looking. I expect you’ve got lots of boyfriends, though, haven’t you?’

The girl poked in a crack at a clump of fluff. ‘I don’t really know Kerry that much.’

‘Don’t you, dear? Well, I expect you get all sorts, in your club thing, the club that Miss Hammond runs.’

‘The Good Neighbours. Pat, we call her.’

‘She was down here last week. Ever such a nice person. Kind. It’s sad she never married.’

The girl said, ‘Is that your husband in the photo, Mrs Rutter?’

‘That’s right, dear. In his uniform. The Ox and Bucks. After he got his stripes. He was a lovely man.’

She sat back on her heels, the dustpan on her lap. The photo was yellowish, in a silver frame. ‘Did he …?’

‘Killed in the war, dear. Right at the start. He was in one of the first campaigns, in Belgium, and he never came back.’

The girl saw a man with a toothbrush moustache, his army cap slicing his forehead. ‘That’s terrible.’

‘Tragic. There was a lot of tragedies in the war. It’s nice it won’t be like that for you young people nowadays. Touch wood, cross fingers. I like young people, I never had any children, it’s been a loss, that, I’ve got a sympathy with young people.’

The girl emptied the dustpan into the bin outside the back door. Beyond the fence, she could see the bushes thrash and Kerry’s head bob among them. She thought, rather him than me, but it’s different for boys, for him anyway, he’s not a nervy type, it’s if you’re nervy you get bothered about things like Packer’s End.

She was nervy, she knew. Mum always said so.

Mrs Rutter was rummaging in a cupboard by her chair. ‘Chocky? I always keep a few chockies by for visitors.’ She brought out a flowered tin. ‘There. Do you know, I’ve had this twenty years, all but. Look at the little cornflowers. And the daisies.

They’re almost real, aren’t they?’

‘Sweet,’ said the girl.

‘Take them out and see if what’s-’is-name would like one.’

There was a cindery path down the garden, ending at a compost heap where eggshells gleamed among leaves and grass clippings. Rags of plastic fluttered from sticks in a bed of cabbages. The girl picked her way daintily, her toes wincing against the cinders. A place in the country. One day she

would have a place in the country, but not like this. Sometime. A little white house peeping over a hill, with a stream at the bottom of a crisp green lawn and an orchard with old apple trees and a brown pony. And she would walk in the long grass in this orchard in a straw hat with these two children, a boy and a girl, children with fair shiny hair like hers, and there'd be this man.

She leaned over the fence and shouted, 'Hey …'

'What?'

She brandished the box.

He came up, dumping an armful of sticks. 'What's this for, then?'

'She said. Help yourself.'

He fished among the sweets, his fingers etched with dirt. 'I did a job on your dad's car last week. That blue Escort's his, isn't it?'

'Mmn.'

'July, I'll be starting full-time. When old Bill retires. With day-release at the tech.'

She thought of oily workshop floors, of the fetid undersides of cars. She couldn't stand the feel of dirt; if her hands were the least bit grubby she had to go and wash; a rim of grime under her nails could make her shudder. She said, 'I don't know how you can, all that muck.'

He fished for another chocolate. 'Nothing wrong with a bit of dirt. What you going to do, then?'

'Secretarial.'

Men didn't mind so much. At home, her dad did things like unblocking the sink and cleaning the stove; Mum was the same as her, just the feel of grease and stuff made her squirm. They couldn't either of them wear anything that had a stain or a spot.

He said, 'I don't go much on her.'

'Who?'

He waved towards the cottage.

'She's all right. What's wrong with her, then?'

He shrugged. 'I dunno. The way she talks and that.'

'She lost her husband,' said the girl. 'In the war.' She considered him, across the fence, over a chasm. Mum said boys matured later, in many ways.

'There's lots of people done that.'

She looked beyond him, into distances. 'Tragic, actually. Well, I'll go back and get on. She says can you see to her bins when you've got the sticks. She wants them carried down for the dustmen.'

Mrs Rutter watched her come in, glinting from the cushions. 'That's a good girl. Put the tin back in the cupboard, dear.'

'What would you like me to do now?'

‘There’s my little bit of washing by the sink. Just the personal things to rinse through. That would be ever so kind.’

The girl ran water into the basin. She measured in the soap flakes. She squeezed the pastel nylons, the floating sinuous tights. ‘It’s a lovely colour, that turquoise.’

