

NOW and THEN

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1

I wake. It is dark. My sleep has been long and deep. For a short while I struggle with a disconcerting sense of not knowing. I try to recall, to recall anything. I flounder without a focus, suspended in a vagueness that refuses to be dispelled. I concentrate. Cogito ergo sum. A soft buoyancy forms beneath me and I float upwards leaving the depths and rising gently to the familiar, the well-known.

I turn to face the clock. Seven twenty-six. Early. The six changes to a seven. The radio will come on at half past. I twist until I am on my back. The other half of the bed is empty. It has been empty for years. The radiator under the curtained window creaks. The central heating has already come on. A metallic click. Somewhere under the floorboards a triple bump. Expanding copper pipes. The house, like me, is waking up. I lie with my eyes open, the ceiling a blurred paleness. Thinking. Dark morning. Autumn. Feels like Autumn. Not yet November. Soon be November. Then Winter. November. The dark days before Christmas. Coloured lights. Shopping. Gifts for him. Gifts for her. Rachel's again. Kids opening presents. What shall I buy? How much should I spend? Must ask Rachel.

I wake again. A voice pronounces a sequence of words. I hold them in my head and string them together to give them meaning. I listen to the news summary, a sentence about the weather.

From some way off comes the sound of a politician rolling out with practised ease a succession of statements and justifications qualified to the point at which precise interpretation is impossible. Slippery. I listen, trying to recognise the voice. The interviewer aggressively asks a question. The aggression tells me that this is not the first time in this interview he has asked the question. The MP continues, as if he had not been interrupted, to answer a different question. The interviewer interrupts again, pushing. The MP deflects, swerves, blocks until the allocated time has elapsed. The interview ends with the customary politeness and I am, along with

all the other listeners, no wiser. The politician's message has been a rehearsal of threadbare mantras, the interviewer's questions mere punctuation.

I get up, shower, shave and dress.

Outside the sky is grey. The car in the drive is covered in little beads of moisture. The trees in the park are shadows, the distance beyond them blank. The shrubs in the garden drip greyness. The pavement and the road are dark with wetness. I zip my jacket. At the corner shop I buy a newspaper and a pint of milk. Mr Patel smiles and I smile. I decline his offer of a plastic bag.

Back in the street the dampness is now almost rain.

I carry the milk in my left hand, thumb and forefinger, the newspaper folded and trapped between my arm and my body.

I unlock and open the front door and step into the warmth of the hall. I put the paper on the table by the telephone and stand the milk on the paper. I close the door and lock it, leaving the key in the lock and the other keys on the ring swinging. I unzip my jacket and hang it on the peg on the inside of the door to the cupboard under the stairs.

I pour milk on my muesli and leave it to soak. I switch on the radio and listen while the kettle boils. I make a cafetière of coffee. I sit down to eat. When my cereal bowl is empty I take it and the spoon I have been using and place them in the dishwasher. In the freezer there is a wrapped loaf of thick-sliced brown bread. I have already used about a third. I take out two frozen slices and prise them apart. I drop them into the toaster and force down the handle. I replace the wrapped loaf. I push down the plunger in the cafetière and pour coffee into a mug . The Best Dad in the World. I take a plate from the cupboard over the toaster, and a knife from the drawer beneath. I look at the front page of the paper. I drink some of the coffee. The toast jumps up and I juggle the hot slices on to a plate. I take a tub of spreadable butter from the fridge and spread some of the butter on each slice of toast. I cut the slices in half, diagonally. I eat, ignoring the radio.

I leave the kitchen carrying the mug that I have topped up with the remainder of the coffee, the newspaper folded under my arm. I go into the front room and switch on the light. Nothing has changed since I went to bed last night. Everything is exactly as I left it. Yesterday's newspaper. The empty glass, still smelling of whisky, on the small table. I stand the mug next to the glass. I drop today's paper on the chair. I draw back the heavy curtains and stare for a few seconds at the greyness. I move the paper and sit down. I drink my coffee in paced mouthfuls keeping the

warm mug in my hand. When it is empty I continue to hold it in the curve of my palm. My grip tightens. Involuntarily I stand. My knee catches the table. I hurl the mug. It smashes into the patterned wall and the pieces explode over the sofa. I stride forward into the table. It is on its side. I turn. I stride again. Towards the door. My foot kicks the whisky glass. The glass skitters across the floor hitting the skirting board.

I once threw something at Jo. A glass. Not directly at her. I wanted to throw it at her but I threw it at the floor. It bounced off the carpet and landed by the bed. Unbroken. I was angry. Angry in a way that has already lost touch with the cause, the reason. It was a rage against a world that did not understand me. Against people that did not understand me. Against a wife that did not understand me. It was me that did not understand. I can acknowledge that. Now. Not being understood is an inherent aspect of being human. No one can ever see the world from another's point of view. And I cannot be expected to see the world from anyone else's point of view. Can I? I try. We try. Some of us. Sometimes. But we fail. Looking back, the anger was never justified. But justifying wasn't a process I considered. I was angry. Simply and straightforwardly angry. It wasn't the product of thought, of consideration, of weighing up the pros and cons. It was a response. A response to a pattern of events and perceptions that conjured up aggression and an urge to cause injury or damage. An adult tantrum. I thought I'd grown out of tantrums.

I walk across the park. A long striding gait that stretches my legs beyond what is comfortable. I walk as fast as I can. Cutting through the fabric of the world, of being. I replay the seconds between finishing my coffee and throwing the mug. I can recall the tension increasing. I can still feel it in my gut, in the muscles of my arms, in the tightness of my chest as I draw in the raw air, burning my lungs. My rationality hovers above the animal drive to move, the need to vent a destructive force that cannot be stopped, only sated. I notice little. I follow the path that forks at the lake. I keep to the left. Approaching the top corner of the lake I shorten my pace. I ease my breathing. I round the top of the lake. My speed has dropped. I feel cold. I am not wearing a coat. I head back to the house.

- Hello Rachel.

- Mr Bathurst.

- Jack. Please.

- It's good of you to come.

- I read about it in the evening paper. Awful.

- Yes. It was. Is.

- I thought you were in Malawi?

- I was. Got back this morning.

- Quick.

- The organisation I was with were very good. Fixed a flight in twenty-four hours. Minibus to Lilongwe. Plane to Heathrow. Late train last night.

- You must be shattered.

[Silence]

- How's your mother?

- She's all right. Still weak. Not out of the woods yet. You should go and see her. She'll be pleased to see you. There's not much you can do here.

- I looked in before I came over here.

- She was all right?

- Yes. Fine. As far as I could see. Asleep. [Silence] There was someone with her. Standing, watching. A tall fellow. Black.

- Michael.

- Michael?

- Yes. Not sure what to tell you. Not sure what I can tell you.

- Oh.

- He's friendly enough. Won't bite.

- But I shouldn't be too inquisitive.

- Right.

- There's a baby.

- Baby?

- Little girl. Born early. Shock precipitated the birth. I think.

- Oh, I see.

[Silence]

- You've moved while I was away.

- Yes. Detached. Over near your school.

- Dad mentioned it. On the phone. Settled in?

- Sort of. Julia's changing things. New kitchen. New bathroom. Carpets. Curtains. It'll be new furniture

next. The rooms are bigger, different shapes. Our old furniture doesn't look right.

Rachel eyes the digital display on the video-recorder.

I watch it change from 14:37 to 14:38. 'I've decided to sell the house.'

Incomprehension blanks her face for a second. 'This house?'

'What other house do I have?'

Her expression changes. Her forehead wrinkles, not quite a scowl. I see the little disappointed girl of many years ago. Long hair, flowered frock. She swings her gaze to the window, through the window, beyond. Short hair, big round earrings. Red plastic, almost the same colour as her lipstick. Black sweater, denim jeans. 'This house. I grew up in this house. We grew up in this house.'

'I know.' I stare at the window.

'Dad, why? Why now? After all these years?'

I keep staring. 'I need a new start.'

She reaches down for her handbag. Red. And puts it on her knee. She is wearing trainers.

I study her trainers. 'I've been idling these past however many years.' The pattern of the fabric pieces, different colours, sewn together.

'Since.'

I nod. 'And now. Now I'm here day after day. On my own.'

'It's not quite two months.'

I look up. 'Nine weeks.'

'Well, nine weeks.' Her face tightens sympathetically. 'Dad.' There is a hint of frustration. 'Give it time. Give yourself time.'

'It's like a prison.'

She almost laughs. 'Now you're being melodramatic.'

'Am I?'

She widens her eyes. Mocking. Disbelieving.

I look at my knees. 'Work was a daily escape. The exercise yard. People. It got me through the weeks. Now.' I raise my head.

'I'll have to go.' She stands up. 'Jack gets cross if I'm not waiting for him in the playground.'

I follow her into the hall. 'Cross?'

She puts her handbag on the top of the glass-fronted bookcase. 'You know what he's like.' She stretches her arms into her tailored jacket. 'It's turned colder this week.'

'The evenings are already getting darker.'

'We going to the cottage for a few days at half term. Come with us. Give yourself a break.'

'Not long before the clocks go back. And then Christmas.'

She laughs. 'New Year, Easter, Summer - if we're lucky - and then Christmas again.'

'That's partly it.'

'Dad.'

'I'm wishing my time away. I feel I should be doing something.'

'You've worked hard. Time to take it easy.'

'I thought a new start.'

'Dad, you've retired.'

'People live into their eighties. Nineties.'

She picks up her handbag and turns to open the door. 'Think about it. Don't rush into anything.'

'I thought if I put it up for sale now.'

'Not the ideal time. People don't buy houses in the winter. And the way the market is.' The door is ajar. Her hand rests on the door handle.

'I thought the sooner the better.'

'Must go.' She slips her handbag up her arm, puts her hands on my shoulders and gives me a light kiss on my left cheek. 'Think about it.'

She has the smell of woman I do not know. Like someone encountered for the first time at a business meeting.

I stand on the doorstep while she waits for a gap in the traffic before reversing her little yellow car out and swinging it across the road. She waves and I wave back as she drives off. A girl who has been standing on the park side of the road crosses over as soon as Rachel has gone. She is quite striking, perhaps sixteen, seventeen. I find it hard to tell these days, dark skin, black hair, big eyes, school uniform. She stares at me. Challenging. She knows how good she looks and she makes me feel uncomfortable. I turn away, step inside the house and close the door.

When we moved into this house, the road had much less traffic. With two little children we saw the park as an extension of our domain. It wasn't long before we trusted them to cross the road safely and they often played games with Jack and Julia's three, and other kids who lived nearby. Jo could keep an eye on them from one of the front bedroom windows. They both learned to cycle on the paths of the park, and as they got older and the bikes bigger, they would compete with the other kids to see who could ride round a section of the park in the shortest time. One of the boys had a gadget on his front wheel that measured distances to a tenth of a mile and he declared that the circuit was a mile and one-tenth. The target time for a lap was five minutes and there was always someone with a digital watch to act as time keeper. On hot days we would picnic on the grass with other families and organise a game of rounders or cricket.

- Hello, I'm Russell Banstead, free church hospital chaplain. Methodist actually.
- Rachel, Rachel Dow.
- How are things?
- Not much to say. He's still unconscious. Severe concussion. Or worse. They say the next few days are crucial.
- He's in good hands.
- I hope so.
- [Silence]
- How far do you have to travel.
- Not far. Twenty minutes on the bus.
- It can be quite draining. Visiting.
- Nothing else to do. No one at home.

- So I understand. I've seen your mother. And the baby. Little mite. In her plastic box, cut off from a loving touch.
- I feel cut off.
- From your father?
- I don't like to think of him being alone. And who else will come and sit? Watching, waiting.
- You do talk to him?
- Doesn't seem any point.
- You should.
- Why?
- They say that hearing is the last sense to disappear as you slip into unconsciousness. It may not even go.
- You mean he may be able to hear us?
- It's possible. And it would be good for you.
- What should I talk about?
- Anything. Anything at all.
- As if he were my counsellor.
- Sort of.

I shouldn't have expected Rachel to be encouraging about selling the house. I think she knows I'm unhappy. No, that's not the word. Disappointed. Life hasn't turned out the way I thought it would. I guess it doesn't for anyone. I've ignored my disappointment. Done nothing about it. Let the demands of each day drive me on to the demands of the next. Looking forward to a time when things would be - I don't know - better? Happier? Fulfilled? No one demands anything of me now. I'm free to do as I please and little pleases me. I need things to be different. I need things to be difficult. Awkward. Dilemmas. Decisions. Compromises. Success. And failure. Elation. And disappointment. Instead I have ease, complacency, monotony.

We started off well. As well as anybody, I suppose. Of course, you don't have anything to compare it with. Not the first time and there hasn't been a second. External appearances are only, at best, an indirect clue to what goes on inside a relationship, inside a marriage. I think we looked good from the outside. Inside there were difficulties. Nothing serious. At least, nothing we let become serious. Money and sex. No, it's never as simple as that, is it? She wanted to save up to buy

a house. I thought we could rent until things were a bit more predictable. I didn't know where I might be in a couple of years time. I'd have to go where there was a job. We agreed we would save what she earned and spend what I got. Which wasn't much. Just over a thousand a year, as a research assistant. I was desperately trying to write my thesis. In the evenings mainly. She wanted to go out more. I hadn't the time and she hadn't the money. We did go out. And I did work late after we came home. Not much time for sex. Even when, to me, all the factors were right, there was no guarantee.

Without any discussion she stopped taking the pill. I don't know whether it was the not-having-to-take-it, or the not-having-to-remember-to-take-it or the fact that, for her, sex now had a worthwhile purpose or what, but we put behind us the quibbles about money and for nearly eighteen months we were content to be happy with each other. Then one day she greeted me with the news that she was pregnant. I didn't give her chance to tell me how pleased she was. I wanted to know how it had happened and when she confessed, I flared. I wanted to know what gave her the right to take this decision on her own. To lie to me. She said she had never lied. She had merely hidden the truth from me. She cried. I left her crying and went to the pub. I had too much to drink, came back, apologised incoherently and then I cried. A child that was ours. Not hers, not mine. A child that ensured our future together. Or so I thought.

2

At the top of the long gentle incline we all stop for a breather. Those who had arrived first are resting against the small eroded outcrop of rock. The distant hills beyond the wide valley are a backdrop of washed-out colour. Even the valley floor with its reticulation of hedges separating pasture and ploughed field is dull under the overcast sky. Moisture hangs in the air. Too fine to be drizzle, but dampening all the same. I turn, putting the panorama, and the chilling breeze at my back.

'Feels like November already.'

'Not the best of days. Still it's good to get out. Away from the city.' Jack pulls a handkerchief from a pocket under his anorak and wipes his long nose.

'I'm glad I came. I'm glad you asked me.'

'Been meaning to ever since I heard you'd retired, but what with holidays and things.'

I follow him to a sloping flat rock some five or six yards away. He sits down.

I sit down next to him. 'It's good to get out of the house.'

'Even at this time of the year.'

'Even at this time of the year.'

'What do you do with yourself?'

'Nothing much. I read. I wander about the neighbourhood. Sometimes go for a drive. I shop. I cook. I go out to the cinema. Or for a meal. I watch television. I listen to the radio.'

'On your own?'

'Yes. For the last few years the only people in my life - except the kids and grandkids - have been those I worked with and now I don't work.'

Jack stands and faces the valley. He addresses an unseen host. 'These people that hang on. Always going back. Offering to help out. Sad.' He turns a quarter circle and studies the ridge. 'Fellow near us. Carries his briefcase in day after day. Must be damn near eighty.'

'University?'

'Some kind of professor.'

'Emeritus.'

'What?'

'Sort of like honorary. He'll have a desk somewhere, perhaps a room, access to the library. He may even have research students.'

'At eighty?'

'Probably not. But he will have had.'

'Cheap labour.'

'As for not wanting to make the break, he's not on his own.'

'When I stopped, I stopped.' Jack straightens his left leg and stretches down with his hands as though coming to attention. He takes off his cap, and I notice, as if for the first time, that there is little left of his fair hair. He puts his cap back on.

The party begin to stir. We rise from the rock and begin to move. Anoraks of various colours, mainly brown or green, one yellow. Those that still have sufficient hair are hatless the rest have flat caps or woollen hats. Most have traditional leather hiking boots, some heavy shoes like me. Trousers, unless waterproofed, are tucked into thick socks or strapped inside gaiters. Some make use of a walking stick. All of them move in a deliberate ballet that privileges balance over speed.

- Hello. Where's the girl who's usually here.
- Julie?
- I don't know her name.
- She usually does evenings.
- Long hair. Late twenties. Thirty? Not what you would call slim.
- And what do you think I would you call slim?
- Sorry.
- [Pause] No. It's OK. I've been here all day. A long day.

- Oh?
- Someone has to cover the desk till the library closes.
- Not your job?
- Not really. Julie rang in. Her little one isn't well.
- So you?
- Told her not to come in.
- And you stayed on.
- I normally finish at five thirty. Six at the latest.
[Pause] Just these to return?
- Yes. [Pause] So this is overtime?
- Yes. [Pause] Unpaid.
- Well thanks.
- Why?
- Only time I could get in today. If the library had been closed.
- You're the only one in the last hour.
- Only another hour. Do you have to lock up?
- No. Security will see to that.
- And then home.
- At least if it's quiet I can get some paperwork done.
- I'll let you get on then.

The path becomes indistinct and I take a couple of quick paces to get alongside Jack. 'I've been thinking about getting away altogether.'

'Holiday?'

'No, permanently.'

'Moving?'

I nod.

'Where to?'

'No idea. Don't know. I don't feel as if I want.' I hesitate. 'I'm.' I shake my head.
'I want things to be different.'

'Fresh start sort of thing?'

'That's one way of putting it.'

'Is there another?'

'That's it. I don't know.' We climb a wooden stile over a drystone wall. 'Anyway, I've put the house up for sale.'

'Not a good time.'

'I know. I keep having this pointed out to me. Economic climate.'

'Now there's a mess if ever there was one. Too much easy credit. Bound to cause trouble eventually. I said as much years ago.'

The group are straggled along the ridge. The breeze becomes a wind and the droplets it carries settle on our waterproofs in a cold film. Those without hats pull their hoods over their heads. I do the same. The wind is strong enough to discourage conversation and we walk along without speaking our boots squelching in the occasional puddle of overnight rain.

The path drops down into a cleft in the ridge, into a narrow space below the wind.

'But you are getting used to being retired?'

'If I'm honest I miss the work. No. I miss the routine, the framework. Can't say I miss the university. Not the way it is now.'

'The people?'

'Not really. Well, not those particular people.'

'I hated it when I stopped. Having to decide what to do each day and not having a good reason to get up in the morning.'

I go ahead of Jack as the path wriggles downwards through a tumble of dark angular rocks. The worn stones underfoot are wet and those that slope at awkward angles are treacherous. A brief yell focuses attention on a green anorak who has slipped. At the bottom we push through a narrow gate and follow a wire fence that divides a large field. On the other side of the fence sheep graze.

'You sound as if you've got used to it.'

'We have,' says Jack, 'Julia, once she retired, made it clear that she was going to do things. And she does. Her week has a pattern to it and I, well, I fit in.'

'I suppose it's different when there's two of you.'

'I suppose it is.'

After another couple of miles of level walking we come out on to a narrow lane with neat hawthorn hedges on both sides. I push my hood back, enjoying the fresh freedom.

- Excuse me.
- Yes?
- Oh, it's you.
- Who did you expect?
- I wasn't expecting anyone in particular.
- Well?
- Am I interrupting?
- Inevitably.
- Sorry.
- What is it?
- Your colleague sent me over. Said you would be able to help.
- That may be true.
- I'm following up this reference in this paper.
- Let me see.
- The journal - if it is a journal - doesn't appear to be in the catalogue.
- No. I don't recognise it. But then.
- Do you think?
- Look. I haven't time just at this minute, but leave it with me and I'll see what I can find out.
- Thanks. Should I come back tomorrow?
- Make it the day after.
- Thank you. I'll see you the day after tomorrow. Thursday.
- Thursday.
- Thank you for your help.
- Thank me later. [Pause] When I've done something.

A quarter of an hour's brisk walk warms us up and brings us to a village. We lunch in the village inn, pint and a sandwich. The girl who brings my sandwich could be the girl I saw the other day, crossing the road. I decide it isn't. It's a school day and this girl is working. Green tabard over a black blouse, black trousers. I smile

hoping to be friendly. She presses her lips together. Her eyes sharp, noticing. I thank her and her face relaxes.

'I don't think we've met.'

I turn my attention to the walker sitting next to me. 'No, I don't think we have.'

'Russell,' he says. 'First name.'

'Neville. Also first name.'

'You've been before?'

'No. First time. You?'

'Get whenever I can.'

'Jack - Jack Bathurst - asked me along.'

'You know Jack.'

'Years ago he lived in the street I still live in. We met up again by chance a few weeks ago. I think he feels a bit sorry for me.'

I judge Russell to be in his fifties. He studies me, his face relaxed with a neutral expression.

'Should he?'

I don't respond immediately.

Russell cuts his baguette sandwich in half and presses one half with the heel of his hand, squeezing the filling. He picks up the sandwich and starts eating.

'I suppose it's because I'm on my own and retired. He probably thinks I'm lonely.'

He chews for a while. I decide that it is a good idea to cut my sandwich.

'Are you?'

'What?'

'Lonely?'

'Aren't we all?' I pick a piece of my sandwich and eat.

He puts down his sandwich and drinks from his pint.

I keep eating.

He places his glass on the table. 'Sorry. It's a failing.'

I wait, wondering.

'This persistent asking of personal questions. I excuse myself by claiming it's part of the job.'

'And the job is?'

'Methodist minister. Bit like a vicar. But the Methodist Church.'

'No gambling.' I nod at his pint. 'No alcohol.'

'Not as strait-laced as we used to be.'

'No. A cousin on my mother's side was a Methodist. Something big in his church. He was a bit old school, I think. Always talking about what they'd done, what they were going to do, and carping about those who didn't see things his way.'

More eating. And drinking.

'I think loneliness - of a sort - is a natural consequence of being human. We are confined inside our own heads, guessing at how it feels to be someone else.'

'Solipsism,' says Russell

'O wouldn't go that far. I think the world is real. Out there. Not merely in my head.' I put on a thoughtful face. 'I was trying to say that loneliness is a natural state. We are alone. So I'm not sure what people mean when they say they're lonely - they seem to mean something different, something that can be changed.'

'So you think that you - because of what you believe - can't be lonely in the same way as other people are.'

'I suppose I do.'

He angles his head slightly as though trying to discern something in my face. 'Do you miss people?'

'Yes. Sometimes.'

'Why?'

'People make life interesting.'

'And without them life is.' He hesitated. 'What? Boring?'

'No just less interesting.'

A different girl comes and takes away our empty plates.

'How long have you been on your own?'

'Fifteen. Sixteen. Years.'

'Long time.'

My head twitches in an unconscious response that I think indicates something between yes and I suppose so. 'Car crash. Jo - Josephine - was killed in a car crash.'

'Children?'

'Already away from home. Never came back. Not properly.'

He lifts his empty glass as if intending to drink from it, puts it down and looks at me. Professionally sympathetic. 'What did you do?'

'University. Lecturer.'

'Subject?'

'Computing. AI. Artificial intelligence.'

'The mind in the machine.'

'No such thing.' I smile to soften my bluntness.

'What?'

'Mind.'

'Not even up here?' He taps the side of his head.

'Not even up there. Or here.' I touch my own head.

'But.'

'Useful working hypothesis.'

'Yes. Like the soul.'

I was sent to Sunday school like lots of kids my age. Out of the house on a Sunday afternoon leaving parents for an hour or so to do whatever they did. I knew the jargon. Heaven, hell, soul. The words had meaning, but I'm not sure they had any significance. I think that if I had known the meaning of the word myth I would have understood that what I was being told were stories about a mythical world that might in a parabolic way guide me in the real world. Did I ever believe? I think I wanted to believe. Jesus of Nazareth struck me as sharp fellow. At least, the bits about his life that have come down to us indicate to me that he had insights into people that go far beyond those I have. Though he wasn't always crystal clear. Came at things a bit sideways. Lateral thinker. I liked what he said and the way he said it. I wasn't so sure about what Sunday school tried to teach. Having him as a

friend. Living by a set of rules that would ensure that you spent eternity – whatever that was – in heaven rather than hell. Hell wasn't much talked about but you knew it wasn't pleasant. Eternal damnation had a very negative resonance. But heaven wasn't a great deal better. Singing for ever in uncreated light. There seemed to be no freedom in either situation. Compulsory pain or compulsory delight. The idea that death was not the end was important. That I liked. Though death at that age wasn't a reality. I couldn't imagine not being. I didn't want a life after death that wasn't real. That was stripped of everything that made life worth living. Striving, failing, succeeding, winning, losing, happiness, sadness, boredom, excitement. Everlasting boredom was terrifying. So was everlasting delight. What I wanted life-after-death to be was awareness of what was going on without the encumbrance of a physical body. And its needs. Without responsibilities. Without decisions.

We set off again along a wide well-used footpath that follows the river downstream. The pace is less urgent and we amble along in groups of three or four. The day has not brightened and the damp greyness seeps into the mind. Occasionally someone, conscious of the extended silence, enquires about a son or daughter, or a wife. By half past two it is beginning to feel like dusk. What light remains is reluctant to illuminate.

At the end point of the walk someone reads the timetable framed and clamped to a bus stop and tells us that we have to wait almost half an hour. I sit on the low stone wall pulling the back of my anorak down so that it protects my backside from the wet and the cold. The wall bounds the garden of a long stone cottage that appears to be the only habitation in the vicinity.

Jack is in conversation with one of the others. After a time he finishes and comes over and sits next to me. 'Cheer up. You look as though you've lost a pound and found a shilling.'

I smile. I don't put much effort into the smile.

'Too much of you own company. That's your problem.'

'Is it?'

'Ever thought of finding a companion, a partner?'

I incline my head and lift a shoulder. 'Not really.'

'Not really? Well, how imaginary?'

'Can't say it hasn't crossed my mind.'

'Seriously. Maybe it is something you should consider seriously.'

'Possibly.'

'Could be cheaper than moving and more rewarding in the long run.'

'Could be a disaster.'

'Could be.'

I look at him and he avoids my gaze.

The single decker bus appears over the brow of the hill and as one creature we stand up and move to the bus stop. I sit next to a window. Jack drops down beside me. 'I heard that you once had something going with Debbie Netherby?'

I try to appear puzzled. 'Where did you hear that?'

'One of Julia's cousins is a close friend of Debbie.'

'Women. Can't keep anything to themselves.'

'You're admitting it, then?'

'It was an awfully long time ago. Must be twenty years. Never really came to anything.'

'Why?'

'Not sure?'

'Would you have.' He eyes assess me. 'Left? Married her?'

'I don't think so. I think she liked the money.'

'Ah, the money.'

'Meaning?'

'If there was money to be, shall we say, acquired, then Donald Netherby was interested.'

'Was he?'

'Anyway now she has the money.'

'Meaning?'

'Don died a month or two ago. Cancer of some kind. Too advanced to operate. Dead in ten weeks.'

'Can't say I knew him.'

'There was a bit in the evening paper. Local business man and all that. Crook more like.'

'Didn't see it.'

He stretches across the aisle to reach an abandoned newspaper and opens it. I give my attention to the window. I wipe a broad arc through the condensation with my forearm but the mizzle has turned to rain and the outside of the window is streaked with water. There is nothing to see. I picture Debbie. Early thirties. Slim, very slim. Especially when I held her close.

- Unpaid late shift again?
- Child care. Bloody child care.
- That's a bit harsh.
- When we had kids I gave up work. These days.
- You have to pay the mortgage.
- So they say.
- I was hoping I'd find you here.
- As I said I'm not often here.
- Came to say thanks. Finding out about that reference. You weren't around when I collected the photocopy.
- Part of what I'm here for.
- I can still say thank you, can't I?
- Yes. And it's nice you do. Better than the string of complaints I sometimes have to deal with.
- Is that part of what you are here for?
- Most end up in front of me if they're anything more than trivial.
- How do you handle them?
- I listen. I make an arrangement to see them the following day. I talk to the staff concerned and then I explain to the complainant - if they return - how it happened, how we will endeavour to avoid it happening again, or - as is often the case - why we have to do things the way we do.
- [Silence]
- Quiet again.
- How did you know I'd be here?
- I come here every evening in the hope that I will see you.

- Liar.
- I am. But I'm pleased to see you.
- Are you?
- I don't get much conversation. Patients. Lecturing to large classes. The research students are better, but they seem so young and have such young interests.
- At home?
- Just me.
- Just you. Sometimes I wish.
- What?
- Nothing.
- [Silence]
- How about a drink when you've finished?
- And why would I go with you for drink?
- My way of saying thank you.
- The words are enough.
- To underline the words. To make saying thank you more than an empty formula.
- More than a social convention.
- It doesn't matter.
- It does.
- What does?
- Understanding why?
- Why what?
- Why you want to change what is hardly a professional relationship into something else?
- Such as?
- A relationship in which there are expectations and implied [Pause] obligations.
- Obligations?
- I couldn't think of a better word.
- Why would I want to change things? Let me think. I like talking to you. Is that a good enough reason?
- We've hardly exchanged a hundred words.
- Many more.
- [Pause] I don't know.
- Come on. Just a quick one and I'll run you home.
- I'd rather get the bus. As usual.
- That'll make you late.
- And if you give me a lift?
- You won't be home much later.
- Won't I?

- I promise.
- All right.
- See you outside here at ten past.
- Make it quarter past.
- Nine-fifteen then.

3

I hear the post as I am dressing. It is lying on the floor in the hall. A long manilla envelope, a sharp-cornered almost-square white envelope and a well-filled A4 envelope. The manilla envelope has a transparent window and I recognise it as a bank statement. The large thick envelope is from an insurance company. Too thick to be important. It'll be a glossy brochure, pictures of healthy old people smiling. The small stiff white envelope has the university crest on the flap. I open it. It is an invitation to a lunch for all recently retired members of staff.

- Been to see Mum?
- Yep.
- How did she seem? To you?
- OK. OK. Didn't get a chance to talk to her.
- Why?
- Some woman I vaguely recognised. Grey-haired. Fattish. Coat over the other chair. Hat still on her head. Mum smiled and gave me a wave.
- Hairy chin?
- That's her.
- Mrs Christine Allen. You remember. Her husband had the greengrocer's at the corner. It's a hairdresser's now.
- Maybe. Anyway what's she doing here?
- Good neighbourliness.
- More like good nosiness. [Pause] Any news here?
- There was talk about trying to sort out his arm.
- While he's unconscious?
- There was a flutter of eyelids yesterday. I think they thought he might be coming round.

- Why bother?
- Ben.
- I mean with the arm. It's only a broken arm.
- Needs surgery.
- [Silence]
- Otherwise, no change.
- Can't he breathe on his own. Without that. Machine.
- They've tried taking him off it, but it's not long before his oxygen level drops. That's what that peg on his finger measures. He's broken several ribs.
- [Silence]
- What are you doing?
- Trying it out. On me.
- Ben. Someone might come in. See you.
- It sort of shines through. Ninety-seven. Is that good?
- They try to keep it over ninety-five. If it gets below ninety they worry.
- Clever. Wonder how it works.
- How long are you staying?
- Got to be back Tuesday.
- Got to?
- Got to. Got to see my supervisor before he goes abroad for a month.
- I see. What's he like?
- All right. Fairly easy going. [Pause] I was at his house last week, for supper. Another student, Deirdre, was invited as well. She's just started her PhD. Bit wet.
- [Silence] I'd been before, met his wife a couple of times. Their daughter was there this time. Rather fancied her, but a bit young. Still at school. Pleasant enough evening but very middle class.
- You're very middle class.
- I know, but I don't like it. Sherry. Clinking glasses. Trying to kiss cheeks like the French but without the elegant nonchalance.

I take a clean white shirt out of the wardrobe and decide it needs ironing. My suit looks a little tired so when I have ironed the shirt I press the trousers of the suit using a clean, damp tea-towel, the way my mother did. I have pair of shoes I only wear with my suit, and recently I have only worn my suit at funerals. I bought the

shoes and the suit for Rachel's wedding. The shirt feels sharp around my neck and when I pull the tie tight I note that my neck is scrawny. The trousers of the suit nip a bit around the waist as I fasten them and pull up the zip. The shoes are stiff and feel narrow. The jacket hangs on my shoulders, off my shoulders.

I take the bus. If I take the car there'll be nowhere to park and I'll have to be careful how much I drink. So I take the bus. The lunch is in a room adjacent to the senior common room bar. I enter the bar.

'Neville.'

I stop as I try to work out where the voice came from. I see a familiar face. John has a chair in mathematics. He is standing near the bar with a woman I vaguely recognise. Dyed black hair. Pale make-up. Thin lips. Too much eye shadow.

'You here for the retirees lunch?'

Mentally I squirm at the word. 'Thought I'd show my face.'

'This is Deirdre Hardcastle.'

'Hello,' I say, and hesitate. 'We've met but I.'

'Deputy registrar.'

'Of course. I'm Neville Dow. Weren't you in Research Grants once.'

'Yes, I was.'

'When we were all learning to work out the best way to get lots of European money.'

'And how are things?' says John.

'Fine. Fine. I'm beginning to find ways of filling my time.'

'Give me half a chance and I'd be doing the same.'

Deirdre gives him a reproving look. 'John thrives on work.'

'You don't do so badly yourself.'

His response has a hint of acid. I sense I am in the middle of something. 'Better join the rest before all the alcohol has gone.'

The room is long and narrow, little wider than a corridor. One long wall of the room is filled from ceiling down to waist height with a parade of windows divided into thin vertical panes. Near the opposite wall a woman wearing a white apron over a purple dress or overall stands at one end of a table. The table is covered with a plain white tablecloth that reaches almost to the carpeted floor. She is

pouring red wine into empty glasses. At the other end of the long table upturned cups in saucers are waiting for the coffee that will be offered later. On the carpeted space between the table and the windows, twenty or so people, mainly men, stand with glasses of wine in their hands talking in pairs or threes. I see no one I know, though I recognise a few.

I move towards the woman pouring the wine. She empties the bottle of red wine and reaches under the table. She brings out a bottle of white wine, already uncorked. She begins to put white wine into empty glasses. I stand.

‘Help, yourself.’

I do. I carry my red wine to the wall of glass and sip it as I stare through the narrow panes. I look down from the slightly elevated position on the first floor across a large gravel square, known as the Chancellor’s Court. The court has an S-shaped paved path through it and some rather dowdy circular raised beds of greenery in the curves of the S. The left and right sides of the court have buildings similar to the one I am in. Broad horizontal bands of raw concrete mark the floors and between these bands stand unbroken rows of vertical strips of glass. The fourth side of the court has a building housing a stack of lecture theatres. From this angle it looks like a concrete pipe organ except that the sections have slipped into an escalation of fractured verticals.

Behind me the conversation has bubbled up into an uneven grumble. I drain my glass and set it down on the narrow window sill and work my way back to pick up another glass of red wine. I’m standing alongside the phalanx of filled glasses when a sharp tap of metal on wood kills the grumbling. The gathering turns towards the door through which we have all entered. Between the bobbing heads I see a head of thick white hair, carefully parted and naturally waved. The vice-chancellor. I pick up a glass of wine.

It was a reception. Some link-up between the city and the university. Her husband – Don – was involved on the city side. His father had a transport business and Don had taken over but was beginning to branch out on his own, logistics, solutions, property. She was there, hanging on to his arm, big smile and bright eyes, long dark hair with a soft curl. I didn’t know who they were until later.

Most of us stood around with a glass in one hand, the other picking canapés from one of a number of trays that approached, were proffered, and moved on

every fifteen seconds or so. Suited men with bulging stomachs. Smart women with severe hair in plain stylish dresses with brash jewellery. On our side there were a few suits. Most of them were on the women. The men were in jackets and trousers, checked shirts with curling collars strangled by ties that had been pulled out of a desk drawer half an hour beforehand. The younger ones, the research assistants and students, men and women, were in sweaters and jeans. It was supposed to be an opportunity to get to know each other but it wasn't long before knots of people who were already acquainted began to form.

You know how it is. You come back from the toilet and all you can see are the backs of people in closed groups of various sizes chattering. What do you do? Look for some one you know well, or reasonably well, and go and stand near until you get included? Or find somewhere to stand hoping that you spot someone in a similar situation. Someone you can approach. Or you hope someone approaches you. I was standing wondering how soon I could leave without being noticed, dreading the sound of a colleague engaged in networking - did we call it that then? - who wanted to introduce me to people I didn't know and who, in their turn, would want to know exactly what I did at the university and would nod vigorously - frowning with feigned comprehension - as I outlined a simplified explanation.

I was standing, eyes a little vacant I suspect, when her perfume interrupted whatever thoughts I had. She, like me, was looking at the room. Sleeveless grey dress, high neckline, pearls that to my mind seemed too old for her. She came up to my shoulder. Boring, she said, and turned her face towards me tilting her chin upwards. Pale blue eyes. Calculating. She wasn't showing her teeth and her mouth waited for me to speak. Are you bored? I said. She smiled. One crooked tooth. Only boring people get bored.

The vice-chancellor speaks for two or three minutes, while I drink my wine, and then there is a presentation in recognition of some achievement. Enough time for me to finish another glass. We all clap. The VC finishes with a few more words and invites us to enjoy the buffet lunch which is set out in an adjoining room. I help myself to another glass of red before we shuffle through the door into the other room and form a queue at the end of long table. The rest of the room is filled with smaller circular tables with white tablecloths and a place settings for each chair: an erect folded paper napkin - purple, the university colour - and stainless steel cutlery - knife, fork and spoon.

In turn we pick up a plate and, moving along the table, load it with a modest number of items. I manage to hold my plate and my empty wine glass with my left hand while, with my right, I take a couple of triangular sandwiches – one beef in brown, the other ham in white – a sausage roll and a piece of quiche. I make my way to a table where four of the six chairs are unoccupied. I sit down and nod to the other two, both men, both not known to me. I eat, listening to their conversation. Someone known to both of them has had a heart attack and has died. The other chairs are taken by two women, already talking, who sit together. A minute or so later a man takes the final chair next to mine. I acknowledge him as he sits down. The two conversations continue. My neighbour, like me, seems disinclined to join in or make idle chat.

When my plate and my glass are empty I push my chair back clutching my napkin. Standing behind my chair, I drop the napkin on to the seat before easing the chair nearer the table. I turn. My right foot catches the rear leg of the chair with sufficient force to make it crash against the table leg. I mumble apologetically and straighten the chair and take my empty plate from the table. I return from the buffet with more sandwiches, some chicken on a wooden skewer, another piece of quiche, and a glass of wine. I set the plate and glass on the table and lift out the chair. The napkin floats to the parquet floor. I pull the chair out further and bend down to retrieve the napkin. I reach for the napkin and nip it between two fingers. I feel unsteady and push my left foot backwards to stabilise myself. Something hits my outstretched foot and I hear a brief squeal and then a clatter. I stand and look round. A small bespectacled woman in a plain green dress is sitting on the floor, feet apart. On the other side of her there is a plate lying in two almost equal pieces and a quarter circle of items from the buffet: a sandwich, a vol-au-vent and a smeared heap of coleslaw.

‘I’m sorry. Ever so. Sorry.’

Two men from the next table move to assist the fallen woman. Fallen woman. I smile at the thought.

‘It’s not funny.’

I look at the man who has spoken.

‘Did I say. It was?’

‘You were laughing.’ He and the other man gently raise the woman to her feet.

‘I don’t. Think so.’

‘Are you drunk?’

I shake my head and for a moment I feel a little woozy. I sit down. Heavily. I lever myself upright and take a step towards the woman who is smoothing her dress. 'I am. Really sorry.'

'It's all right,' she says, 'no harm done.'

'Are you. Sure?'

'Yes. Please don't fuss.'

I wait until she is sitting at a table and has turned her back to me. I sit down and look at my plate of food. I no longer want to eat. I drink some of my wine. There is conversation across the table. I try to focus my attention on what is being said. Each word is clear but the succession of words does not break up into sentences, not sentences that I can understand. I drink some more wine. I eat the sandwiches. And the chicken. I finish the wine. I lift the wedge of quiche to my mouth and take a large bite. A chunk of filling breaks away from the pastry like an iceberg calving and falls on to my plate. A flap of pastry hangs from my mouth. I push the pastry between my lips with the fingers of my left hand and replace what is left of the piece of quiche on my plate. The rise and fall of incomprehensible voices continues. I stab the last piece of quiche with my fork and steer it into my mouth. Still masticating I wipe my lips with the napkin, screw it up into a ball and place it on the table cloth. I stand up. My chair slides back and I step sideways and walk away from the table.

I head for the door. The spaces between the tables have become more restricted and I apologise several times for catching a chair as I manoeuvre through the narrow straits. When I reach the bar I take the long way round to the men's toilets. I push the door open and walk in. Beyond the door there is one step up and I hesitate, steady myself with one hand on the wall, and then lift my right foot. It doesn't quite make it, but I am already committed to forward movement and the tiled floor rises up and I fling my left arm around my face. The length of my forearm hits the hard floor. I get to my knees and then to my feet. My left arm hurts, but the pain is distant. I go over to the urinals and choose the one with a wall at the left. I lean my shoulder against the wall, unzip my trousers and pee into the bowl. I tuck my penis away and pull at the zip with my right hand in moves so far then sticks. I take hold of the bottom of the zip with my left hand to keep the zip straight. I slide the zip up. A sharp pain slices up my left arm.

- What'll you have?
- A glass of cider.
- Cider? [Pause] Sorry. Cider it is.

*

- Well Jo Dow. Is there a Mr Dow?
- No. There's a Dr Dow. But then you knew that didn't you?
- I still had to ask?
- Why?
- I wanted to know how much you would say. What you might not say.
- You mean if I had pretended?
- Pretended?
- I was unattached. [Pause] For example.
- If you'd given the wrong answer or avoided answering I would. I would have. I don't know.
- You don't know. Why ask then?
- It tells me something.
- Oh?
- Something that I will take into account.
- Well, take this into account. We haven't quite reached our Silver Wedding and we have a son, Benjamin, Ben, and a daughter Rachel.
- That's nice.
- Nice?
- Yes. A boy and a girl.
- Conventional. But.
- But?
- Nothing.
- [Silence]
- What's the matter?
- It seems strange.
- What?
- Sitting in a bar with a man I hardly know.
- All relationships start off like that.
- In bars?
- No. Not knowing each other.
- So this is a relationship?
- Of a kind.
- What kind?
- Who knows. [Silence] Are you Jewish?

- No. What made you think?
- Your kids. Biblical names. Old Testament names.
- Never crossed my mind. Our minds. Unpretentious, middle-class names.
- It's odd.
- What is?
- The Old Testament names that are still popular.
- Not sure I know many? Adam and Eve. Solomon and David. Abraham and Isaac.
- Job, Elizabeth, Ruth, Esther. Samuel, Eli, Elijah.
- Jacob.
- Now there's a chap. Look at his sons. Benjamin, Simeon, and Reuben and Levi you hear, but not Zebulun or Issachar.
- Are you religious?
- Not sure.
- But you know your Bible?
- My nephew was in Joseph. I was living with my sister at the time.
- Joseph?
- Joseph and his Technicolor Dreamcoat. Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber. I heard him singing so often I knew the words better than him. [Singing] Reuben was the -
- Please. No.

I collect my coat from the peg in the bar. My left arm hangs loosely at my side while I hook the coat over my left shoulder. I reach round my back until I find the sleeve. It takes me a while to wriggle my right arm into its sleeve and hoist the coat on to my right shoulder. I pull the left side of the coat over my painful arm. Holding my left wrist with my right hand I shoulder my way through the door into the open air. I sit down on a low brick wall and breathe deeply.