‘My niece got me that last Christmas. Nightie and a little jacket to go. I was telling you about my wedding dress. The material came from Macy’s, eight yards. I cut it on the cross, for the hang. Of course, I had a figure then.’ She heaved herself round in the chair. ‘You’re a lovely shape, Sandra. You take care you stay that way.’

‘I can get a spare tyre,’ the girl said. ‘If I’m not careful.’

Outside, the bin lids rattled.

‘I hope he’s minding my edging. I’ve got lobelia planted out along that path.’

‘I love blue flowers.’

‘You should see the wood in the spring, with the bluebells. There’s a place right far in where you get lots coming up still. I used to go in there picking every year before my leg started playing me up. Jugs and jugs of them, for the scent. Haven’t you ever seen them?’

The girl shook her head. She wrung out the clothes, gathered up the damp skein. ‘I’ll put these on the line, shall I?’

When she returned the boy was bringing in the filled coal-scuttle and a bundle of sticks.

‘That’s it,’ said Mrs Rutter. ‘Under the sink, that’s where they go. You’ll want to have a wash after that, won’t you? Put the kettle on, Sandra, and we’ll top up the pot.’

The boy ran his hands under the tap. His shirt clung to his shoulder-blades, damp with sweat. He looked over the bottles of detergent, the jug of parsley, the handful of flowers tucked into a coronation mug. He said, ‘Is that the wood where there was that German plane came down in the war?’

‘Don’t start on that,’ said the girl. ‘It always gives me the willies.’

‘What for?’

‘Scary.’

The old woman reached forward and prodded the fire. ‘Put a bit of coal on for me, there’s a good boy. What’s to be scared of? It’s over and done with, good riddance to bad rubbish.’

‘It was there, then?’

‘Shut up,’ said the girl.

‘Were you here?’

‘Fill my cup up, dear, would you. I was here. Me and my sister. My sister Dot. She’s dead now, two years. Heart. That was before she was married of course, nineteen forty-two, it was.’

‘Did you see it come down?’

She chuckled. ‘I saw it come down all right.’

‘What was it?’ said the boy. ‘Messerschmitt?’

‘How would I know that, dear? I don’t know anything about aeroplanes. Anyway, it was all smashed up by the time I saw it, you couldn’t have told t’other from which.’

The girl’s hand hovered, the tea-cup halfway to her mouth. She sipped, put it down. ‘You *saw* it? Ooh, I wouldn’t have gone anywhere near.’

‘It would have been burning,’ said the boy. ‘It’d have gone up in flames.’

‘There weren’t any flames; it was just stuck there in the ground, end up, with mess everywhere. Drop more milk, dear, if you don’t mind.’

The girl shuddered. ‘I s’pose they’d taken the bodies away by then.’

Mrs Rutter picked out a tea-leaf with the tip of the spoon. She drank, patted the corner of her mouth delicately with a tissue. ‘No, no, ’course not. There was no one else seen it come down. We’d heard the engine and you could tell there was trouble, the noise wasn’t right, and we looked out and saw it come down smack in the trees. ’Course we hadn’t the telephone so there was no ringing the police or the Warden at Clapton. Dot said we should maybe bike to the village but it was a filthy wet night, pouring cats and dogs, and fog too, and we didn’t know if it was one of ours or one of theirs, did we? So Dot said better go and have a look first.’

‘But either way …’ the boy began.

‘We got our wellies on, and Dot had the big lantern, and we went off. It wasn’t very far in. We found it quite quick and Dot grabbed hold of me and pointed and we saw one of the wings sticking up with the markings on and we knew it was one of theirs. We cheered, I can tell you.’

The boy stared at her over the rim of the cup, blank-faced.

‘Dot said bang goes some more of the bastards, come on let’s get back into the warm and we just started back when we heard this noise.’

‘Noise?’

‘Sort of moaning.’

‘Oh,’ cried the girl. ‘How awful, weren’t they …’

‘So we got up closer and Dot held the lantern so we could see and there was three of them, two in the front and they were dead, you could see that all right, one of them had his …’

The girl grimaced. ‘Don’t.’

Mrs Rutter’s chins shook, the pink and creamy chins. ‘Good job you weren’t there, then, my duck. Not that we were laughing at the time, I can tell you, rain teeming down and a raw November night, and that sight under our noses. It wasn’t pretty but I’ve never been squeamish, nor Dot neither. And then we saw the other one.’

‘The other one?’ said the boy warily.