After a minute or so I get to my feet. My head is clear. I start walking keeping the upper part of my left arm tight against my side and pressing the wrist against my upper chest so that there is no weight on my forearm. The hospital is a few minutes walk away, on the southern edge of the campus.

Four hours later I take a taxi to the house. My arm is in a plaster cast supported in a cotton sling. I can flex the fingers of my left hand without any pain which allows me to remove my wallet from my inside jacket pocket and give a note to the

driver. My wallet and the change are still in my right hand as I stop in front the door. My keys are in my left trouser pocket. I stuff the wallet and change into my coat pocket and endeavour to put my right hand into my left trouser pocket. Fuck. I shrug the coat off my left shoulder and shake my right arm until the coat drops to the floor. I try to reach my keys. I get hold of a handkerchief and tug it out. I drop it on top of my coat. I reach in again. My forefinger and middle finger can feel the end of a key. I grip the metal between the pad of one finger and the nail of the other. I retract my hand. The key twists and my fingers twitch into their normal alignment. I stretch for the key once more straining past the end of the key towards the ring. The edge of the pocket is tight, pulling at the stitching. My fingers press the ring. I move my hand slowly, gently pulling. When the ring has moved with it I slacken my hold and reach again. My middle finger almost catches the ring. Once more I pull slowly. My finger hooks the ring and I have the keys in my right hand. Yes.

4

I picked up the telephone. Hello. This is Neville Dow. Hello Neville Dow. It's Debbie. I thought it would be nice if we had lunch together one day. Lunch? What day? Wednesday or Thursday. You can choose, but make sure you're free in the afternoon. I don't want you rushing off to see some student.

It was only the third time I'd spoken to her. A couple of weeks after our first conversation she had turned up at the university. It was about two o'clock. I was on my way back from the senior common room and she was sitting on a chair outside the departmental office in the main corridor. I had to pass her off as a young cousin come for a interview for a job. It was a sunny day, early May and, as I had nothing on until mid-afternoon, we walked into the city and had coffee in the Queens Hotel.

In answer to her question I said Wednesday. In those days Wednesday was still something of a half day at the university with various sports fixtures scheduled for the afternoon. She said she'd book a table at the Queens. Meet me in the foyer, about twelve. You can get there by twelve? I'll try, I said. I did try. And I did get there.

I bought drinks in the bar and at half past we went through into the dining room. I remember it was a short menu perhaps three options for each course, but I can't remember what we had. After coffee, which we took in the lounge, she stood up and moved slightly away from the low table and held out her hand. She moved her head slightly, inviting me to go with her. I got up and suggested I ask for a bill. Taken care of, she said, her face bright with the delight of observing my puzzlement. She took my hand, holding it lightly, her fingers neither warm nor cold. Soft, clean. We waited for the lift, then went up to the third floor. Outside three-seventeen - brass digits on a white-painted door - she brought a key out of her handbag and opened the door. She went in. I waited in the corridor. She beckoned with the tips of the fingers of her left hand. I entered the room. The

curtains were drawn across the window keeping out all the daylight. One bedside lamp and a lamp on the table illuminated the room with an intimate softness. Put the do-not-disturb on the handle and close the door. That the Spanish equivalent of 'Do not disturb' includes a word like molest came into my mind. I'll expect to find you in bed when I return. She went into the bathroom. A few minutes later she came back in to the room wrapped in a large white towel. Her eyes were diamonds, her face a little flushed. She allowed the towel to slip to the floor as she waited by the bed.

Afterwards we lay in bed naked on our backs our bodies just touching. Eventually she said she was going to have a shower. I continued to lie in the bed unsure of the future.

Taking a shower is the first real difficulty I encounter. I must not get the cast wet. I think about it. The option of washing over the hand basin seems more awkward. I retrieve a crumpled plastic shopping bag from the cupboard under the kitchen sink and two elastic bands from my desk drawer. I wrap the cast and my left hand in the plastic bag and secure it with the two elastic bands. After a one-handed shower I am able to dry most parts of my body using only my right hand. My back is a difficulty. I rub the parts I can reach and flap the towel over each shoulder to try to dry the parts I can't. Getting dressed is less of a problem. Everything takes a little longer as I have to drag at socks and underpants twice, once with my right hand and again for my useless left hand. My shirt is not a problem until I have to fasten the button of my right cuff. I try with my left hand. I can grip but there is pain. I steel myself and endure the pain until the button is secure. Trousers prove tricky. When I have them as high as I can manage with one hand, I sit on the bed to stop them dropping down, then using what little grip I have in my left hand to stretch the zip I ease it up with my right. Buttoning the waist is a little tricky but tightening the belt is straightforward. When I stand I feel uncomfortable. My shirt is uneven under my trousers. I run my right hand round the inside of the waistband to remove the creases. I am exhausted.

- I thought you might have come in this afternoon.
- Needed to do some shopping. I haven't quite got the hang of living on my own.

- Good to have a break.
- You've had to put him back on the ventilator.
- They took him down to theatre this morning. To sort out his arm. As the anaesthetic wore off his breathing became laboured. Should only be for a day or so.
- What did they do?
- Put a few pins in I think.
- You'll have to ask if you want the detail. [Pause] Excuse me. I'll have to go. Come and see me later. I might be able to tell you more.
- Thanks.

*

- I wish you could talk. Tell me all about it. I don't really know what's been going on, but I could make a guess or two. Probably wrong. Probably more complicated than I can imagine. Difficulties I wouldn't understand. I don't expect it'll be any better when you've recovered. I guess you are going to recover. Aren't you? Of course you are. One day I'll come in here and you'll be wide awake and able to talk. Then you can tell me everything. I promise I'll listen. I won't criticise. I won't condemn.

For the next six months Debbie and I conducted a circumspect affair. Her husband wasn't often out of town and Jo was almost always at home. Jo didn't go out, didn't want to go out, moaned if I was out, or away. At first it was difficult, complicated, making time, creating opportunities for us to be together for anything more than a couple of hours. We didn't manage an overnight until Debbie was able to borrow her sister's flat at the coast. It was easier for her to get away than me. Debbie told him that she was going away with a girl friend. He'll not be on his own. I told Jo I was at a meeting somewhere, or a short conference, or something.

It was the summer. Teaching had finished and I told them in the department that I was working at home. We all did that. Sometimes it was true. Writing the first draft of a paper was often easier away from the university. Later when you were finishing it off, checking the references and generally tightening up the prose the library was the place.

I told Jo I was getting a lift with a colleague and left our car with her. Debbie drove us to the flat. We had dinner in a nearby restaurant, drank just enough wine and then.

The following morning the weather was warm with a gentle breeze off the land. We walked the along the promenade and, when the tide had ebbed, back along the beach. In the afternoon we went back to the flat. It was always better in the afternoon.

The bus takes two and a half hours to reach the coast, frequently leaving the main road to stop in the centres of villages, dropping off and picking up the occasional passenger.

Before I get off the bus I put my left arm back into the scarf I have tied in a loop to act as a sling. From the bus station I walk down to the esplanade. The seaward side of the road is intermittently lined with parked cars. The tall Victorian terraced houses facing the sea declare their offers to an absent clientèle. Warm, friendly, TV in every room. Licensed. I stroll along the promenade. The sea is calm. Low waves break and spread over the flat beach. I stop and lean on the iron balustrade at the edge of the concrete and watch the indolent water, slowly encroaching. The air is still. Damp. Listless. A seeping cold. Miserable. A man and a woman walk along the beach. He wears a flat cap. She steadies herself with a walking stick. She stops and pokes at the sand with her stick. He keeps walking. I see her mouth form words. He turns and slowly retraces the couple of yards to where she is studying the sand around the end of her stick. She raise her face and speaks again. The air does not carry the sound of her words. I can't see his face. A dog sniffs my left shoe. The dog, a little terrier of some sort, has a hatless elderly woman attached who smiles brightly at me. I smile back and turn away. A weak sun breaks through the cloud.

'That's better,' she says.

I glance at her.

'A bit of sun.'

I nod. 'Lifts the spirit.'

'It does.' The dog pulls at her lead. 'He's off. I'll have to go.'

I watch as she allows the dog to determine her pace and wonder whether she is lonely.

I start to walk again. The flat is not quite on the sea front, but set back among trees, slightly uphill, at an angle to the run of the beach, one of eight in a converted large house. I stand for a moment on the pavement opposite the large house. I stroll round the side. The windows of *the* flat are on the rear giving a view across the bay. *Autres temps, autres mœurs.*

After a bacon sandwich and a cup of tea in a small café where the average age of the customers is over seventy I take a side street on my way to the bus station. The street forms one side of a bowling green. A group of four men are bowling diagonally from one corner of the green and another group - two men and two women - from another corner. Crown green. All the players look to be of pensioner age. I walk in through an opening in the boundary hedge and sit down on a white-painted bench to watch. I take my arm out of the makeshift sling and straighten and bend it a few times. It no longer hurts. I have an appointment to have the plaster cast removed at the beginning of next week.

Jo's father died towards the end of July. Unexpectedly. And after the funeral Jo stayed with her mother for a week or so. Debbie and I had a week at the seaside. I took the week as holiday. Over the rest of the summer Jo spent most weekends with her mother. And I spent them with Debbie. Jo and I had planned to have a week away in Scotland in early September but we cancelled it. Jo didn't want to be that far away from her mother for that long. I don't think either of us had been looking forward to it.

- You're not married?
- No.
- Ever?
- Never.
- Reason?
- The question never arose.
- No candidates?
- One or two.
- But nothing serious.
- There was one. Back home.
- Home?

- Nigeria. We'd been seeing each other for a year, more than a year when I came over here to university. We wrote. Twice a week, sometimes more. The mail was erratic. [Pause] She finished school. I graduated. I said come to England. She said not yet. I asked why. She never said. And then a letter came telling me that this was her last letter.
- No explanation.
- No. But my mother told me that she had married. [Silence] It didn't help that while I was studying I couldn't afford to go back.
- Do you go back often?
- No. I did when my parents were alive. But not since.
- How long since you have been back to Nigeria?
- Eight years.
- Do you want to go back?
- No.

Could it last? I thought it might. I was wrong. It was about the third week of September. I had gone back to the university about eight o'clock in the evening. One of my students had a new version of an expert system he had been working on all summer and he had asked me to look at it. I needed time, uninterrupted time, to work my way systematically through the various pathways and options. To make notes and to test the system against the criteria we had agreed at our recent meeting. It was after midnight by the time I had enough written down to drive our next discussion. The computer lab was on the third floor. I was the only one still there. I put out the lights and locked the door. The windowless corridor was dark. It was the practice of the security patrol to leave almost no lights on in the building. I think they liked patrolling unlit corridors waving the beam of a heavy torch. In the stairwell there was enough illumination coming through the floor-to-ceiling windows for me to see where I was going. I didn't use the lift. I went quickly down the stairs, my soft-soled shoes making only the slightest sound with each step. Two flights between each floor. Six flights in all. The ground floor entrance area connected the north and south sides of the narrow building. My car was parked at what was technically the back of the building, the north. Outside I pulled the metal-and-glass door until I was sure it was locked.

The car park was unlit. Light from a distance showed me that there were a few cars. I headed for mine. I held the key ready to unlock the car. I was about three

yards away from it when I heard a car door open, and then another. Without altering my stride I glanced in the direction of the noises. Two men were coming towards me. I had my car door open when my right arm was grabbed by two strong hands. My keys fell to the ground. I was pulled away from the car and the man who held my arm quickly changed his grip so that he was holding both my arms behind me. The other punched me in the ribs then the stomach. And again. The one holding me let go and I went down slowly, struggling to suck in air. My arms came up to protect my face. I rolled on to my side and curled around my knees. I heard one of them speak. Stay away from her. Understand? I nodded my head. You understand? I was kicked in the kidneys, not viciously, but enough to make me spasm. You understand? I grunted a yes.

My eyes open with a suddenness that banishes the nightmare and replaces it with incomprehension. In the darkness the pain flares and I feel as though my gut is being opened up with a knife. I press back and stiffen my body against the repeated thrusts of the blade. The stabbing stops and I roll on to my side and bring my knees up to my chest. Slowly the pain fades. I reach out for the flex of the bedside lamp and slide my hand to the switch. I press the button. The light reveals my bedroom. The piercing agony has dispersed. I throw back the duvet and see that there is no blood, no warm stickiness. I put my bare feet on the carpet and sit on the edge of the bed. I stand up. As soon as I am upright I feel queasy. I gulp in air to suppress the nausea. I make my way to the bathroom and lift the toilet lid and seat. I put both hands on the toilet cistern and hold my head above the bowl. I strain to retch. Nothing. I slide to the floor and lean against the wall. The sick feeling lessens. I push myself up and steady myself before I return to the bedroom and get back into bed. I lie on my back and pull up the duvet.

- Just a moment.
- What's the problem?
- He's just come up from theatre.
- Is something wrong?
- You must be Rachel? Sally told me you'd be coming in. We tried to ring you at home.
- I was out. At a friend's.

- Nothing to worry about. Blood pressure started dropping and we thought he might be bleeding. Internally. So as soon as we could get a slot he was wheeled down so that they could investigate.
- Did they have to do anything?
- I'll try to find out. I'm Anne by the way, I'm just back from holiday.

5

The only Netherby in the phone book is a D. H.

'Hello.'

'Debbie?'

'Yes,' she says and I hear wariness.

'Neville. Neville Dow.'

'Neville.' It's almost a question.

'Yes.'

'Neville.' A brighter tone. The light has dawned.

'It's been a long time.'

'A very long time.'

A second of silence.

'I'm sorry about Don.'

'Thanks. But you needn't be.'

'Debbie.'

'I shan't miss him.'

'He wasn't that bad.' Not that I knew him well enough to judge.

'Wasn't he?'

'You never left him.'

'No. The charming bastard was generous. We understood each other.'

'Meaning?'

'We trusted each other. Within limits. It was a sort of love. With certain.' She pauses. 'Freedoms. There were times when it worked and times when it didn't.'

'So. Why?'

'Why what?'

'Why stay with him?'

'The times when it did - work - were like starting all over again. You remember.'

'Vaguely.'

'He had enthusiasm. You couldn't fault him for his enthusiasm.'

'No. I suppose you couldn't.'

'But then it would be all over and he have found someone else.'

'A woman?'

'Of course, a bloody woman.'

I almost say, a new enthusiasm, but I don't. Instead: 'Did you ever think of leaving?'

'Often.'

'But.'

'The money of course. Much of which, I have to say, was a bit dodgy, but it spends just the same. And now it'll all be mine when things are sorted. Silly bugger never thought to make a will. Thought he would live for ever. Even when the cancer got him.'

I wait. She says nothing.

'I thought we might meet up some time.' I sound weak, tentative, almost pleading.

'What a delightful idea.'

Is she joking? Taking the piss?

'I thought - '

'I'll let you take me out to lunch. How about Friday?'

I'm startled. 'This Friday?'

'Yes. This Friday. That place across from the station. Bistro something. French. They do a very nice lunch and they throw in a glass of wine.'

'Not literally?'

'Don't ask me what they do in the kitchen.'

'Friday. About twelve. Meet you there?' I fail to sound positive.

'Yes. Yes. Twelve seems about right. Yes. Twelve.'

Now I am less certain. 'See you then.'

'Bye-bye.'

I toy with the notion that she is a little drunk. I glance at the clock. Almost midday.

- Tell me if I'm prying.
- You are.
- I'm going to ask you a question. If you don't answer.
- You'll probably be able to work out what the answer is.
- So you might as well answer anyway.
- Yes. Yes.
- Do you have a good marriage?
- God, you are direct. Bloody direct. [Silence] Do you want the short answer or the long one?
- The truth. Perhaps not the whole truth.
- Definitely not the whole truth.
- So. The partial truth.
- Right.
- I'm listening.
- The simple answer is no. I don't. We don't. It's mutual. But we get on. In a way.
- Friends?
- Not enemies. Mutual irritants.
[Silence]
- Do you still love him?
- I don't think you're allowed to ask that.
- Why?
- Love? What is love? It's not a simple either or. It's complex. It's there and then it isn't. It was and now it's gone. But it leaves a trace, an outline, an imprint.

- Divorce?
- Why?
- Why not?
- We're not the team we were, but we are sort of in the same family business. House. Kids.
- Marriage of convenience.
- No. But a divorce would be inconvenient.
- I think I see.
- I'm not sure I care whether you see or not.
- I'm sorry. I shouldn't have. I shouldn't have pried.
- No you shouldn't. But you did.
- I wanted to clarify my position.
- I don't see that you have a position.

It would always start with something trivial. Have you seen my keys? When did you last have them? I unlocked the front door. Where did you go after that? I can't remember. You'll have put them down somewhere. I know that - but where. If you had a place for them, you wouldn't lose them. I do have a place for them - in my pocket. Well why don't you keep them there? I do. Most of the time. But when I come home I expect to relax and I don't want so much in my pocket. You could still have a place for them. It's the same with everything. Everything? You just put them down anywhere. The place would be a mess in no time if I didn't keep putting things away. That's why I can't find anything. It's never where I put it. You don't put, you just leave. I'm the one that puts. Puts away. So damned self-righteous. I like to keep the house tidy. A few things around make it lived in. A home. Not a show house. It's straightforward laziness. What is? Not putting things away. I only put things away when I'm sure that I have finished with them. And it's weeks and weeks before you're sure. Never. You take it from me if I didn't put things away they'd be there for months. Months. Even years. Why is it that you're the one that's right and I'm the one that's wrong? I don't know, but it seems that way. You've no flexibility. No give and take. It's always what you think. What you want. How you'd like things to be. And it's me that has to change, adapt and fit in. This is my house as much as yours and I should be able to do as I please. That's nothing more than selfishness. You can't have your own way all the time. You seem to. I don't. I fit in. I don't complain when you're late home. Or working at weekends. What's that got to do with it? It's got everything to do with it. I don't see. I don't fucking see it at all. That's your trouble. You don't see. Your so far up in your academic clouds you see

absolutely nothing. All the things that happen because I deal with them. You don't know a thing. Not a bloody thing.

It would end when I walked out. Not a good idea if I hadn't found my keys.

- Sister would like a word.
- Sister Jenny?
- Any time. Before you go. She asked me to mention it.
- Thanks. Do you know what it's about?
- No. Sorry. [Pause] He looks peaceful. Almost smiling.
- Better since they took the tube out of his mouth.
- More normal.
- When do you think he'll come round?
- It's early days yet. Part of the body's defence. Shut down as much as possible.

It is exactly twelve according to the clock at the back of the bar when the barman puts my gin-and-tonic in front of me.

'Anything else, sir?'

'Not now. I'm waiting for a friend.'

I twist round on my stool so that I can see the entrance without facing it. There is an intermittent flow of diners arriving. The first few are retired couples. Then three women - late forties, early fifties - with seven bags of shopping between them, large stiff paper carriers with thick cord or plastic handles. Each is emblazoned with the logo of a shop, a fashion house, a brand. They are taken straight to their table and spend a couple of minutes arranging their shopping between the chairs then arranging themselves around the table, talking all the time. When they are presented with their menus the talking stops and they each search their carrier bags till they locate their handbags. Out of the handbags come spectacle cases and out of the spectacle cases come reading glasses.

'Neville?'

'Debbie.'

'I thought you'd never notice.'

'Sorry. People watching.'

She lifts herself on to the high stool testing the strength of the stitching in her white skirt. 'I'll have a gin and tonic.'

The barman is hovering.

'Another, gin and tonic, please.'

She is wearing a pale blue jacket over a dark blue top with a square neckline low enough show the shadow of her cleavage. A round pendant of jet mounted in silver and held by a thin silver chain rests in the valley of her flesh. Set off-centre in the jet is a button of lapis lazuli that catches the colour of her eyes. Her hair is as black as it had ever been, but dyed. And cut too short, not concealing the slack skin and fullness under her chin. Her lips gleam. I calculate. Not bad for fifty-six, a little fuller, a little softer. She pulls at the hem of her skirt which is tight over her crossed knees.

When her drink comes, Debbie raises it almost to eye level. I lift mine and we clink our glasses. 'Cheers,' we say, in unison. The crooked tooth has been straightened.

'Not the done thing these days,' I say.

'What?'

'Clinking glasses.'

'Who says.'

'Ben says.'

'Your son?'

'Yes.'

'Daughter.' She holds up her hand to keep me from speaking. 'Rachel.'

'Yes. How did you know?'

'You must have mentioned her. I'd not forgotten.'

'She's married. Two boys, six and three.' I pick up my drink. 'You. What about you?'

She shakes her head. 'It never seemed right. For the first ten years it was the high life and kids were out of the question. Then later when things were. Patchy. Nothing was going to happen was it? Well I was getting on. It was either get out and have children. Quickly. Or I had to give them a total miss. Either way they'd be a complicating factor.'

'Your table's ready.' The waitress puts our unfinished drinks on a small tray. She is young seventeen, perhaps eighteen, I find it hard to tell. Dark skin. She smiles, a large friendly smile. An innocent smile that makes me feel. Known. Familiar. Old, too old.

As I follow Debbie following the girl I notice that Debbie seems taller than I remember. The heels of her shoes are not very high, moderately high. Enough to make her legs look good and give her a bit of sway, but not enough to cause the perceived difference in height. Perhaps I'm shrinking, or slumped, or sagging. I straighten my shoulders and lift my head.

We study the menu in silence. After a minute or so I raise my eyes from the card to look at her. Her menu is lying on the table. She is staring out of the window.

'Decided?'

She switches her gaze from the window to me. For a couple of seconds the stare is into the distance, far behind me. Suddenly I'm back in focus. She smiles with her mouth. Her eyes are veiled with a film of regret.

'Yes,' she says.

I lean back in my chair. 'Not been here before.'

'It's nice. A few girls' lunches. Once in an evening with Don.' She stops. 'And my sister and her husband. Ex-husband. Now.'

'Sister? The one who has the flat where we.'

'Yes.'

'Do you see much of her?'

'She's helped a lot since.'

The waitress comes to our table and we order. Debbie picks a fish starter and the vegetarian main. I choose the ham hock terrine and the calves liver.

Debbie waits until the waitress has gone. 'Shouldn't it be calf's liver?'

'Maybe it's from more than one calf. But I'm not sure where I would put the apostrophe.'

'After the S. It's a plural.'

The waitress brings us each a glass of wine. Red for me and white for Debbie.

'Will it take long. Sorting out Don's affairs.'

'I hope not.'

'What's likely to hold things up.'

'I'm not sure. He didn't always declare everything.'

'To the Inland Revenue.'

'That sort of thing.'

The waitress puts our starters on the table taking a moment to turn each plate so that the restaurant's logo is correctly orientated.

We begin eating.

- Your mother said the police had been.
- They have, but she couldn't tell them much.
- So she said.
- They came here as well.
- Here? To see your Dad?
- A waste of time.
- You'd have thought they would have realised. Been told.
- You would. They asked me if I knew anything.
- Another waste of effort.
- Left his card. DI Dawlish. And PC Hetherington. I think.
- She's worried about the baby.
- I know. They let her hold her yesterday.
- Bonding.
- I think so, but it was only for a few minutes.

'I keep telling.' She thinks for a moment. 'I keep telling Jenny.'

'Your sister.'

'Yes.'

I frown a little.

'I keep telling' - a slight hesitation - 'Jenny that he could have money salted away all over the place. And that some of his ventures might not have been entirely legal.'

'Surely not.'

'He thought rules were there to be broken. Or at least bent.'

'I never really got to know him.'

'I think he quite liked you.'

'That surprises me.'

'One of life's innocents. That's what he called you. Intelligently naïve.'

'I suppose that could be a compliment.'

'He could read people. Everyone, he would say, has desires. Things they want, wish for, or would like. Desires are weaknesses. Weaknesses can be used. Don't desire. Don't want. That's living for tomorrow. Living for the future. Recognise what's in the here-and-now. Take it. Live this day as if thy last. I suppose that's why he didn't write a will.'

'Because it was dealing with the future.'

'And it was no concern of his.'

'Do you think there's much that you don't know about?'

'Lots.'

'Seriously illegal.'

'Dubious. Definitely dubious'

'Dubious enough for the police to take an interest.'

'Almost certainly.'

'You worried?'

'Don't know. We'll see.'

6

- I've enjoyed this evening.
- So have I?
- The time's flown.
- Time flies when you're having fun.
- I wouldn't exactly call it fun.
- Why not?
- I don't know. [Pause] Actually I do. It's the lying.
- What did you tell him?
- That I was working late.
- Well you did.
- Half-past six isn't really late.
- You happened to finish earlier than you expected. Merely because you failed to inform him does not make you a liar.
- When you've been married and lived with someone for twenty odd years, you learn to read them.
- You mean?
- I mean that you know when there's more happening than's been said.
- And you think he'll know.
- Not know. Suspect. No, suspect is too strong. Wonder.
- Will he?
- I did.
- What?
- Wonder about him. A couple of years back. Nothing concrete. Things didn't quite add up.
- An affair?
- Possibly. It was around the time my father died. I was distracted.
- Then it's your turn.

- It's not quite like that.
- Isn't it?
- No.
- If you say so.
- That's not fair.
- Do I have to be fair?
- I'd like you to. [Pause] I'll have to go.
- Why?
- The light's on in the front room. He's home early.
- Perhaps the light was left on.
- No. He's there. And I think I can see the car.
- You had to wait for a bus. Tell him.
- He might see us.
- The curtains are drawn.
- What if he comes to the door? Or goes upstairs and looks out of a window?
- He'll see a parked car on the other side of the street.
- Drive around the corner.
- I thought you wanted to go?
- I do. But I don't want him to see.
- See what?
- Me. Getting out of your car.
- I could be any colleague that happened to give you a lift.
- Don't be naïve. He'll ask and I'll have to say something. Another lie. Another lie I'll have to remember so that I say the right thing later. Just drive round the corner. Please.

The doorbell rings. The kettles boils and switches itself off as I leave the kitchen. I walk along the hallway. Through the dimpled pane of glass in the upper part of the front door I can see a blurred shadow. I twist the knob on the latch and ease open the door. A uniformed woman police officer and man in a long coat which hangs open. He is wearing a suit. The jacket is fastened with one button, the creases in the fabric radiate. His hair is cut very short. Two or three millimetres. His skull rises to a slight longitudinal ridge, not quite symmetrical. He holds up his warrant card, a single finger down the fold.

'Neville Dow?'

'Yes.'

'DI Dawlish and PC Elrington. May we have a word?'

I sense it isn't really a question, but I still hesitate.

'It would be easier if we came in.'

'Sorry. Bit surprised.'

'Just a few questions. Sir. Nothing to worry about.'

I'm not sure that is the whole truth. 'Come in.' Even to my ears my nonchalance sounds shaky. The thin woman PC takes off her hat and cradles it in her arm, as though it were a baby. I lead them into the front room. 'Please sit down.'

He sits at the end of the sofa close to the chair in which I am thinking of sitting. She sits down in the other armchair, off-centre, resting against the right arm, her thinness leaving space. She puts her hat on the arm of the chair. When they are both seated I sit down. I try to be matter-of-fact. 'What's this about?'

The PC has her notebook out. She opens it and places it on the arm of the chair.

'I'll come straight to the point.' He is sitting upright, neither leaning forward nor resting his back. He runs the finger tips of his right hand over his head. He's not used to the short hair.

I am in a scene from a television police drama. 'Please.'

'Did you know Donald Netherby?'

'A long time ago. At least I knew *a* Donald Netherby.'

'Did you know he was dead?' He lets himself relax put his head on the back of the sofa and fixes his gaze on a point behind and above my head.

'The Donald Netherby I knew died recently.'

'How did you hear of his death?'

'From a friend.'

'Name?'

'Jack Bathurst.'

'Was he acquainted with Netherby?'

'I don't think so.'

'How did he come to know about the death?'

'The Evening Post, I think. No. From a relative of his wife who is a friend of Netherby's wife. I don't see an evening paper.'

'Debra Netherby.'

'His wife?'

'Yes. Debra Netherby is his wife.'

'I just wanted to be clear.'

'Mr Dow. I'd appreciate it if you were straight with me.'

'Doctor. Doctor Dow.'

'You were once friendly with Mrs Netherby.'

'Once.'

'I said once.'

'You did. Twenty years ago.'

'Twenty years. A long time. Have you seen her in the meantime?'

'Not really.'

'Not really?'

'There have been a small number of occasions when our paths have crossed.'

'I see.'

'Do you?'

He presses his lips together and lifts one side of his body as though to ease some discomfort. 'Let's return to Donald Netherby.'

In the several weeks following the unexpected termination of the affair there were occasions when my path and that of Don Netherby crossed. He seemed to have links to the senate of the university as well as the local council. I kept clear of him, even when we were in the same room. Sometimes Debbie was with him. Civic occasions. I'd be representing the department or the university. Other times he was on his own trailing another woman. These were the private parties. In large houses. Jo and I were part of the outer fringe of guests. Not always sure why we were there. Jo liked being among such people. Netherby appeared to be good company. Loud. Already carrying too much weight. Usually waving a cigar. A caricature.

Playing a part. He knew what he was. He wanted others to know it too. He wanted everyone to be certain he had power and influence and that he could exercise both without regard to law, etiquette, or ethics.

In the week before that Christmas he did seek me out. It was one of those early evening gatherings that the higher levels of the university hierarchy deemed civilised. Wine and a finger buffet. I was standing in a group when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I stepped back out of the circle and turned. Neville, he said, good to see you. You're well? Yes, I said. He smiled. Sorry about. He didn't need to be specific. I shrugged. He leaned towards me as though wanting to confide something. He whispered. Actions speak louder than words. My mouth dry, I nodded, feeling that I had been gently, but firmly, reprimanded for a minor indiscretion. He smiled again, patted me on the left shoulder and, as he was about to walk away, put something into the top pocket of my jacket. I watched him go and returned to the conversation I had been listening to.

When I was putting away my suit I remembered and thrust my fingers into the pocket. I gripped a piece of card between my index and middle finger and eased it out. It was his business card - Transport and Business Solutions. On the blank back was written a single sentence in a neat, almost female, hand. At a price, you can have anything you want, just ask. Jo saw me looking at it and asked what it was. A business card, I said, and replaced it. Later I put it in the drawer of my bedside table, the place where I usually kept things that I had not yet decided what to do with.

I am conscious that the muscles in my neck are tensed. I endeavour to relax.

'Since Mr Netherby's demise, certain financial irregularities have come to light. As a consequence of this we have removed a number of items from the house he owned. Where he and his wife lived. Not quite together, I understand.'

I wait.

'One of those items was a personal computer. Apparently, Mr Netherby was a meticulous keeper of records and for many years - perhaps fifteen or so - had employed a computer for this purpose. As he changed computers he appears to have transferred the accumulated data from the old one to the new one. He seems to have done this several times. Of course on the latest computer all his data is encrypted.'

'Sensible.'

'Yes, sensible, but not totally secure. Our experts have managed to ascertain the key to the encryption and lo and behold much interesting information is laid before us.'

'Fascinating.'

'Yes, fascinating.' He leans back in as though relaxing. 'When we had the report of this gentleman who seemed to be - had been - a friend of Mrs Netherby, we took steps to determine his name. Not difficult. And then we searched the fascinating information for your name and we had a hit.'

'My name on his computer?'

'Yes, Mr Dow. Dr Dow.' He closes his mouth. His eyes are steady.

I find it hard not to avoid his gaze. He is waiting for me to react. 'Somebody else with the same name?'

'We don't think so.'

'Why would he have my name on his computer.'

'Why do you think?'

'How should I know?'

'As I said, Dr Dow, Netherby was meticulous.'

'Clearly this is an occasion when he was less so.'

'A sort of journal. When. What. Who. And sometimes why.'

'When is this. Whatever. Supposed to have taken place?'

He smiles slightly like a chess player who has seen a very good move. 'There are two dates. The first is in August nineteen-ninety-three. Twenty-third. It was a Monday. The second is two days later. The twenty-fifth.'

'So?'

'So. What business - or whatever .' He smiles. 'What business did you have with Netherby on either of those two dates.'

'None.'

'Dr Dow.'

'It's nonsense.'

'Better if you tell us.'

'You want me to come clean?'

He allows himself a tiny smile. 'Please.'

'I don't know what to tell you.'

Dawlish reaches into the inside pocket of his suit jacket. He brings out a folded sheet of paper. He opens it up twice to the full A4 and flattens it on his knee. There is a block of dense printing. Some lines are highlighted in yellow. He holds it up and reads.

'Dow rings me at home. Wants me get him the keeper of a vehicle. The next to last column has one hundred in it - the price.' He moves his finger to the next highlighted item. 'Send Wayne to Dow's office.' In the last column the number one hundred - the payment

'Doesn't make sense to me.'

'Who's car was it?'

'How should I know?'

'You're saying you had nothing to do with it?'

'Yes.'

'I find that hard to believe.'

'I'm sure it's not the only thing you find a bit difficult.'

He glares at me.

'Any way just because it says Dow it doesn't mean it refers to me.'

'Didn't I say? Your phone number was mentioned.'

'You didn't,' I say, irritated. 'But it never happened.'

'Why would Netherby make it up.'

'I don't know. To cover up something else?'

'This was for his eyes only. Why write fiction?'

'As I said. I don't know. I hardly knew the man.'

Dawlish stands up. He folds the sheet of paper twice and inserts it into his jacket pocket. 'Thank you for your time, Dr Dow.'

The woman officer finishes writing and puts away her notebook. She stands up holding her hat in both hands.

Dawlish moves towards the door. 'As I said, you've nothing to worry about.'

I show them out and stand at the door until they are both in the unmarked car and have driven off. I return to the kitchen and set the kettle to boil again.

Over the years I've had a few encounters with the police. All straightforward, even amicable. My first was way back in the days when policemen patrolled the streets on foot and usually alone. In the centre of town they were usually in twos but beyond the railway line it was rumoured that three was the minimum number.

Peter and I were on our way to the park. The park lay on the very edge of the town, a gift to the town from a wealthy Victorian, in his will perhaps. To us it was just somewhere to play. Between the edge of the housing estate and the park were fields and through the fields ran a path. That sunny afternoon in the school holidays, Peter and I were part way along this path when we noticed a uniformed police constable a few yards ahead of us. Where he came from I never quite worked out. We were larking about and then he was there. We stopped, looked at him and he came up to us. He asked us where we were going, where we lived and finally our names, ages, and addresses. As we answered his questions he wrote in his notebook. I wasn't frightened of him but I understood that he had to be told the truth and that this might not be the end of it. I knew I was innocent of any real wrongdoing, but I didn't feel innocent. I felt that I might be guilty of some crime that I had unwittingly committed. Trespassers will be prosecuted. Had I trespassed? Would I be prosecuted? Peter shrugged it all off. As soon as the policeman had sent us on our way, Peter assured me nothing would happen. Nothing did. I told my parents who quizzed me about exactly where we had been and what we were doing and had we seen any other boys or anyone else. My mother suggested that I stay away from the fields and from Peter. Dad thought that was unnecessary, but mother said that for the time being I should only play within sight of our house. I adhered to her precept while stretching its restrictions until everything was back to normal.

The second encounter meant nothing at the time. For some reason Dad came home one evening around bedtime with a policeman in uniform. He introduced us to him telling us his first name. Frank, I think it was. I had never considered the possibility that a policeman might have a first name. He wasn't in the house long. I think Dad went out with him. For a drink, maybe. A year or two later Dad told us that this same copper with whom my Dad had seemed very friendly had been

caught stealing from the till in a shop while the owner was getting something from the back of the premises. Every time I learn of a policeman accused and perhaps convicted of some crime I think about Frank and what might have happened when he was imprisoned with other criminals. I've heard it said that those who join the police force could easily have become criminals and vice versa. The line between law enforcer and law breaker seems not to be easily drawn.

Since then I have had the kind of contacts with the police that most of us have had. Interviews after a burglary. Stopped for speeding. Nothing of great significance.

- Have the police been back?
- No. [Pause] But they will be.
- I see he's breathing on his own.
- Since yesterday.
- A good sign.
- [Sigh] But I wish he'd wake up.
- That tube up his nose. Makes me feel sick.

I wake from fragmented sleep. Pale light is pushing in from behind the curtains. I still sleep on the half of the bed I have always slept on, nearer to the window, nearer to the bedside clock. The clock display is flashing a string of zeros. The power must have been off. I reach for my watch. I can make out the positions of the hands. Half-past eight. I put my head back on the pillow and close my eyes. One side of my mind glimpses an image, a sound from my sleep, my recent unconsciousness. My attention swings like the beam of a torch but the light only catches a shape, an idea, scuttling into meaninglessness. I endeavour to recover the idea, but it hovers, mocking my rationality, refusing to be made concrete. The mocking takes on the face of DI Dawlish, and, as though he is in the room, I hear his reassurance. As I said, you've nothing to worry about. This time I hear an undertone. Is he taunting me? Warning me? Or is there an oblique threat? Whichever way, there is the implication that I *do* have something to worry about. He will come back which will, of course, be a waste of time. But that's what the police do. Waste time. Both their own and other people's. No doubt he has a purpose, but did his visit achieve that purpose? I don't know. He thinks he has evidence that a crime has been committed. He may not know that a crime has been

committed. Or he does not know who committed the crime. Or his evidence is not sufficient for a court of law. Otherwise. Otherwise I would have been arrested. Even charged. Was he trying to make me say something to toughen his evidence. What might he have expected me to say? What goes through his mind when he interrogates - interviews? - a suspect? Does he expect the suspect to lie because he is guilty? To recall something that did not happen to underpin his claimed innocence. A lie that may be used to uncover guilt? Can he possibly expect the guilty to provide him with the evidence of their guilt? What's his rationale? Does he have a rationale? What makes someone become a police officer? Want to become a police officer?

7

The phone rings. I'm in the kitchen. I leave the kitchen and pick up the phone in the hall.

'Hello.'

'Neville.' I hear her breathe. 'It's Debra.'

I start to speak.

'Oh God, it's a mess?'

'What's a mess.'

'Everything.'

'Everything?' I sit down in the Windsor chair.

'Yes. Every bloody thing.'

'Calm down and tell me.'

'About a week, no ten days ago, after our little lunch. Monday. Morning. The police paid me a visit. Complete with a soddin' search warrant.'

'I had a visit too.'

'What did they want to see you for?'

'It doesn't matter. Tell me what's wrong.'

'The took away everything of Don's. His computer. His filing cabinet. They cleared his desk. Papers, letters, bank statements. A wodge of cash I didn't know was there, some computer disks. All of it. All in plastic bags. They all wore gloves, like doctors. You'd think it was all contaminated.'

'Did they say anything.'

'Said they were looking into Don's affairs. And that I might have to be interviewed. I said that I knew nothing about his business. Which is true. Well, almost true. But that's not the bugger.'

'What is?'

'The whole probate thing is now held up, frozen. For God knows how long. All that money and I can't get my hands on a penny. And on top of that there's the fucking mortgage.'

'On your house?'

'Not my house. Don's house. And he'd recently re-mortgaged. The bastard. And because of whatever the police have done the last monthly payment hasn't gone through. Over a thousand a fucking month. I can't afford that. And it's not my house. The letter came this morning. Full of dire warnings.'

'What money have you got?'

'The life insurance payout, a fair few thousand in some kind of savings account and and maybe four or five hundred in a current account. And I've no idea what's on the credit card. He always paid that off.'

'So you're OK for a bit.'

'Not if I have to pay the mortgage. And if I don't pay they'll repossess and then what'll I do.'

'They'll give you six months I would think.'

'Sounds like a bloody jail sentence.'

'At least you'd have board and lodgings.'

'Don't make me laugh. I want to cry. But I'm too angry.'

'Would you like me to come round?'

'No. I'm beginning to hate this place. I'll come to you. If that's all right.'

'Of course it's all right. I'm sure I've got enough to make us a lunch.'

- Hello?
- Michael. It's me. Jo.
- Are you all right?
- Yes.

- The other night?
- Sorry.
- I waited ages. I was worried. I wanted to ring but.
- I'm sorry. Something came up.
- Came up?
- Yes. It did. I had to. There was no way of. Please. Can we talk about this later.
- Where? When?
- Half an hour. Gerard's
- I'll have to be back by eleven.
- OK.

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- What would you like?
- Coffee's fine.

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- Thanks.
- What happened?
- I'm sorry. Neville rang. A bit after five. Rachel had left a message with his secretary.
- Malawi?
- Yes. No detail. Just said she would try to ring later when we were at home. I tried to call you, but your phone was engaged.
- Sorry.
- Not your fault. I went straight home. I couldn't imagine why she had called, why she had said nothing.
- No news is generally not bad news.
- But if it was an ordinary call, she have said something. Like. Everything's OK. Ring you later. It was the try to ring that worried me. As if something could prevent her. [Pause] She didn't ring until nearly ten. I was frantic. Didn't know what to expect. When she did get through she only had time to say that she was OK before the line went dead.
- A relief.
- Only partly. I was sure there was more. We didn't have a number for her. Eventually we went to bed. I hardly slept. Kept thinking the phone would ring again. Hoping

it might. I called in and took the day off. Neville went into work. I waited. And waited.

- How long?
- Midday. Lunch-time. She was calmer. She'd been coming back from a visit to another school when they were held up.
- They? Held up?
- Her and a driver. They had guns. The driver had put his foot down and driven at them. The [Pause] thieves, bandits. One of the Land Rover's wheels went over one of them. The others had started shooting.
- Was she hurt? Is she hurt?
- Neither of them.
- Lucky.
- I suppose so. She seemed composed. Too rational. She was shaken up. I could tell.
- Shock. I suppose.
- Could be. We only talked for a few minutes.
- Has she rung since?
- Yes. Last night. She talked as if the whole incident didn't count for much. Insisted that I should not worry. A different country, different risks. Probably more chance of my getting run over by a bus than her getting shot.
- So she'll carry on.
- Yes. I think. She seems to be thriving on the challenges, the risks. Surprising, really.

I'm in the middle of slicing mushrooms when she rings the bell. I wipe my hands on my kitchen apron before taking it off and hanging it behind the door. I glance in the hall mirror and smooth over my hair before turning back the catch to let her in. She is wearing a black trouser suit over a burgundy sweater. Her make-up is neat. The lapels of the jacket have a cut-out pattern like a paper doily. She stands outside for a second.

'Come in, come in.'

She manages to smile and press her lips together at the same time. The effect is child-like. She steps into the house glancing about as though she were a prospective buyer.

'I see you've got a for-sale sign.'

'It been on the market a month and not one iota of interest.'

'Bad time.'

'As everyone tells me.' I push at the door of the front room. 'You can either sit in here with the paper while I make us lunch. Or you can watch me in the kitchen.'

'Kitchen.'

She follows me into the kitchen, pulls out a chair from under the table and sits down. 'Why do you want to move?'

I put the butter and sliced baguette in the middle of the table and set a knife and fork in front of her and another at the opposite side. I tie my apron. 'You OK with a mushroom omelette?'

'Lovely.'

I melt some butter in a pan. 'I don't really know. It's a feeling. A feeling of not belonging.'

'How long have you been here?'

'Nearly thirty years.' I crack two eggs into a measuring jug then slide the mushrooms off the chopping board into the melted butter. They sizzle and spit. I push them around with a wooden spatula.

'Long time.'

'Yes.' I beat the eggs with a fork. 'It was Jo that wanted to move here. Nothing wrong with the house we were in, but she wanted four bedrooms and more garden. She would have liked detached but this stretched us as it was. She went back to work so that we could afford it.' I turn down the mushrooms. 'Fancy a glass of wine?'

'Please.'

I take a bottle of South African Chenin Blanc out of the fridge door and stand it on the worktop. 'Nothing special.' I take two glasses from a cupboard and set them on the table. With the corkscrew twisted into the cork I pull to ease it out. The cork doesn't move. I take a firmer grip of the bottle and the corkscrew and holding the bottle below my waist I strain to separate the cork from the bottle. It comes out suddenly and I let out a puff of air as my body relaxes. I put the small frying pan on to heat up and drop in a little butter. I pour out the wine. I put one glass in front of her and lift the other. 'Cheers.'