‘The one at the back. He was trapped, see, the way the plane had broken up. There wasn’t any way he could get out.’

The girl stiffened. ‘Oh, lor, you mean he …’

‘He was hurt pretty bad. He was kind of talking to himself. Something about mutter, mutter … Dot said he’s not going to last long, and a good job too, three of them that’ll be. She’d been a VAD so she

knew a bit about casualties, see.' Mrs Rutter licked her lips; she looked across at them, her eyes darting. 'Then we went back to the cottage.'

There was silence. The fire gave a heave and a sigh. 'You what?' said the boy.

'Went back inside. It was bucketing down, cats and dogs.'

The boy and girl sat quite still, on the far side of the table.

'That was eighteen months or so after my hubby didn't come back from Belgium.' Her eyes were on the girl; the girl looked away. 'Tit for tat, I said to Dot.'

After a moment she went on. 'Next morning it was still raining and blow me if the bike hadn't got a puncture. I said to Dot, I'm not walking to the village in this, and that's flat, and Dot was running a bit of a temp, she had the 'flu or something coming on. I tucked her up warm and when I'd done the chores I went back in the wood, to have another look. He must have been a tough so-and-so, that Jerry, he was still mumbling away. It gave me a turn, I can tell you. I'd never imagined he'd last the night. I could see him better, in the day-time; he was bashed up pretty nasty. I'd thought he was an old bloke, too, but he wasn't. He'd have been twentyish, that sort of age.'

The boy's spoon clattered to the floor; he did not move.

'I reckon he may have seen me, not that he was in a state to take much in. He called out something. I thought, oh no, you had this coming to you, mate, there's a war on. You won't know that expression – it was what everybody said in those days. I thought, why should I do anything for you? Nobody did anything for my Bill, did they? I was a widow at thirty-nine. I've been on my own ever since.'

The boy shoved his chair back from the table.

'He must have been a tough bastard, like I said. He was still there that evening, but the next morning he was dead. The weather'd perked up by then and I walked to the village and got a message to the people at Clapton. They were ever so surprised; they didn't know there'd been a Jerry plane come down in the area at all. There were lots of people came to take bits for souvenirs, I had a bit myself but it's got mislaid, you tend to mislay things when you get to my age.'

The boy had got up. He glanced down at the girl. 'I'm going,' he said. 'Dunno about you, but I'm going.'

She stared at the lacy cloth on the table, the fluted china cup. 'I'll come too.'

'Eh?' said the old woman. 'You're off, are you? That was nice of you to see to my little jobs for me. Tell what's-'er-name to send someone next week if she can, I like having someone young about the place, once in a while, I've got a sympathy with young people. Here – you're forgetting your pretty jacket, Sandra, what's the hurry? 'Bye then, my ducks, see you close my gate, won't you?'

The boy walked ahead, fast; the girl pattered behind him, sliding on the dry grass. At the gateway into the cornfield he stopped. He said, not looking at her, looking towards the furzy edge of the wood. 'Christ!'

The wood sat there in the afternoon sun. Wind stirred the trees. Birds sang. There were not, the girl realised, wolves or witches or tigers. Nor were there prowling blokes, gypsy-type blokes. And there were not chattering ghostly voices. Somewhere there were some scraps of metal overlooked by people hunting for souvenirs.

The boy said, 'I'm not going near that old bitch again.' He leaned against the gate, clenching his fists on an iron rung; he shook slightly. 'I won't ever forget him, that poor sod.'

She nodded.

‘Two bloody nights. Christ!’

And she would hear, she thought, always, for a long time anyway, that voice trickling on, that soft old woman’s voice; would see a tin painted with cornflowers, pretty china ornaments.

‘It makes you want to throw up,’ he said. ‘Someone like that.’

She couldn’t think of anything to say. He had grown; he had got older and larger. His anger eclipsed his acne, the patches of grease on his jeans, his lardy midriff. You could get people all wrong, she realised with alarm. You could get people wrong and there was a darkness that was not the darkness of tree shadows and murky undergrowth and you could not draw the curtains and keep it out because it was in your head, once known, in your head for ever like lines from a song. One moment you were walking in long grass with the sun on your hair and birds singing and the next you glimpsed darkness, an inescapable darkness. The darkness was out there and it was a part of you and you would never be without it, ever.

She walked behind him, through a world grown unreliable, in which flowers sparkle and birds sing but everything is not as it appears, oh no.