'Cheers.'

I take a quick sip and put my glass down by the hob. I pour the beaten eggs into the frying pan and wave the pan around until the egg has spread to the edges. I crack two more eggs into the jug and beat them as I watch the omelette setting. Before it sets completely I spoon half the mushrooms into the middle of it. I take a warmed plate from the oven and put it down to the left of the hob. I fold the omelette with a fish slice, and slide it on to the plate. I carry the plate across to her and place it between her knife and fork.

'You get on. Mine will be ready in a minute.' I start my omelette. While I am waiting I put my glass on the table. 'I think I'm ready for a change of scene.' I return to the stove.

'I'm surprised you didn't move sooner.'

I sit down with my omelette.

'You mean after the accident.'

'Yes. Terrible. It was in the news. Briefly.'

'Briefly.'

'I thought about getting in touch then.'

I butter a slice of baguette.

'But he wouldn't have understood.'

'Did he know about you and me?'

'No. He would have killed me. Or you. Anyway, things were still good between us. I hadn't yet twigged.'

'What?'

'The nature of his business.'

'What was it exactly?'

'There was no exactly about it. He was always vague. He had the vans and lorries that he inherited from his father, but there were other things.'

'Transport and Business Solutions.'

'I think that was a bit of a joke. He said he liked to keep tabs on everything.'

'I see T A B S.'

'He left the house in the morning. He usually came back for six. He made me open a bank account and every month a few hundred quid would be paid in. It varied, but more than enough for the shopping and even when I spent what I wanted on clothes and the hairdresser there was some left. Which I saved. He paid the mortgage and all the bills. Bought the big things like cars, furniture, cookers and fridges.'

I prod a mushroom that has slipped out of my omelette.

'Sometimes he was away for a few days. I never knew where. No explanation. Before or after.' She pauses. 'I had a nice house. A husband who looked after me. And most of the time I liked him. He was good fun, good to be with. Again, most of the time. I thought it was love.'

She stops talking and eats.

I wait.

She rests her fork on the edge of her plate. 'We had a full social life. We held dinner parties and we went to dinner parties. We seemed to get invited to various events where we mixed with people who thought he was - we were important.'

'I know.'

'We rented villas in Spain and sunned ourselves with friends. I stopped asking the questions and took it as it came.'

I put my fork and knife together across my plate. 'Coffee or tea?'

'Tea, please.'

I send her through the dining room to the tiny conservatory beyond the French window. I go through a couple of minutes later with a tray. She is standing studying the garden.

'Decent sized garden.'

The sun has warmed up the conservatory and the garden is bright between the shadows.

'Too big.' I put the tray down on the low table. 'For me.' I set the cups on the saucers. 'Milk? Sugar?'

'Milk.' She sits down. Crosses her knees. 'I wouldn't move if I were you.'

I pour milk into each cup. 'Why?'

'Good area. Open aspect. Manageable garden. Spacious rooms.'

'You sound like an estate agent.'

'What's driving you out?'

'Memories. No, the absence of memories.' I pour the tea and take her cup to her.

'That's too subtle for me.'

'Well there are memories. From before. But since. Well nothing's happened here.'

'Nothing?'

'I've come home. Gone to bed. Got up. Gone to work.'

'But now. You've more time. Things could happen.'

'Maybe.'

'Well they have.'

I raise my head. She is smiling. Gently. Mouth and eyes. I cock my head, inviting her to elaborate.

'I'm here.'

'And the police have been.'

'You see it's all happening.'

I laughed.

'That's better.'

'I think the police'll be back.'

'Why?'

'I think he thought I was holding something back.'

'Were you?'

'Your husband had my name and telephone number on his computer.'

'Did he now.'

'He did.'

'I wonder why. Do you think he did know about us?'

I make as if I'm giving the idea some consideration. 'He probably did. But somehow.'

'You don't think that was the reason.'

'No. I don't.' For an instant I regret the tone of certainty.

'I shouldn't worry.'

'That's what he said. Detective Inspector Dawlish.'

'The one with shaven head?'

'His hair was beginning to grow.'

'Wants to be the hard man.' She pulled back the sleeve of her jacket. Gold watch on a gold bracelet. 'It's time I was off.'

'You don't need to go.'

'Thanks for the lunch.' She stands up. 'Can I?'

'Afraid it's upstairs. First on the left.'

I wait in the hall till she comes down. 'What about you? What are you going to do?'

'I'll wait and see.'

I lead her to the front door. I open it and see that there is only my car on the drive. 'How did you get here?'

'Taxi. Never learned to drive. Not that it would have made any difference. Police took the car.'

'I'll drive you home.'

'You don't mind?'

'Course not.'

- I didn't expect this.
- Didn't you?
- This part of town. And it doesn't look much from the outside.
- David. The university librarian mentioned it at a meeting the other week. We were sitting together waiting for the chair to arrive.
- I do hate that. The term chair instead of chairman or chairwoman.

- Or chairperson.
- That's as bad. We were waiting for the chair to arrive.
As if you had nowhere to sit and everybody was going to
have to share a single chair. When it did arrive.
[Silence]
- Is something the matter?
- No. Not really.
- You sure?
- I was thinking.
- And?
- How many years it was since I been taken out for a meal -
á deux, that is.
- And now that you have, is that good?
- Yes. But. [Pause] I feel. I feel.
- Guilty?
- No. Not guilty.
- Is that a plea?
- What do you mean?
- How do you plead? Not guilty, m'lud.
- No. More like. More like. I don't know. It's somewhere
between excitement and anxiety. Between hope and
disappointment.
- Hope for?
- Don't ask. I don't know what to hope for? Or what to
expect? Or what to fear?
- Future uncertain.
- I suppose it has to be.
- Otherwise predictable and boring.
- Predictable doesn't have to be boring. There's pleasure
in looking forward to something.
- Only because you aren't quite sure that it is going to
happen. Or not happen the way you expect it.
[Silence]
- What are you going to have?
- I thought I'd have the sea bass. And maybe the crab
risotto to start with.
- Carpaccio of beef and the rack of lamb.
- Carnivore.

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- Well, cheers.

- Happy birthday.
- How. How did you know? [Pause] And a card. Thank you.
[Silence]
- That's nice. How did you know?
- Sometime last week, or the week before, you were searching for something in your handbag and your driving licence slipped out from among the things you were holding. On to the floor
- Did it?
- I picked it up and had a good look at it while I was bending down.
- And?
- It's all there in the driver number.
- And you've worked out how old I am.
- I did, but I have forgotten. Completely. And utterly.
- That's another fib.
- Only a little one.

I pull up outside the house. It's large and set back from the road behind a high hedge.

I watch as she takes off her seat belt. She opens the door and then leans over towards me and kisses me lightly on the lips. For an instant her lipstick adheres. She gets out the car without saying anything.

'Bye,' I shout as the door closes.

She walks up the drive and without turning gives me a little wave over her shoulder as the curve of the drive takes her out of my sight.

I want to see her again.

I was a couple of years into my PhD when we met - one of those Hollywood meetings. She was working in the university library, her first job. I was crouching down searching for a book along a bottom shelf and she was re-shelving returned books. She was up on one of those wooden stools with two or three steps and pole to hang on to, half a dozen books in the crook of her arm. She dropped the lot. The heaviest, a thousand-page volume, caught me on the side of my head. She was upset. I wasn't hurt. She fussed and apologised. I helped her pick the books up. I

was quite taken with her. Love at first sight. That's an exaggeration. I said hello to her whenever I saw in the library or around the university. We accidentally met up on our way to lunch one day and we shared a table. Before she left I suggested we went to the cinema. Two years later we were married.

While I was earning my doctorate she did a librarian's course and was offered a job back at the university library. The research project I was involved with while I was doing my PhD got further funding and I stayed on as research assistant (while I finished writing up) then as a research fellow. She continued to work in the university library until Ben came along. We argued about what to call him. She wanted John but I wasn't having a son called John Dow too much like John Doe, a nobody. We settled on Benjamin which soon became Ben.

It wasn't long before I was offered a lectureship. At the university here. Tenured. I accepted. Ben had just had his first birthday when we moved. We rented a flat for a year until we could afford a small house. Our first house.

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On my way back I am preoccupied. On the phone she sounded upset, close to tears. Yet while she was in my house she didn't say anything about the police until I mentioned it. Was it no more than an excuse, a pretext for a visit? And if so, why so? Am I being manipulated? Is it part of a strategy to achieve something that will surprise me? Something I might regret? Or am I finding darkness where I should see a pleasant, warming glow?

The four-by-four in front of me brakes suddenly, heavily. I react. The car bucks, kicking up its rear as it squeals to a stop. The road has a continuous line of parked cars on both sides and on the pavements uniformed boys and girls are either waiting or walking. Eyes and bodies turn. Necks stretch, faces strain. The point of interest is in front of the four-by-four. A fucking shunt. I glance in my rear-view mirror. Another car is close behind. I am trapped. Unable to reverse and too damned close to the four-by-four to pull out and drive around. I lean over to the passenger side and try to see past the four-by-four. I bang the steering wheel with the side of my fist. Stupid drivers in vehicles they can't control, can't manoeuvre. Mothers driving oversize vehicles that only their husbands wanted to buy, picking up kids that should be attending a school nearer home and walking. When I was a kid we walked to school and walked home again. And we were the better for it. Kids

these days don't know they're born. The driver of the four-by-four opens the door and gets out. A woman. Of course. Collecting her son or daughter. Somebody behind hoots a horn. I shake my head. No one has any time. There is a tap on my window. A young man is looking at me. I press the button and the window glides down.

'Been a bit of an accident.'

'Shunt,' I say with my anger moderated to impatience.

'No,' he says reprimanding me with his quiet serious tone.

'Oh,' I say.

'One of our girls. Stepped out with out looking.'

'Hurt?'

'Doesn't look serious. But it's best not to move her. We've called an ambulance.'

'Thanks,' I say, and switch off the engine.

I pull the key out of the ignition and get out. I walk round the four-by-four. There is a ring of adults around a girl lying on the road. Other mothers are urging their children away. Some of the children are trying to see. The girl's feet are under the front of the four-by-four. Her eyes are open. One leg isn't quite right. For a second I think I recognise her. Is she the girl that was waiting to cross the road when I was watching Rachel leave? It could be her. Pretty. Dark skinned. Her eyes have closed. The driver stands expressionless, leaning on the bonnet of her vehicle. As I watch, her eyelids slowly fall and she slides to the ground. There's nothing I can do. I walk back to my car. Some of the parked cars have managed to move and the car that had stopped behind mine is reversing. The driver carefully pulls out and drives past. I get in the car and back it up a few feet and drive round the four-by-four. I drive at a suitably moderate speed. A lad about twelve runs across in front of me. I brake. The lad is safely on the pavement. I shout. 'You silly bugger!' The window is still down and he spins round, looks at me, and puts up two fingers. I stop the car, open the door. The car behind be hoots. Twice. I glare at the driver. Another silly bugger. I close the window and I drive off. A police car comes towards me and I drive into a space between parked cars to let it through.

- Mum. Didn't expect to see you here.
- I wanted to see him.

- I'll get another chair
- They insisted I come in a wheelchair. This is Michael.
- Hello. [Pause] Mum, this is Simon.
- Hello, Simon.
- Simon was in Malawi. We overlapped by a month. He's at Bristol. English.
- Literature or language?
- Literature.
- Favourite author?
- Golding, William Golding. At the moment.
- Lord of the Flies. Pincher Martin.
- I prefer The Spire.
- Oh.
- Simon's up for the weekend.
- Where's he staying?
- At home. Of course. [Pause] Don't look at me like that.
- Be sensible.
- I will.

8

It is half past eight by the time we reach the cottage. Both Jack and William are fast asleep. The front of the cottage is lit by the Range Rover's headlamps. Simon gets out leaving the engine running, unbuckles Jack's seat and heaves him out. Jack's eyes open for a second then close again as his head drops on to Simon's shoulder. Rachel goes ahead of him unlocking the front door and switching on lights. I swing my legs out and for a moment the cold air is refreshing after the warmth of the vehicle. Through the lighted doorway, I see Simon carry Jack upstairs. The sky is black above the cottage. At the back of the car I open the luggage space, put on my coat and take a couple of bags inside. Simon passes me on his return for William. In the sitting room I put the bags down next to an armchair and then sit in it. I keep my coat on. The cottage has two rooms downstairs. A large L-shaped kitchen with ample space for the long dining table and its eight chairs. The square sitting room is slightly smaller, almost filled with two armchairs and and a three-seater sofa. The ceilings are low. Rachel comes in and draws the curtains across the black windows. The room is cold. She turns on the free-standing electric heater.

'Simon will light the stove when the boys are settled. I'll start in the kitchen.' She closes the door behind her.

- We've decided to operate.
- On the arm?
- If we don't deal with it soon there might be complications.
- Complications?
- Things could go wrong inside. Things we can't see. And by the time we've realised. There could be permanent damage.

- When?
- Later today. Depends. Depends on whether we have any emergencies. Possibly tomorrow.

I hear Simon come down the stairs.

I wait. I hear a door close.

The door behind me opens and Simon comes in with a basket of cut logs. He puts his head on one side as he come through the low doorway. The weight and size of the basket make him stoop. He back-heels the painted wooden door shut. 'And how are you, Neville?'

'Not so bad.'

He drops the basket in front of the stove. 'Rachel says you're thinking of moving.' He kneels down and opens the door of the stove.

'Thinking.'

From the wooden box at the side of the stove he takes out a packet of fire-lighters. He places three or four in among the ashes of the last fire. 'Not sure?' He lifts out a handful of thin sticks of wood from the same box.

'I'm sure. At least, sure I want a change.'

He arranges the sticks in the grate and pushes in a couple of small logs. He strikes a match and lights each of the fire-lighters. He watches as the flames lick around the sticks. Smoke begins to trickle upwards. He closes the door and adjusts the vent. He puts the basket of logs at the other side of the stove from the box, and steps backwards watching the flames grow, filling the space behind behind the small window.

'Isn't retirement a big enough change?' He lowers himself into the other armchair and stretches out his long legs.

'You could say that.'

'But?'

'But it's the wrong change.'

'How?'

'I should have bought another place before I retired so that as soon as I had finished work I could put the old life behind me. Completely. Clean break.' The

flickering flames catch my eye. 'I feel as if I am nowhere. Tied to the past. Not moving out into the future.'

'I think I understand.'

I'm sure he doesn't. I shuffle in my chair so that I am sitting more upright. 'Anyway, how are you? Work OK?'

'Much the same.'

Rachel comes in. 'Twenty minutes and we can eat.' She glances at Simon and lifts her chin in a wordless enquiry.

'Not a murmur. I'll pop up in a minute.'

She sits down. 'Whose for a drink? Wine. Gin and tonic?'

We each have a gin and tonic. Ice but no lemon.

'What's the weather going to be like tomorrow?'

Simon looks at Rachel. 'I don't know. Why?'

'I thought we could go for a walk along the cliffs and back along the beach.'

'If the tide's right.'

'According to this morning's paper,' I say, 'it should be dry, dry with bright periods.'

'That sounds hopeful.'

Simon reaches forward and pulls open a shallow drawer in the coffee table. He takes out a small folded sheet. He sits down and studies it. 'High tide's O-nine-seventeen.'

'That's settled then a walk along the cliffs and back along the beach.'

'Will William manage that?'

'We'll take the big pushchair and he can ride when he gets tired. He's quite a good walker. For his age. What about you Dad?'

'If the pushchair's big enough then I'll take a ride when I get tired.'

We laugh. For a moment I'm pleased to be there.

*

Over the years the house has grown heavy. I stopped calling it home. Without her it wasn't a home. Merely a house, a place to shelter, keep warm in winter, sleep, eat. There are rooms that I haven't been in for months. Little has changed inside those rooms. The wallpaper is the same, the paintwork the same colour, the curtains have perhaps faded but so slowly that I am not sure. In other parts of the house the changes there have been have been occasioned by necessity. A replacement stereo, television. Back door after a burglary. A new fridge. A new washing machine. A new central heating boiler. Not deliberate changes, not made out of choice.

If it hadn't been for Jo we'd still be living - I'd still be living - in our first house. It was big enough, but in the wrong part of town. Tall terraced house with a yard at the back and nothing at the front. The front door opened straight on to the pavement. Jo wanted a garden. A better school for the kids. We went for as big a mortgage as we could get and bought this house. For a year or two we had to spend carefully but inflation reduced the cost of the mortgage and salary rises gave us a little to spare and year by year we found it easier to manage. It was her house. She had chosen it. She decided on decoration and furniture. She made it her home. Our home. Without her the home became a house and the house did nothing but grow older and heavier.

It is not half past ten when they announce that they'll soon be going up to bed. 'The boys'll be up at the crack of dawn.'

'Dawn doesn't crack that early at this time of the year.'

'You stay up if you want, Dad.' She stops part way to the door. 'Did you realise it's Mum's birthday tomorrow?'

'Is it?' I calculate. 'You're right. She would have been sixty.'

'And a grandmother.'

She leaves the room.

'I won't be long.'

She closes the door.

I listen to the noises from above the ceiling. Doors open with a squeak and close with a click that sounds as though it is in the room with me. Water runs. The toilet is flushed. Twice. Something falls to the floor. Eventually there is a quietness and I am on my own.

- Well, this is it.
- I like the view.
- Do you?
- The sweep of the city.
- A character from Dickens?
- Look at it.
- All haze and grey blocks.
- The hive. Busy. Thronging. People.
- Ah. People.
- Yes. People.
- Sit down. I'll open a bottle.
- Would you rather live in the country? Green hills.
Rolling fields. Grazing sheep. Wandering cattle. The
distant sound of a tractor.
- Away from people. At least not too close to them. Cities
are full. Oppressive. The press of the crowd. People I
don't know. Will never know. Don't want to know.
- That's it about people.
- What?
- You can only see the outside. Hear their voices. Watch
them behave, perform.
- And?
- And you know. You know that inside each of them is a
mental turmoil that is like your own. Struggling. But
with a different set of demands, problems, difficulties,
decisions. What is it like to be like any one of them. I
want to know.
- Do you?
- Yes. If I knew I might make more sense of my turmoil.
- But do you know they are like you? Inside?
- I have no reason to think otherwise.
- But it can be no more than a hypothesis.
- A working hypothesis.
[Silence]
- This is nice.
- Not bad for a fiver.
- I didn't mean the wine I meant being here. The two of us.
With time.

Some warmth radiates from the stove even though there's no sign of burning. The book I brought is in my case and my case is in my bedroom. It will be cold in the bedroom. I sigh and then wonder what I am sighing at. The corners of the room are hidden in a dark softness that the yellow light from the three lamps cannot push back. The room is a rounded volume of illumination squashed by six planes. As the warmth fades, the volume reduces and the cold creeps nearer. Beyond the walls there is darkness and silence and beyond the silence the cold stars and beyond the cold stars the vastness of the emptiness between the galaxies and beyond the galaxies the boundary of time and beyond time a beginning with no beforehand. I feel a quiet terror that is the recognition of that absence beyond everything, the terror of a question that has no answer, that asks why anything is.

I take a deep breath and survey the room. The solid reality of the walls, the chair I am sitting in, the floor, the ceiling, the cottage, the fields, the cliffs, the sea, the Earth, tearing through space at eighteen miles per second on its predictable journey around the sun. I tell myself. That's what is.

I'd be about fourteen when in the middle of the night the thought struck me that even if the universe extended for ever in all directions for ever it still had to *be* somewhere. Somewhere in relation to something else. At that time they - the astronomers, cosmologists or whatever - were still debating the merits of the continuously expanding universe as against what was loosely called the big-bang theory. Either the universe had been expanding forever with matter being created all the time or all the matter that ever existed and ever would exist had been concentrated in one point which at some to-be-specified time in the past had exploded and had given rise to the expanding universe. That the universe is expanding is evidenced by the Doppler shift of light coming from distant galaxies. But for a chilling and deeply disturbing instant that night I didn't care which was true because I had a vision of the emptiness, the nothingness, the meaninglessness of what would be there if the universe was taken away. The notion that as the universe was everything deceitfully avoided the question of what if it wasn't. The universe existed. Of that there was no doubt. But in what realm did it exist? What did it mean for the universe to exist. For time to exist. Even the universe had to have a context. A context to give it meaning and significance. And the beyond-knowing of that context was what flooded my gut with an iciness that still from time to time catches me unawares.

The stove has no more warmth to give and the air is cold. I stand. I switch off each of the lamps. At the foot of the stairs I take off my shoes and carry them.

In the narrow bed with the duvet over my shoulders and my book held with one hand I read. I read for about a quarter of an hour, until my mind starts to elaborate the sentence I'm reading and I think I've read something that, when I check, isn't there in the print. I close the book on the envelope I'm using to mark my place and set the book on the bedside table. I switch off the lamp and pull my cold hand into the warmth. I settle down to sleep.

- He's ready to go down. Just waiting for a porter.
- How long?
- It's hard to say. It's not straightforward.
- I wish he was conscious. I wish I knew [Pause] for certain [Pause] that he knew I was here.
- Talk to him. Hold his hand. You never know.
- He feels so cold.
- You can walk down with him. If you want to.

I wake. For a minute or two I listen to the silence. None of the continual sounds of the city. No wailing police cars or ambulances. No voices of young people parting from friends. Not even the background drone of distant traffic. My body reminds me why I have woken. In the dark I use my hands to determine the locations of the furniture as I go carefully in the direction of the door. The landing is black. I head for the bathroom, one hand touching the wall before I take a step. I close the door behind me and push the small bolt across. The bathroom is lighter. The white surfaces making more of the little light that comes in through the window. I lift the lid and the seat and stand with my legs against the toilet bowl, directing my stream into its centre. I hesitate before flushing the toilet, before introducing a harsh splatter into the quiet. I flush the toilet, put down the seat, and Jo's reprimand is repeated in my head so I lower the lid.

The return journey is easier. The darkness has yielded and allowed the solid shapes to push into its opacity. The bed is still warm and I pull the duvet up and close my eyes. Before I doze off again the sharpness of indigestion cuts into my gut. Eating too late in the day. Lying on my back, I have discovered, usually eases the pain. The ceiling is a distant greyness.

- Hello. I was hoping you'd be here.
- How did it go?
- Quite well. Up to a point.
- Is there a problem?
- No. Not really. It was a little trickier than we expected.
- What does that mean?
- The arm is going to be fine. However, there were other problems.
- Yes.
- I'm not sure exactly what happened or why.
- Tell me. Please.
- His heart stopped.
- For how long?
- Not long.
- Please. I need to know.
- Less than a minute.
- That's not dangerous. Is it?
- No, not in the normal course of things.
- But.
- But we don't know why.
- The stress of the operation.
- Could be.
- [Silence]
- We'll monitor him and may be do a few more tests. He seems stable at the moment.
- Where is he?
- Recovery. He'll be back on the ward in an hour or so.
- I'll wait.

I am woken by the morning sun which has thrown chunks of brightness across my pillow and half the duvet. The curtains are still drawn back. I listen. Indistinct voices. I wash and shave. As I leave the bathroom I hear a crash deadened by the distance. A shout, a female shout. The yowl of a child. I dress and venture downstairs. In the kitchen I find Rachel on her hands and knees wiping the floor. William is sitting at the table, still sobbing. Jack has an empty cereal bowl in front of him and is bright with the self-righteousness that recognises that the wrongdoing of others makes whatever he does seem good.

Rachel stands up and wrings out the cloth. Grey milkiness dribbles into the sink. 'Watch where you walk, Dad.' She gives Jack a stare. 'And you needn't look so smug.'

Jack drops his shoulders and widens his eyes silently protesting his innocence.

'If you hadn't started that silly game. He wouldn't have sent his bowl flying.'

I sit down at the table. William is given a clean bowl and some more cereal. Rachel pours on some milk. 'Now eat it properly.'

'Where's Simon?'

'Shopping. I thought we could get an early start while the weather's nice.'

'What we doing?' asks Jack.

'I think we might be going for a walk and a picnic.' I smile.

'Picnic?' says Jack. It sounds like a question but it is rich with disdain.

'You'll like it. It'll be fun.'

'Don't try to humour him.' Rachel sits down.

'I don't want to go for a walk.'

'It doesn't matter what you want. We're going for a walk and you're going with us. Like it or not.' Rachel picks up her cup of coffee which must be cold.

'It's not fair.'

'Fair doesn't come into it.'

It's William's turn to feel smug, but he is more cautious. The expression on his face is serious, almost hurt, but his eyes betray his relief at no longer being the focus of his mother's attention.

Outside the sun is strong enough to be warming. On the cliffs the air is still and below the tide is dutifully retreating. Jack having declared his dislike of walking perversely runs ahead. William is walking and the all-terrain buggy that Rachel is pushing serves as a cart for the rucksack that holds the picnic. Simon lingers behind with his new camera assessing the view.

'Jack! Not too far!'

'I'll go after him.' The six-year-old is climbing a fence about fifty yards ahead and I stride up the gradual slope towards him. There is a gate in the fence and as I get nearer he jumps off the fence and tries to open the gate. Whatever mechanism is keeping it closed does not yield to his efforts. I break into a gentle run and when I reach him I find it hard to breathe. I stand and let my chest heave. Jack continues his struggle. I lean over him and uncouple the hook. I have to lift the gate over the drying mud until it is sufficiently open. Jack wriggles through and dashes off. I lift the gate back into place and refasten the hook. Jack has already disappeared into the next dip. 'Wait for me!' I move as speedily as I can with a motion that is barely fast enough to call running. As soon as I can see into the dip I stop. I can't see Jack. Between me and the next fence I can only see a couple of sheep. There are gorse bushes growing in the dip which narrows and deepens towards the cliff where a V-shaped fence provides a symbolic barrier to the drop down to the beach below. I try to discern his hiding place, but he is wearing a brown anorak and is well camouflaged. I saunter down towards the fence looking from side to side. A glimpse of red. He is wearing red Wellington boots. I pretend I have not determined his hiding place. I move up the slope towards him, staring beyond where he is crouched behind a bush. My feet are almost touching his knees.

'Jack!' I shout. I shade my eyes with one hand, searching the horizon.

He giggles.

I look down. 'There you are.'

He leaps up and I make a grab for his arm.

'Let me go!'

'Your Mum said not to get too far ahead.'

He pulls. A frond of the bush is between him and me. I step to one side to go round it. He yanks at my grip and my foot slips on some loose earth. Instinctively I stretch my arms to ensure my balance and my hold on his arm loosens. Suddenly he is free and he stumbles, his feet scrabbling to keep him moving. For a moment his footing is firm then the momentum of his body throws him forward and he falls into the bush.

He screams.

I stride up the slope, my feet slipping. 'Don't move.' But he is thrusting with his arms trying to push himself up out of the prickling spines. I stand astride him and put my hands under his arms and pull him upright.

'Geroff.'

I release him and he runs down back into the dip and up to the flatter ground. By the time I reach the top of the slope he is running to his mother. My arm hurts. I must have pulled something when I grabbed him. I rub it but the pain seems to be deep inside.

As I get near I see that Rachel is smoothing antiseptic cream into the scratches on his hands.

Jack glares at me with eyes forced wide. 'It was his fault. He made me. He pushed me down into the prickles.'

'I was only trying to stop him running off again. You said.'

'He nearly broke my arm. I hate him.'

'I'm sure Grandad didn't mean to hurt you.'

'He did. He did. He chased me into the bushes.'

'You were hiding.'

'You were after me. I know you don't like me.'

'Jack. Stop it.'

'What.'

'Talking like that. It's not nice.'

'He's not nice.'

'Jack.' Rachel puts the tube of ointment in a pocket on the side of the rucksack.

Jack takes a step towards me and then swings a kick at me. It catches me on the shin. Not painful. 'No wonder no one likes you. You're just a nasty naughty little boy.'

'Dad.'

'Well he is. And who do you think has made him like that?'

I long ago accepted what seems to me to be a fact of life: all parents fail. Of course Philip Larkin put it with more force in language that, to some extent, gives the statement a comic wryness that offers the reader or hearer an escape route to denial. The real damage is done by those parents who count themselves successful

because their offspring have achieved, as a result of much pressure and much nagging, the goals that have been forced upon them. Vicariously triumphant.

Down on the beach, we stop and sit in a huddle on one side of a large rock out of a breeze that sweeps along the sand bringing the scents of low tide. Drying sand, drying seaweed. After we have eaten our picnic I join in kicking a ball with Jack and Simon, but when Jack gets the ball he kicks it as hard as he can towards the sea and strides off along the beach. I go after the ball while Simon goes after Jack.

The wind drops and the clouds part and within a few minutes the beach has touch of summer.

'Who's for an ice cream?'

'Me', says Jack.

'What about you, William?'

William nods and I hold out a hand. He takes it. 'Anybody else?' Rachel and Simon both shake their heads.

'Come on then.' Jack refuses my hand.

The ice-cream van is parked on firm sand further along the beach. I buy three cones and hand one to William, one to Jack and keep the third for myself. The ice cream is solid, not soft. We walk back towards Simon and Rachel, each of us concentrating on licking. I am holding William's hand. Jack is trailing a little. When we get back William goes straight to his mother and she takes the cone from him and helps him sit down on the rug before she puts the cone back into his hand. I turn round. Jack is watching a boy running along the sand parallel to the sea tugging a kite on a few yards of string. The kite is twisting and turning like a tethered wild animal. I finish my ice cream. Now that the wind is light the kite fails to rise. Jack is walking backwards and steps into a small hole that has been dug in the sand. He loses his balance and sits down on his bottom. His ice-cream cornet leaps out of his hand and lands point upwards in the sand. He grabs it and holds it as he gets to his feet. Rachel is running. Jack starts crying.

'Give me it,' I hear Rachel say.

'I want it,' says Jack.

'It's dirty.'

'Make it clean.'

'I'll get you another. Go to Daddy. I'll be straight back.' She stalks off towards the ice cream van.

'Come here, Jack.' Simon beckons him.

Jack comes over slowly. William licks his ice-cream. Jack sits down next to his father, his shoulders droop, his mouth droops, his eyes are full.

Rachel comes back with a replacement ice cream. She holds it out to Jack.

'Don't want it.'

'Jack.'

'I want the one Grandad bought me.'

'It's gone. It was dirty. This one is just the same.'

'No it's not.'

'It is, Jack.'

'It's different.'

'It's the same.'

'You bought it.'

'Well, if you don't want it I'll eat it.'

Jack says nothing.

'Honestly Jack. You are the limit. You couldn't help dropping your ice cream. I've got you another. What else could I do?'

Jack stares down.

'Do you want it. Or should I eat it.' She pretends to lick it.

Jack reaches for it and Rachel proffers it. Jack takes it and sullenly begins to eat it.

Rachel was never sympathetic, not in that natural way that I was brought up to expect women to be. For her, sympathy is a waste of time and effort. If there was something she could do to ease someone's distress or anguish, something practical then she would be straight in, bull-at-a-gate. It wasn't that she didn't think about

things before she did them, rather she had thought and she saw what was obviously needed. So obvious that to discuss the wisdom of the action, its efficacy, or its possible side-effects was unquestionably unnecessary. She was often right. Not that sympathy was wrong. No, she was right in getting something done, moving things on, changing the situation. Sympathy encourages stasis, a wallowing in the moment, the prolongation of the time of unhappiness or hurt.

Jo was like that. She would claim to see the world from another person's point of view, but all she was doing was imposing her point of view on the other person.

We cross a stretch of soft sand unwashed by the sea, I lift William on to my shoulders and leave Rachel to drag the empty buggy to the slipway that takes us up into the village. I manage to carry William all the way back to the cottage ignoring the dead ache that accumulates across the top of my back.

- Alison, what are you doing here?
- Came to see you. Thought you might appreciate some company. Who was that?
- Russell the hospital chaplain. He comes every so often to have a chat. He's OK. You can talk to him.
- Breaks up the time.
- It does get boring. But I feel I ought to be here. I've tried reading, but I end up watching, waiting, looking for change. Anyway thanks for coming. I do appreciate it.
- How are you bearing up?
- Me?
- Yes you.
- I'm OK. I think. I don't know how I should be. In the circumstances.
- You look tired.
- I'm not sleeping well. The empty house. It's feels a bit.
- Has there been any change?
- To Dad? [Silence] Hard to tell. Hard to tell whether he's improving, getting worse or staying the same. Sometimes I think he's pretending. He seems so normal. Lying there with his eyes closed. Breathing. Listening. Listening to

what's going on. What people are saying. What we're saying.

- Why's he on his side?
- They turn him every so often. Prevents bedsores.
- He doesn't look comfortable. Head looks to be at an awkward angle. Would give me a crick. [Silence] Is your Mum OK?
- She thinks she'll be discharged at the end of the week.
- That'll be better. Not on your own.
- I suspect it won't be as simple as that. [Pause] What with him and the baby.
- A little girl. How is she?
- They're going to keep her in.
- She's still in the ... incubator?
- Yes.
- So tiny.
- She seems to be holding her own.
- Your half sister.
- That's a thought.
- Better than a younger brother. Mine's a pain. Moody. Anything you say is wrong. And if you ask him a question.
- We could go and see them.
- Your Mum and the baby?
- Yes. It's not that far. And I could do with a walk and some fresh air.

9

In the evening, after we have eaten and the boys are in bed, we sit down around the warmth of the stove. There is no television set. The CD player is dribbling out some Vivaldi. Simon is reading the paper he brought back with the shopping. Rachel has a cross-stitch frame with a part-finished piece of work on her knee.

'Dad.'

I look at her.

'Jack's not easy. He needs careful handling.'

'Needs a firm hand if you ask me.'

'I'm not asking, I'm explaining.'

'Wilful. Self-centred. An awkward little.'

'He's only young. There's no use fighting him. For some reason he's developed this need to get people's attention by being.'

'Naughty? Nasty?'

'That's part of it. But.'

'But what? He just need to be made to do as he's told. No more. No less.'

'It doesn't work.'

'So he goes on being unlikeable.'

'That's neither fair nor nice.'

'Nice doesn't work.'

'Nor does your attitude.'

'My attitude?'

'I was only trying to.'

'I know.'

'You want me to stand there and be kicked. Be spoken to as though I was.' I stop, lost for a word.

'No. But getting heavy with him won't help. It'll make him worse.'

'God help us. He's bad enough as it is.'

'He can sense your feelings. And he reacts.'

'If he does that again. I'll react.'

'You won't do anything of the sort. He's not your child.'

'No. And I'm damned glad.'

'Don't get angry. It doesn't help.'

'I'm not angry.'

'Yes, you are.'

I close my eyes.

'Let's not say anything more.'

I open my eyes and look at the ceiling. 'I think I need a walk.'

- You're quiet.

- Am I?

- Yes.

- Don't.

- Don't what?

- Touch me.

- After what we've.

- Please.

- All right.

[Silence]

- It's the deceit.

- Do you think he knows.

- No. He's too tied up with himself. And his work.

- So?

- So I don't like lying.
- So you want to try it standing up.
- It's all right for you.
- How?
- You don't have anyone to lie to.
- But I can't be open. About you. I can't tell my friends.
And sometimes I have to lie to them. [Pause] It's
different when you're married.
- I suppose so.
- No suppose about it. Whatever you think. When you've made
promises in public. In front of your family and your
friends. Cleave only unto him or whatever I said.
- You can't even remember.
- Not the words maybe. But the meaning. The significance.
- Things change.
- And I still live with him. We see each other almost every
day. We sleep in the same bed.
- Don't remind me.
- We only sleep.

I push open the pub door, take off my cap and roll it up before pushing it into my coat pocket. There are a dozen or so people in the room. I walk up to the bar and the man I know to be the landlord appears.

'What'll it be?'

I ask for a pint of a bitter that is brewed locally. It is a dark colour. I hand the landlord a note and wait for my change.

'Wind's getting up,' he says.

I take my change. 'Doesn't feel like rain.'

'Forecast says different.'

'We can hope.' I turn from the bar and go over to a corner bench where there is no table. There is, however, a shelf at a similar height where my pint can stand. Before I take off my coat I pull the paperback from a pocket put it down near my pint. The coat I fold and put on the bench. I sit down between my coat and the corner.

Under the window a couple of lads sit across a table. Their thick woollen sweaters look like work wear. Though different colours, one green the other blue,

they are equally matted and dull, the structure of the knitting flattened by time. One of them is sitting on a stool leaning forward his back curved, the other sits on a bench and rests his back. Beyond them a couple sit together in the corner. Both are older than me and they sit without speaking as though they are ornamental, the illusion broken by the intermittent reaching for and lifting of a glass, the drinking from it with care, and then the replacing of it on the table. She has a half pint that is half full and he has a pint that is three-quarters empty. The others in the pub are hidden from me by the partition that forms my corner. I can hear a television. The landlord has disappeared.

The head on my beer is thinning and the liquid no longer fills the glass. I take a long drink, welcoming the fresh bitterness. I open my book at the envelope and turn back a page before resuming my reading.

By the time I decide on a second pint, the pub is busier, most of the tables are occupied, mainly couples, some foursomes. I move my folded coat into the corner, reserving my space, and go to the bar where three fellows are standing gossiping.

Shouting over by the door attracts my attention. A lad in his twenties is arguing incoherently in a loud voice with a mate who is saying nothing.

'Don' you see. Don' you see. See. That if it weren't for 'er. Her, I tell you. If it weren't for 'er I would'n after. You see. Don' yuh.'

I pay for my pint and return to my corner. I leave my book closed.

I'm not sure we ever were a family. I'd thought that children had given her a purpose. She was certain after Ben that she did not want to go back to work now that I'd completed my PhD and was earning a decent salary. We assumed without actually talking about it that we would have another child. I got on with my career, she looked after Ben and, as a consequence, me.

It had taken over a year for her to get pregnant the first time. It was another four before she fell pregnant with Rachel. She had a difficult pregnancy. Spent the last few weeks in and out of hospital. Vowed she would never have any more. She'd never been happy about the pill, so I had the snip. That's was when things really began to change.

At first she was tired because of the kids. Then when they were both at school she was bored. That's when we moved to our present house. There was a brief period of improvement when she found a part-time job in the main city library that

fitted in with taking the kids to school and picking them up in the afternoon. We agreed that what she earned should go into a bank account in her name and she enjoyed spending money on herself, on Ben and Rachel, and being able to contribute towards the cost of a better or longer holiday in the summer.

After a couple of years she moved to another part-time post, with a higher salary, in the university's medical library. The hours weren't quite so convenient and she had more responsibility. She started to bring work home so that she could leave early and meet the kids out of school. Sometimes she couldn't make it and I would have to drop what I was doing and collect them. I'd use that as an excuse to go back to the university in the evening and sometimes if I got involved in a programming problem I would be there to the early hours. We spent less time together and there was less sex. We trundled along for a few years with sporadic good times, once in a while very good. Increasingly my work took me abroad, mainly Europe for two, three days, occasionally a more distant destination would keep me away for a week, sometimes almost a fortnight. The kids became less dependent on us. Jo's work became full-time. The sex had become occasional and not always successful. I think we were both unhappy, but didn't dare admit it. Not so much to each other, but to ourselves.

The clock above the bar shows me that it is ten o'clock. I drain my glass and stand to put on my coat. I push the book into one of the coat's pockets and make for the door. A large group of men occupies the space between the door and the bar and I have to say excuse me three or four times before I reach the door and pull it open. Outside there is a dry chill. The moon is up and it is bright enough to light up the lane as I leave the village behind. So much for the forecast rain. A little way ahead of me where the lane rises and curves there is a bench which during the day gives a view over the bay towards the bulky headland. When I am about ten yards from the bench I notice that there is someone sitting on the bench, head down. I keep to the opposite side of the lane and study the sitting figure as I approach. My shoes make no sound. I am almost opposite the bench when I step into some loose chippings at the edge of the tarmac. The figure looks up.

I say, 'Good evening.' A defensive gesture.

The face smiles. The figure is hooded. 'Hello.'

The voice is female, young, bright, a sequence of gentle bells.

'Are you OK?'

'I suppose so.'

'You only suppose so.' As I speak I take a couple of steps towards her.

'How can I be sure?'

'Sure of what?'

'Sure that I am OK.'

'I see.' She is only a girl. Mid teens I guess.

'Do you?'

'I don't know.'

'Nor do I.' She laughs. A little ripple of a laugh.

'Are you on your way home?'

'I could be.'

'But you're just sitting here not going anywhere.'

'Yes,' she says, and she sounds pleased.

'But isn't it a bit late for you to be out on your own?'

'I'm not on my own.'

I look around.

'You're here,' she says.

'But I'm not *with* you.'

'Then who are you with?'

'I'm not with anyone.'

'So you are out on your own. Isn't it a bit late.'

I laugh. 'You're a strange girl.'

'That's because you don't know me. Do you?'

'Should I?'

She stands up and comes up to me and stops. She turns so that she is facing the moon and the pale light falls on her face. Somehow I know she is dark-skinned. She pushes back her hood and releases a black halo of curly hair.

'You seem a little familiar.'

'You mean I am being too friendly.'

'No. I meant that your face seems a little familiar.'

'But you don't know me.'

'No I don't know you.'

'You are a stranger and I was told not to talk to strangers.'

'Wise advice.'

'Then I'd better be going.'

'Which way?'

'The way you are going of course.'

'Why of course?'

'Because I was taught not to talk to strangers. No one said anything about not walking with strangers.'

She sets off along the lane. I follow her hurrying to get alongside her. We walk side by side for a quarter of a mile. We say nothing. I come to the white-painted stone that marks the grassy track that goes up to the cottage.

'This is where I leave you.'

She does not alter her pace, she does not say anything, she keeps on walking. I watch her for a while as she walks in the moonlight. When she reaches a point where the moon casts the shadows of trees across the lane her dark figure dissolves into the dappling.

10

I put the plastic bags down in the hall, placing them so that they keep the door open. Searching my pockets for the car keys, I dash back through the heavy cold rain. The rain stings my head where the hair has thinned. After slamming the boot lid, I lock the car. Inside the house I move the bags and shut out the weather. When I come back into the hall after I have unpacked my shopping I notice that the light on the answering machine is flashing. Someone has left me a message. I press the play button and listen.

'Neville. It's me. Debra. I'm frightened. Ring me on this number.'

She says the number too quickly for me to memorise it, and all I retain is the fact that it's an out-of-town number. I take the notepad and pencil from the drawer in the table and play the message again. She seems even more frightened as I listen this second time. I get the first five digits. My concentration on writing disables my hearing. I play the message again. This time I get the rest of the number.

I sit down. I'm not sure what to do. I can't imagine what she's frightened of. And, whatever it is, do I want to be involved? In the absence of legitimate pros and cons my decision is, if not arbitrary, then emotional. I pull the phone towards me and carefully dial the number I have written down.

I listen to several cycles of the ringing.

'Hello.'

'It's Neville.'

'Neville.' There is relief in her voice.

'What's up?'

'Please come.'

'Come where?'

'The flat. You know. The one.'

'Yes,' I say, thinking that she is talking as if someone might be listening. Someone that she doesn't want to find out where she is. 'Near the front. Overlooking the sea.'

'Can you come?'

I look at my watch. Outside it is almost dark. 'Tomorrow?' I know what the answer will be.

'Now. Please. As soon as you can.'

'It'll take me a while. To get ready. Then the evening traffic.'

'Please.'

'OK, but I can't say what time I'll get there.'

'Be quick.'

'Tell me the address.'

'No. Ring me when you're on your way.'

'Yes.' I sound uncertain.

'Please.'

'All right,' I say. 'I'll come.'

'Be as quick as you can.'

'I will.'

'Thank you.'

'See you soon.'

'Bye.'

I put down the phone. I tear the page off the notepad and put it in my wallet.

- I do like the sea. Especially in winter.
- Why winter?
- None of the crowds. Empty beaches. Come on let's go down.

*

- In summer the sea is treacherously playful. Now it's quietly menacing. The waves just big enough to threaten. With a little help from a stiff breeze its power would become apparent and it would rise up bragging and crash down and destroy.
- Eloquent.
- Can't you feel it?
- Not the way you do. It's there. Where the land ends. A boundary. A barrier.
- Unromantic, so unromantic.
- Come here.
- I didn't mean like that.

I go upstairs and pack a small suitcase. I bring the case down with me and stand it in the hall. I check round the house. The back door is locked as it was when I went out to the supermarket. I put the key in a bowl on a high shelf in a cupboard. I look into each downstairs room. I'm not sure what I am looking for. In the front room there is the morning paper on the table. I fold it and put it in the magazine rack. Unchanging untidiness, should someone look in through the window, is more noticeable than unchanging tidiness. I take the suitcase out to the car. The rain has eased. I return for my waterproof jacket, lock the front door and get into the car. I put my jacket across the passenger seat. I sit, keys in my hand, trying to get the measure of what I am doing. It's probably something trivial. Something she has got out of all proportion. I start the engine. Switch on the lights. The fuel gauge warning light is on. Bugger. I say the word out loud. I reverse carefully out of the drive. The rain streaking the rear window and the brightness of the street lights collude to confuse the image in the mirror.

After filling up with petrol I drive round the congested ring road, wipers repeatedly clearing the splattering rain. The lights of oncoming vehicles are duplicated in the wet surface of the road doubling the dazzling. After I have turned towards the coast the traffic coming in the other direction is less. I follow the tail lights of the car in front, fifty miles per hour.

An hour later the road in front is empty. Sixty miles per hour. I have driven out of the rain. I put the headlights on full beam. I come to a large village. I slow down

to thirty. I drive more slowly through the village endeavouring to spot a phone box. When I reach the green I turn off the main road which cuts through the middle of the green and park on the side of the green. Standing outside the car I sweep the scene. There is a phone box in a recess by a shop. I lock the car and hurry round to the phone box. Inside I take out my wallet and take out the sheet of paper. The only illumination inside the box comes from a nearby street lamp. In its yellow light I can barely make out the number. The apparatus is of an unfamiliar design. I take some coins from my trouser pocket and separate out some ten and twenty-pence pieces. I stack them immediately above the slot where the coins go in. I lift the handset. I put two twenties and a ten in the slot and holding the paper up to the light I dial the number. I hear one cycle of the ringing tone.

'Neville?'

'Yes.'

'Where are you?'

'Not sure. About half an hour, maybe three-quarters.'

She gives me the address and tries to explain where the flat is.

'I can remember.'

'They've made some of the streets one-way.'

'Don't worry. I'll be there. Definitely in less than an hour.'

'Number three.'

'Yes.'

'Be careful.'

'I will.'

'Bye.'

'See you in less than an hour.'

I put the handset back on its rest and a coin drops. I retrieve the ten-pence piece.

I get out of the car. Waves crash in the darkness beyond the road. The large house stands among trees almost facing the sea. A paved path leads straight to the steps that rise up to the porch. A security light comes on as I walk up the path

illuminating the trunks of the trees with a lunar wash. The light inside the porch is warmer. I press the button next to the number three. The name card behind the curling celluloid has faded into illegibility. I hear her distorted voice inside the speaker say yes.

‘Neville. Debbie, it’s me.’

The door lock slaps back. Beyond the door is the large cream-painted hall with the wide staircase. I go up to the first floor. I tap lightly on her door. She opens it and turns away immediately. I close the door carefully. She is wearing a loose thick sweater and denim jeans. No boots or shoes. I follow her along the passage into the main room of the flat. Kitchen area, dining area – glass dining table and chrome chairs – and sitting area – brown leather sofa and a single matching armchair, large television. She stops and swings round and then comes close. She hugs me round the waist and presses the side of her head into my chest. I hear sobbing. I hold her. I feel like a father.

It is a long time before she quietens. I sense her body relaxing, the pressure on my chest is less. I loosen my arms. She straightens and steps back. She sniffs and then without looking at me walks into the kitchen area and pulls out a couple of tissues from a box. She wipes her eyes and blows her nose.

‘Tell me.’ I say.

She walks around the far side of the table and sits down on the settee. I take the shorter route and sit in an armchair. She pats the space at her right. I get up and sit down next to her.

She takes my hand and leans against my arm. She breathes, her chest rising. ‘This man came to the door. Yellow jacket with photo-ID. Said he’d come to read the gas meter. I tried to read his badge but I hadn’t got my glasses on. Just a blur.’ She sniffs and squeezes my hand. ‘I take him through to the kitchen and point to one of the lower cupboards. He ignores me and unlocks the back door. I tell him it’s in here. The back door opens and another man – big – comes in. The one in the yellow jacket crosses in front of me, closes the kitchen door and leans against it. The big fellow shuts the outside door and locks it and puts the key in his pocket. I’m suddenly terrified.’

She looks at me. I try to show I’m sympathetic.

‘Where’s the safe he asks. Safe, I say, there isn’t a safe. He tells me I’m stupid and he’s not. He shouts: of course there’s a fucking safe. I tell him that I’ve never seen a safe in this house. Then he slapped me. Hard across the side of my head.’

She turns her face towards me and twists her body round. She pushes back her hair. Between her eye and her ear there is discolouration. Along her cheek bone there is a long mark where the skin is broken. She touches it and flinches. 'He was wearing a ring.'

I unloose my hand and put it round her shoulders.

'The big chap produces a knife, like a big penknife, but with only one blade. A long blade with a sharp point. Yellow-jacket leaves the kitchen. I hear noises. I hear him go upstairs. The big fellow relaxes against the sink and just as though he were in a gangster film he starts to clean his finger nails with the point of the knife. Banging comes from upstairs. I hear him coming down the stairs. He comes into the kitchen. Can't see anything. Try the garage. He comes back after a couple of minutes. At the back under a tea chest. Set in soddin' concrete. And then they went.'

When I feel she will tolerate being left I go out and come back with fish and chips and an extra fish in printed cardboard boxes and a pint of milk from the garage shop. We don't bother with plates, sitting on the settee, the boxes on our knees. Earlier she had said she wasn't hungry, but she eats all her fish and a good third of my chips. I make a pot of tea and we sit drinking the tea in silence. She has moved herself to the end of the settee leaving a distance between us. I sense that I should not speak. She stares into the corner of the room.

I stand up and take the mug out of her hand. She gives me a thin smile, waif-like. I say nothing. I sit down again aware that I must continue to sit, sharing her silence.

- Hello.
- Your mother would like to see you. I think she's planning her return home.
- You don't have to whisper.
- I feel as though I'll wake him up.
- She's coming back to our house?
- Yes. She thinks it'll be easier. With the baby.
- Oh.

- I think she needs time. And I think she would rather be with you than me.
- I'm sorry.
- It's difficult. The uncertainty.
- I know. I'm beginning to feel that he'll never wake up. You do hear. Don't you?
- Months. Sometimes years.
- [Silence]
- OK. I've got everything. Let's go.

'I'm going to bed.' She stands up and holds out her hand, arm straight. 'Come with me.'

'I'll get my things from the car.'

She gives me a bunch of keys. 'That's the downstairs door and that's the flat door.'

Minutes later, I put my case on the floor inside the flat and shut the door.

'Put the bolt on. Please.' Her voice comes from beyond a door that is sufficiently ajar to let out a faint light. I slot the bolt home and turn the key in the lock.

I hesitate outside the bedroom door. 'Is it OK if I come in?'

'Neville,' she says hinting at the needlessness of the question.

I go in. She is curled towards the unoccupied half of the double bed. The lamp at the same side provides the soft illumination that hardly reaches the other three walls of the room. I close the door. I put my small case on a straight-backed chair and open it.

'I won't look,' she says.

I laugh a little. I undress and put on boxer shorts and a tee shirt. I stand for a moment at the side of the bed. A threshold, a boundary, a Rubicon. I fold back the duvet and get in. The bedding is cold. I slide down. I lie on my back looking at the featureless ceiling. 'Shall I put out the light?'

'Please' she whispers as she moves her warm body against mine.

- Quiet tonight.
- There's a chair behind the door.
- I'll leave it open. So I can hear what's going on.
- How are things?
- With?
- Yes.
- He'd like me to see if I can change back to days.
- Do you want to?
- Not really. Now I'm getting used to it.
- What does he say?
- Oh, things like its not natural. But I think it makes things easier. He can take the kids to school in the morning. I can sleep till it's time to pick them up and do a bit of shopping if I want. On my days off I catch up with the housework and go to the supermarket. I quite like the time I get on my own.
- That's how I started.
- Will you change?
- Perhaps.
- [A cry]
- It's him in the far bed. I'll check, but it'll be nothing.

A shout wakes me. I am instantly alert. Adrenaline is rushing round my body. I scan the darkened room quickly. The window is in the wrong place. A wardrobe looms. A snuffling sound brings a second wave confusion. My retinas are adapting to the low light. The room has shape and subdued colour. Memory adds to the mental picture piece by piece. Debbie. I notice her head on the other pillow. The flat. The drive through the dark. The story. I stare at the space at the side of the bed, trying to see my watch. I put out a hand. I touch a hard surface that is lower than the bed. I move my hand around. I hold my watch in the air, trying to catch as much light as I can on its face. It is inscrutable. I fold back a triangle of the duvet and put my feet down. The carpet has a deep soft pile. I pad over to the window and move the edge of the curtain. It lets in a little more light. The time is six twenty-five. I return to the fading warmth of the bed and lie on my back.

11

In the kitchen cupboard where I found the teabags there is also a jar of instant coffee, another jar with sugar, and a small pepper mill made of transparent plastic and containing a few black peppercorns. The other high-level cupboards contain crockery and glassware. The lower cupboards have pans and cooking utensils. In the fridge there's most of the pint of milk, a plastic tub of low fat spread, three cans of beer and a bottle of white wine in the door. I make myself a mug of coffee. I regret not buying some bread and some butter. The idea of toast is seductive.

Self-catering cottages. And flats. We went to a lot when Rachel and Ben were little. Cheap. Easy. Each place was different and yet there were similarities. The exploration on arrival. Sizing up the bedrooms. Who was going to sleep where. The kitchens took the most getting to know. The crockery and cutlery was never quite what you wanted. Nothing missing that you couldn't manage without, but too many cups and not enough glasses. Too many knives and forks and only a few teaspoons. A sink squeezed in a corner so that there was only a drainer and no adjacent space on the other side to pile up the dirty crockery. Bathrooms were either big with everything spread out or small with the toilet fitted in to a space which hardly left sufficient room for your knees when you were sitting on it and a seat that wouldn't stay up or fell down when you were in the middle of peeing. And there were always bits of things left by previous visitors. Coffee, tea, sugar, a half-used bottle of tomato ketchup, gravy browning. We never used them because we always had the feeling that they had been there ages, which was highly likely if everyone thought as we did. By the end of the week or fortnight the place was familiar, we were used to it but would occasionally discover something that we had searched for earlier in a cupboard or drawer that we had glanced into at the beginning of the week not expecting that what we were looking for would be there.

*

I hear noises from the direction of the bathroom.

The window allows me to see the area to the rear of the building. A row of garages and some parking spaces, half of them occupied by a cars, mostly middle-range family saloons. A red Jaguar and a small camper van are the oddities. There has been a frost and the windscreens of the cars facing me are still opaque. Beyond the garages two curved terraces of houses run down towards the sea which is grey. There is no horizon. A low weak sun brightens a patch of the featureless cloud. I recall a better view of the sea.

A boy in a hooded top appears and stands on the corner of the street across from the entrance to the car park. He is carrying a small rucksack over one shoulder. It's half past eight. A girl runs along the street, her legs flailing a little, an inelegant action. She is wearing black stockings and black flat shoes. Her jacket is zipped up and she is carrying a red shiny plastic bag. She stops close to the boy. I can see she is breathing hard. She takes a few deep breaths and then tilts her head up. Her hair is black and curly, her skin is brown. The boy puts his free arm around her shoulders and their lips touch briefly. They walk off hand-in-hand down the hill.

'Sweet.' Debbie is standing near me.

'Sweet sixteen.'

'The excitement of just having a boyfriend. Someone who you were special to and who was special to you.'

'Or the pain of not having a girlfriend.'

'Pain?'

'It seemed like pain.' I press my lips into a half smile. 'The options seem to be tea or coffee.'

'Tea. It's ages since I've been here.'

'Seems ages since anyone's been.'

I switch on the kettle.

'Don and I used to come for a few days when he wanted to get away from things. Or from a woman.'

'And you came along. For the ride.'

'Was that meant to be funny?'

'Sorry. I didn't mean.' I drop a teabag into a mug and drown it in boiling water.

'As I told you, there were times when we were good together.'

'And in between.'

'I did my own thing.'

'Which was?'

'Friends. Lunch. Shopping.'

'Men?'

'Yes. But not often. And not for long.'

I fish the teabag out of the water with a spoon. I drop it in the pedal bin. I add some milk and stir until the tea is a uniform colour. I hand it to her. She takes it and sits down.

'Didn't you have time on your hands?'

'There were other things. I tried golf. Helped out in a playgroup for a while, but I don't think toddlers are my scene. I even joined the WI in my sister's village.' She made a face at me as I sat down. 'Me in the WI.'

'Any other family?'

'Mum's in a nursing home. Doesn't know who I am. Dad died.' She glanced upwards. 'Nearly ten years ago. Liver cancer. I didn't have much spare time when he was ill and Mum was losing it. And Jenny wasn't much help. Too busy.'

'Your sister?'

'Jenny. Yes.' She gets up to put her mug by the sink. 'What about you? Brothers? Sisters? Parents?'

'Parents of course. Both dead. Neither brothers nor sisters.'

I can't imagine what it's like not to be an only child. My mother almost died having me. She'd had rheumatic fever as a child and as a result she had heart problems. I was born in the middle of an air-raid while my father was in North Africa. She was in hospital, we were in hospital, for much longer than the usual week. They never talked about it. Grandma told me. She told me the essence of the story one day

after I had jumped out of a cupboard and shouted boo at my mother. Grandma explained that it wasn't a good idea to startle my mother as the shock might give her heart failure.

Family life was bit limited. Laboured walking was about as much exercise as my mother could manage and then only for a few tens of yards before she needed to rest. My father fussed over her, and she fussed over me. I think she would have preferred a girl. After Grandma died we bought a car. I was nine. On Saturday and Sunday afternoons we went for a drive, ending up in some village or near a river where mother could sit on a folding chair that we kept in the boot, and my father and I would go for a walk taking us along the river or up to the summit of a hill where we could sit on the grass or a rock and point out things to each other. Father chain-smoked. He always had a cigarette in the corner his mouth. He could talk round it. He did take it out to drink and eat. When one cigarette burned down to within a quarter of an inch of his lips he took out another and lit it from the remainder of the first. He puffed out a cheek and the stub of the cigarette would fly in a controlled arc into the fire or the empty grate or, if we were outside, into the gutter. He would then place the fresh cigarette between his lips and draw on it to ensure it was burning. Occasionally he would have to use his lighter. I hated his smoking.

We talked as we walked and we talked while mother was dozing in her chair, by the fire, in the evening. We listened to the wireless. Words and music. We didn't have many books in the house but we, my father and I, were enthusiastic users of the public library. Books were an extension of my world.

I take Debbie to the supermarket where she fills a trolley with food and household items.

'How long do you think you'll stay?'

We join a queue at one of the checkouts.

'I don't plan to go back. Not to live there, anyway.'

'Won't there be problems with the flat?'

'Such as?'

'Like the house?'

'Nothing like that. It's paid for.' She closes the space between her trolley and the person in front. 'I'm sorry. I didn't tell you.'

'What?'

'Not only is it paid for. It's mine.'

'Yours?'

'Yep. Mine.' She starts transferring things from the trolley to belt.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. A packet came by registered post on.' She hesitated. 'Wednesday. No. Thursday. It had a note in it explaining that Mr Netherby had asked the person who had sent it to make sure I got it if Don died.'

'What was in it?'

'A sealed envelope with a solicitor's letter explaining that I owned the property and a photocopy of the deeds.'

She pushed the empty trolley past the till and I move round to stand with it. She packs the the goods into plastic bags. As each is full I lift it into the trolley. She fills five bags. She pays with a debit card.

Neither of us speaks as I drive back through steady rain to the flat. We carry the shopping up to her flat in silence. She takes two bags, I take three. She puts hers down to unlock the door. She holds the door open so that I can go in. I put all three bags on the worktop next to the sink.

'You sit down.'

I do as she says.

She unpacks each bag taking time to decide where the various items should be stored.

'Everything seems quite new.'

She turns to me. 'What?'

'The furniture and fittings. Nothing looks more than two or three years old. Not like my place. Nothing's changed in more than sixteen years.'

'I noticed.'

'Never felt the need.'

'That's a man for you.'

'How do you mean?'

'Don would have left everything as it was when we - he - first bought the flat.'

'But not you.'

'Not me. I replaced everything as you said about three years ago. Chucked everything out, redid the kitchen and the bathroom. New carpets, curtains, the lot.'

'Expensive.'

'Don, as I said, was generous.'

'As long as you didn't ask where it came from.'

She continues unpacking in silence.

When she finishes she says, 'Lunch.'

It is neither a question nor a statement.

'Good idea.'

She goes over to the window. 'It's stopped.'

'Are you suggesting we go out?'

Still looking through the glass she nods.

'My coat is in the car.'

'Mine's hanging up in the hall.'

I take the hint and go and get it.

'Thanks, ' she says as I hold it for her.

We walk down the hill towards the sea. Gulls sail in circles squawking. The sky is still grey and I cannot fix the position of the sun. The surface of the water heaves but only breaks in the last few yards before it spreads thinly over the sand. Debbie walks as if she is following a familiar route. She turns up a narrow street. Too wide to be an alley, but not wide enough for vehicles.

'There's a little Italian place up here.'

There is.

Inside a foursome sit together studying menus printed on sheets of card. They occupy four chairs at two small tables that have been pushed together. The two

women have short grey hair, one man is bald with a horseshoe of white hair, the other has thick hair, parted on the left, that has faded with the years but still retains a tinge of its original colour. All the tables are the same, square, dark, some in twos, some in threes. There are no other diners. Debbie threads her way through to a table for two and sits down with her back to the wall. I take off my coat and hang it round the other chair. I sit down. Debbie unfastens her coat and shrugs it off. It drapes, almost inside out, over the back of the chair.

We both order a pizza and a glass of red wine. I ask for a dish of olives.

'Why don't you stay. A couple of days.'

'Here?'

'Where else?'

'With you?'

'Of course.'

'I'm not sure.'

'Why?'

'I left in a hurry.'

'I'd like you to.'

'You would?'

She nods. 'It's raining again.'

I twist in my chair to see. The window is almost clear of running drops, but the steady vertical fall of rain is obvious against the darkness of the shop on the other side of the alley.

The woman who took our order presents us with two glasses of red wine and the olives. She also puts down two red paper napkins each wrapped around a knife and fork.

We both take cocktail sticks and take turns at spearing olives. After a puzzled hesitation I place my first stone in the glass ashtray. Debbie does the same. We say nothing as one by one we eat the olives.

When all the olives have been eaten she continues. 'It's - this is not quite the right word - cosy having someone around who doesn't expect anything.'

'Interesting word. Cosy. Hints of warmth and closeness. A friendly sort of word.'

'Perhaps.' She smiles. 'Perhaps it is the right word.'

'It does have overtones of secrecy and the exclusion of others.'

'Even better.'

A girl we haven't seen before approaches our table with two pizzas on plates.
'Four seasons?'

I hold my hand over the middle of the table to indicate Debbie. The girl places the two pizzas in their correct locations. 'Enjoy your meal,' she says and leaves.

'Let me go back today and I'll think about coming back for longer.'

Debbie reaches across the table and rests her right hand on the my left. I put my fork down and turn my hand over so that she can take hold of it. She does.

'Please,' she says. 'I'll expect you after the weekend. Monday afternoon.'

12

- Can I get you something?
- I'm fine.
- Sure? Coffee? Tea? The stuff out of the machine's not bad.
- I know.
- I'm going to get a coffee.
- OK then. I'll have a coffee.
- Milk? Sugar?
- Milk. No sugar. Thanks.

*

- Your mother's going home tomorrow.
- Yes.
- Is that not OK?
- I don't know. [Silence] It seems complicated.
- Does it?
- Not complicated. [Pause] Difficult. Difficult to know where I fit in. If I do.
- You didn't know.
- No. I've been in Malawi since last October.
- No signs.
- I just thought they were getting a bit tired of each other. I had hoped that being on their own.
- Would have brought them closer?
- Yes.
- Do you think he knew?
- Perhaps. Perhaps not. [Silence] You're not married?
- No.
- Have you always been a hospital chaplain?
- No, just over a year.

- Are you. [Pause] Enjoying it.
- Yes. Yes I am. But I don't see me doing it for more than three, maybe four years.
- Then what?
- Back into circuit.
- Circuit?
- Methodist churches are organised in circuits. I will indicate what kind of a circuit I am interested in and circuits wanting a minister will indicate what sort of a minister they are looking for and by some strange process the circuit issues an invitation and it is decided where I will be stationed.
- Sounds like the military. Stationed.
- In the end the choice is made for us.
- Where were you before here?
- In Lincolnshire. Lots of little country chapels.
- And where will you like to go next?
- A town or a city. Not sure about suburbia. I'll have to see what's on offer.

'Neville.'

I straighten up. He's wearing a heavy navy blue sweater. No dog collar in evidence. For a moment I can't remember his name. 'Russell. Hello. Trying to see where the coffee beans are. Packs all look the same.'

'Not seen you in here before.'

'Don't come often. Use the corner shop for things like milk. Bring the car here once in a while to stock up.'

'You don't live around here?'

'Not far. Too far to carry.'

'I'm just along the road.'

'One of those big houses?'

'Yes. Far too big for a chap on his own like me.'

'I know what you mean. I've put my house on the market. Not that anyone's been to see it yet.'

'Not the best time.'

'I know. I know. That's what everybody says. But it feels right for me.'

'Look. I've nearly finished. And it's.' He uses a finger to reveal his watch. 'Not eleven yet. Fancy a coffee at my place. I've nothing that must be done till this afternoon.'

'You can park on the drive.'

I swing the wheel and steer the car between the gateposts. There is no gate. I stop leaving a yard or so between my car and his. To the left of the drive is a square of lawn with a border crowded with nothing but lavender. The house is built of stone, a steep slate-covered roof. 'Late nineteenth?'

'Think so. Left to the church by some local millionaire in the days when a million quid was an awful lot of money.'

I open the car door carefully so that it does not touch the the low wall that separates the drive from that of the next house. Russell carries his shopping to the front door. I catch up with him as he unlocks the door. I follow him through the wide doorway.

The inside is light with pale walls throughout. He shows me into a room on the back of the house. I don't sit down immediately but walk over to the French windows glazed with leaded lights. The garden has a long neat lawn. A draught comes through where the two windows meet. I turn around. The dark fire-surround is high and wide. Probably as old as the house. Set in the surround is a coal-effect gas-fire. Unlit. The room is not warm. The three-piece suite is heavy and has pale floral loose covers. Not quite in keeping. I sit down in one of the armchairs. Soft. There is a folded newspaper on the coffee table. *The Times*. There are no pictures on the walls. The large television has a simple stand with no shelves. The room is devoid of clutter.

Russell returns with a cafetière in one hand and two mugs in the other. 'Milk?'

'No. Thanks.'

'Sugar?'

I shake my head.

He puts the mugs and the cafetière down on table and moves the folded newspaper to a magazine rack next to the hearth, half hidden by a chair. He moves the table so that it is equidistant from my chair and the sofa. The carpet is blue with grey flecks. He sits down on the sofa and pours the coffee.

'Sorry. I seem to be out of biscuits.'

I smile. 'That's OK.'

He sits back.

'All looks nice and fresh. The décor.'

'All newly done last August last year. For my arrival.'

'It feels quite modern inside.'

'Except for my furniture.'

Neither of us speaks for a good number of seconds

I put my mug down and study the black surface of the coffee. 'Tell me if I'm prying.' I pause. He says nothing. 'Have you always been on your own?'

'No. Not always.'

I relax.

'I'm divorced.' He grips the thumb of his left hand. The knuckles of his right hand are pale.

'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked.'

'It's all right. It was along time ago.' He releases his thumb and curls his left hand into a loose fist. He raises his hand to his face, the thumb under his chin and his index finger pressing against his mouth. He releases his lips after a few seconds. 'And a long time since I've talked about it. People expect the minister to listen to them. Not often does anyone want to listen to the minister.'

'I can listen.'

'Thanks. But.'

Again there is a silence, almost long enough to be uncomfortable.

'We'd been married almost five years. We'd had a couple of years in London and then I was stationed in Lincolnshire with a string of village chapels, all with small ageing congregations. Or at least they seemed old to me. There were children in the Sunday schools, but we didn't see much of their parents. She got a job in a junior school about ten miles away. My initial invitation was for three years and

normally I might have expected to be invited for another three. Anyway when decision time arrived a year or so before the three years were up. I said I didn't want to be re-invited. I didn't like the rural lifestyle. I'd crossed swords with senior stewards in a couple of churches and there was some resentment that the minister's wife was not always in evidence. At first she seemed glad we were moving on, especially when she heard that my move would be to the Home Counties. But.' He is gripping his thumb again. His eyes close momentarily, more than a blink. He breathes audibly. 'One Sunday about three weeks before we are scheduled to move I get back from taking a service at my furthest chapel. A small van is parked outside the manse. The driver looks familiar but I can't place him. I smile at him thinking that he probably recognises me and he will expect me to recognise him. He turns away and starts the engine. The front door is, as usual, unlocked. I walk in. She is standing in the middle of the hall with a jacket on and holding her handbag. I ask where's she's going. She says I'm not coming with you. For a second I'm confused. I'm not going anywhere. She says, I'm staying here. In Lincolnshire. I say nothing. She waits. Staying, I say, trying to make the word have meaning. She moves to pass me. I'm sorry, but I don't want to be with you any more. And she walks round me and out of the house. The van drives off.'

The air in the room is heavy, difficult to breathe. He sits, elbows on his thighs, his coffee in both hands, staring through it.

'I'm sorry.'

He puts his mug on the table and rearranges himself until he gives the impression of being relaxed. 'It was a long time ago.'

'But the memory is vivid.'

'Yes. The words are clear in my mind. I can hear the tone of her voice. Determined. Brooking no argument. Loveless.'

'Hurtful.'

'Not really. It was if she had become empty in some way. As though something inside her had gone. I went to the gate and stared down the road. Nothing to see, of course. Which was a relief. I think the worst thing that could have happened at that moment was for her to have changed her mind. If the van had stopped and she had got out and come back.' He raised his shoulders and then let them drop. 'I think I would have felt it necessary to forgive, to have her back, but she would have always been an empty woman.'

'Soulless.'

'In a way. Whatever it was in her that had made me love her had gone. Perhaps it had been gone a long time and I had not noticed. Perhaps I had stopped noticing her. Perhaps that was why.'

His faced changed. A quick grin told me he was throwing off the past and coming back to the present. 'More coffee?'

The classroom had tall French windows, curved at the top, that gave on to a grassed quadrangle. It was summer. The windows were open. The air was warm and still. Between the window and the grass there were low shrubs interspersed with flowers. I had finished whatever task we had been set and was watching a butterfly. My long pencil was held between my fingers and as I watched the butterfly settle and close its wings my fingers moved alternately. I could feel the length of the pencil oscillating. Suddenly the pencil slipped from the light grip of my fingers, twirled into view and continued spinning in a rising trajectory through the open window. The quadrangle was out of bounds. I lifted myself off my seat and peered through the window. My pencil lay on the soil at the edge of the grass. I sat down and leaned forward. Alec. Alec turned his head to listen. My pencil's just flown out of the window. What you goin' to do? I don't know. I daren't tell her. I'll tell her. No, I said. But it was too late. Alec's arm shot straight up. Her eye caught the movement and she straightened up from where she had been bending down next to a girl in the middle aisle inspecting the girl's book. Yes, Alec. Miss. My pencil's flown out of the window. Flown? Out of the window? Yes, Miss. Did it just flap its wings and take off? There was a little laughter. No, Miss. I was just. Playing with it. And it went. Well then you'd better retrieve it. Alec hesitated. Go, find it, and bring it back. Now, Miss? She nodded, eyes wide, eyebrows raised, mouth tight. Alec hurried across the front of the classroom and carefully opened and closed the door. The handle was about head height. In half a minute he was standing on the grass looking down. Those of us nearest the windows were leaning to look out. He picked up the pencil and was soon re-entering the classroom. He strode across to his desk passing between Miss, who was standing at the blackboard, and the front row of the class. He put the pencil on his desk. I wondered where his pencil was. He sat down. Miss looked at Alec. Alec looked back. She curled her index finger and beckoned. Alec swung out of his seat and walked towards her. She put a hand on his head and steered him until he was facing the blackboard. Touch your toes. He stretched is arms to touch his toes. Knees straight. We all knew what was going to happen. Resting one hand on Alec's

curved back she slapped him sharply at the back of each knee. Sit down. Pencils are not for playing with. His eyes full Alec forced a grin as he walked to his desk. When she wasn't looking Alec held my pencil behind his back for me to take. Sitting on the toilet at home I thought of Alec and remembered those occasions when the back of my knees had been sore and I had lifted my body by sitting on my hands so that the soreness did not catch the edge of the toilet seat. I bought a tube of fruit gums on the way back to school after the midday break. Alec grinned again when I offered them to him. A gift.

I leave the house and walk along to the main road and approach the knot of people waiting for a bus. I join what I pretend is the end of the queue. A bus comes. It is one of the three or four routes that go into the city centre. I get on after everyone else and pay the driver. He presses a button and my ticket snakes out of the machine. I pull at the ticket and it tears easily. I choose a pair of empty seats halfway down the bus and slide up to the window. I hold my ticket in my hand and look through the grubby glass. My object in going into the centre is to browse the shops for ideas for Christmas presents. A first reconnaissance. It is only the middle of November.

The streets are bright and dry, a chill wind catches me as I round a corner. I pull the collar of my coat up and overlap the lapels. I turn into a department store. Soon I am too warm. I unbutton my coat. I wander the various areas. Perfumes and cosmetics. Accessories. Up an escalator. Women's fashions. Up another. Men's fashions. I take the lift down to the basement. Kitchen and dining. Up the escalator to the ground floor. Jewellery.

Jo always did the Christmas shopping. All I had to do was think of something to buy her. Nothing extravagant. That was our rule. For each other. She thought too much was spent at Christmas. I enjoyed Christmas when the kids were little. Watching them bear their unbearable anticipation brought back memories of going to bed on Christmas Eve and not being able to sleep until, suddenly, so it seemed, it was morning. Dad always made me wait until I had some breakfast. All I was allowed to see was the scattering of wrapped presents around the tree that had not been there when I went to bed. *He* had been. Later, when I was older, and the myth had been discarded, the day lost most of its excitement. Except for what was unwrapped in

the morning, the day progressed as it had done the year before. A walk with Dad to the local park, whatever the weather, and there were few white Christmases. The stuffed turkey, roast potatoes, mash, carrots and the sprouts. Christmas pudding with brandy sauce. The Queen's speech on the radio, which Dad called the wireless. Then they would fall asleep in their chairs and I would read my new book, eat something from the inevitable selection box. There was always a jigsaw puzzle, but that had to wait until mother woke. The enclosure of edge pieces would be complete by tea. Ham sandwiches. Pork pie. Pickles. A slice of Christmas cake. When I was thirteen or fourteen I was allowed a small glass of sherry before dinner. And a small glass of port with my slice of Christmas cake. In the evening we played three-handed cribbage, passing round a box of Black Magic every so often. I liked the pointed ones filled with what we called orange cream.

Outside the cold strikes me and I button up again and push my hands into my pockets. I plan a route around the shopping area. I look in shop windows. Inside one of the bright malls where the excessive light is reflected from every surface, I begin to think that I am on a futile expedition. Nothing has caught my eye. I only have four presents to buy. Something for Rachel and Simon, a joint gift. Something for Jack. Something for William. Something for Ben. I haven't looked at any toys. I sit down on a bench and try to recall where I might look at toys. I remember a toyshop near the market. I set off through the clinical brightness, pleased with my sense of purpose. A young woman reaches the start of the escalator a few seconds before me and I stand three steps above her as we glide down to street level. She is wearing a yellow woollen hat pulled down over her ears. As we head towards the exit I overtake her. I glance at her. She is not as old as I thought. For a moment she reminds me of Jo. The automatic doors at the exit are taped over. Printed on a sheet of white A4: PLEASE USE OTHER DOORS. I push open one of the narrow doors and before I release it I check behind me. The girl is a yard or so away, I step round the door and hold it open for her to walk through. Yes. She does look like Jo. Her skin is a few shades darker, and brown eyes rather than blue. I allow the door to close. I choose my direction and set off towards the market. It's lunch-time and there are more people on the streets. I find myself hesitating and veering as I attempt to keep up a good pace through shoppers who are either going more slowly in the same direction as me or hurrying in the opposite. I keep noticing the yellow hat ahead of me. I decide to cut into a thin, covered alley that has no shops and opens into a narrow yard where there is one of the city's oldest pubs. The

weathered picnic tables in the yard are unoccupied. I stride through the yard, passing the entrance to the pub, and enter the further alley. When I am about halfway along it, the girl with the yellow hat passes across the exit.

I come out on to the street and turn to follow the girl. Soon we are at the edge of the shopping area and into streets where almost all the buildings, old and new, accommodate the offices of accountants, solicitors, property agents, and the like. She takes a street that has a right-angled corner at the far end. I keep her in sight. She turns the corner. Five seconds later I do the same following her into a Georgian square. There are a few people in the square. All walking. In summer every bench would be occupied and people would be sitting out on the grass. Today there only those walking. Not one of them is wearing a yellow hat.

- Hello? [Pause] You were asleep.
- Jack. How long have you been here?
- Five, ten minutes.
- Sorry.
- Don't be.
- Couldn't sleep last night.
- Worried?
- Not really. It's Mum. Spent yesterday evening talking to her about going home.
- When?
- Tomorrow or the day after. I asked her what she needed. List as long as your arm. Spent this morning shopping. Mainly things for the little one. I don't understand the rush. I don't think they'll be letting her - the baby - go home for a while. Cot's coming tomorrow. Sometime.
- You should have given me a ring. I'd have taken you to town or wherever in the car.
- I didn't think. I feel it's all down to me.
- What else do you need?
- She's making another list. For the supermarket.
- What's he doing?
- He's too busy.
- I see.
- I think she wants to keep him at a distance. Until she. Oh, I don't know.
- I'm sorry.

- What've you got to be sorry for?
- I'd rather things weren't the way they are. For your sake at least.
- Thanks.

13

I'm reading the paper, a black coffee on the table beside my chair, when the phone rings. There's no phone in the front room. Jo thought that having a telephone in the room where one entertained was rude, impolite at best. I tried one of the cordless ones for a while but I never knew where the damned handset was and neglect resulted in flat batteries making it useless. I drop the paper on the carpet and go into the hall. I sit on the old Windsor chair that came from Jo's grandmother's house and pick up the phone.

'Hello.'

'Neville?'

'Yes.'

'Jack.'

'Jack. How are you?'

'Fine. Fine. I was wondering.' Silence. 'I was wondering if you'd been in touch with Debra. Debra Netherby.'

'I have spoken to her. On the phone.' Not a lie.

'How was she?'

'OK. She didn't seem too upset about Don's passing.'

'It's - what? - two, three months now.'

'Less.'

'I always think it's a hard time. After the funeral. Sorting things out.'

'Yes. It is.'

'You'd know of course.'

'What?'

'What it's like sorting things out.'

I hesitate, wondering. 'Yes,' I say, 'of course.'

'Is she managing?'

'I don't really know.'

'Julia thinks. Julia thinks she hasn't many close friends. Really close friends. And no kids.'

'I wouldn't know. About the close friends.'

'So she didn't say anything.'

'About what?'

'Difficulties.'

'No. Why should she tell me?'

'You were close once.'

'God, that was no more than an aberration of a man entering the male menopause.'

'I thought there might be a flickering flame that hadn't quite gone out.'

'It was a long time ago.'

'Yes. It is a long time.'

'Nearly twenty years.'

'As long as that.'

I don't want to dwell on the past. I say, 'We're different people now.'

'I still think I'm twenty-one.'

'Well you are a different person now.'

After a second or two, I sense I have said something unacceptable, or not said what was expected.

'Well nice talking to you. Good to know you're all right. We must meet up again.'

'Yes, we must.'

'I don't think there'll be another walk until after Christmas.'

'Right. I look forward to it.'

'Bye, Neville.'

'Goodbye Jack.' I stand up and put the phone down.

- What's the matter?
- I knew we shouldn't have come.
- You said you liked ballet.
- I do.
- Jo. Tell me.
- Three rows in front, just beyond the aisle.
- Yes.
- A couple. She's got short hair, dangling earrings. He's fair, thinning, long nose.
- Yes.
- They know me. Live half a dozen doors away.
- Friends?
- Not really. More than just neighbours. Jack and Julia. Dinner parties. Drinks at Christmas. That sort of thing. But. [Pause] Wouldn't. [Pause] You know.
- Borrow a cup of sugar?
- Who does that these days. But you're right.
- Swap seats and then you can half keep your back to them.

*

- They're part of a group. Looking the other way. Chatting.
- I'll be glad when the lights go down.

I'm walking. I'm walking in order to walk. Not to get anywhere. Simply to walk. Another cold and bright day. Not like November. I left the house around ten and set off across the park. At the farthest side of the park from the house, beyond the lake, I keep going. I feel better than I did in the house. I suppose it's the endorphins. I wonder when the police will come back. What questions they will ask. What answers will satisfy them. My stride lengthens. My breathing takes effort. I am not out of breath, but I am exercising my lungs beyond what they have become used to. The road I am on is deceptively steep. Or do I mean it is deceptively gentle. I ease my pace. I reflect on the telephone conversation. With Jack. I can't recall his exact words. He asked questions about Debra. I had assumed that he didn't know her.

His words were purposeful despite the offhand light bantering tone. Perhaps he did know her. Or her husband. Debra reaping the reward of years under the control of a crook. She hadn't mentioned any friends. I wonder why this is so. Julia's cousin knew her. But was she a friend? Is she a friend? I don't know much about Debra.

- Nurse! Nurse!
- Sh. Sh. Calm down. There's no need. Dad. Everything's all right. Sh. Sh.
[Silence]
- What happened?
- He suddenly started writhing. Breathing harshly. His eyes were moving. Under his eyelids. Then it stopped.
[Silence]
- His heart rate is high. [Pause] I'll take his blood pressure and check his temperature.
- What could it be?
- It could be something that's nothing to do with accident. Some underlying problem. I'll mention it to Mr Malcolm when he does his rounds tomorrow.
- Shouldn't something be done now?
- We'll keep an eye on him and I'll mention it at handover. There are no obvious signs. I don't think there's anything to worry about.
- I do worry.
- Come in early in the morning. Don't wait until visiting time. Say half past ten and I'll tell you what Mr Malcolm thinks.

I've been walking on the flat for a while and the tightness under my ribs has eased. I have been walking for half an hour. I plan my route back to the house. I anticipate a cup of good coffee and perhaps a square of really dark chocolate. I decide to change my route and call in at the supermarket. My walk takes me down the road where Russell lives. I consider the possibility of calling on him. When I reach his house, I hesitate. His car is in the drive.

- How is he now?
- Quiet.
- I left a message with Mr Malcolm's secretary and she's rung back to say he'll try to pop up later.
- Thanks.

I taste the coffee.

'I'm glad you called in.'

'You're sure I'm not disturbing you.'

'My day off. Wednesday. And he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. Genesis chapter two, verse two. King James version.'

'James the first of England and sixth of Scotland. Sixteen-O-three to sixteen twenty-five.'

'Very good. Though you could be coddling me.'

'One of those I remember. Not sure why.'

'Must soon be the quatercentenary of the bible. The King James Version.'

I curl my lower lip outwards as though intrigued by this supposition. Russell drinks some coffee. I put down the mug I have been holding and pick up one of the chocolate-covered biscuits. 'Doesn't seem much. One day a week.'

'It's OK. And don't most professional people work more than the requisite hours?'

'You can say that again.' I drink more of my coffee. I'm not sure what I should say next.

'Last time.' he says, his mug of coffee is held in both hands, his elbows rest on his knees and he studies the floor through the triangular space formed by his arms. 'Last time. I went on a bit. About.' He lifts his head a little. He strains his eyes upwards to see my face. 'Thanks.'

I shrug.

'For listening.'

I smile pressing my lips together.

He sits up. 'Tell me about yourself. If you want to, that is.'

'There's not much to tell. Well. Not much more than you already know.'

His eyebrows rise. 'You said something about children. I forget.'

'Two. Rachel. Married. Two kids. Lives about half an hour's drive away. Ben. In London. Lawyer with a small financial company of some sort. Ben got the degree he wanted then spurned the academic life and followed the money. Rachel went to university, graduated in biochemistry, and then looked for a job which made no demands on her outside the hours she was at work. She found a post in a medical laboratory analysing medical samples from patients she would never know, mere numbers on a sheet of paper. She's been in that line ever since, going back part-time after Jack was born and again after William. The hours are flexible so with a bit of child-minding from Simon's mother and mornings at the playgroup, she manages to earn a decent income at little inconvenience to her family life. Simon says she doesn't need to work. She says she needs to get out of the house and meet people and talk about things other than childhood ailments, food additives, prospective schools. Time to consider questions other than whether television is good for kids, and not have to spend it trying to persuade dedicated full-time mothers that saying *no* is a good thing. Ben hasn't impinged on my life for years.'

'You don't see him much?'

'No. We've drifted apart since his mother died.'

'We never got round to kids.'

'Mixed blessing.'

'Kids. Or not having them?'

'Both. I guess.' I finish my coffee.

'What's it like being retired.'

'I'm not sure I know. Yet. I have to work at each day. Try to make something of it. When you've a job there's always something to do. Now I have to invent things.'

'Such as?'

'Like today. A walk. No purpose in it other than to have a walk. Sometimes a drive. Pub lunch, a wander round a village and then back again. I thought it might be like being on holiday. Not that I've had much in the way of holidays in recent years. But it's not. Sitting down to read a novel. Well it's what one does on holiday. I can't do it now without feeling that I should be doing something. Something more productive. It's not a good time to retire. August. Not long before it's Autumn. And then the days get shorter and darker.'

'Depressing sometimes?'

'Not always. I'm more likely to get angry than depressed.'

'Angry?'

'Frustrated. More like. I want a reason. A reason to be. To keep going. Something to aim for.'

'So you're going to move house.'

I'm not sure whether it's a question or a provocative statement or the echo of what I have already told him. 'Yes. I thought. I'm not sure what I thought.'

'But it gives you a focus.'

'In a way.' I pause. 'I think I thought it might present me with a challenge. Getting to know somewhere unfamiliar. Learning to live there.'

Neither of us speak for what seems to me like a long time. Uncomfortable. Russell's gaze is inward. Thinking. Praying? His head lifts sharply. He fixes me with an angled quizzical look. 'I rather fancy the idea of a run-out to a country pub and nice leisurely lunch. If you're planning one on a Wednesday let me know.' He takes a small wallet from his back trouser pocket and pulls out a business card.

I take it and push it into the top pocket of my jacket. 'I'll let you know.' I stand up.

Russell stands up. 'Nice to have a chat.' He stretches his arm towards me and we shake hands.

14

'Thanks for coming.' She kisses me on the cheek. 'I meant to ask you on Sunday. Should have done it the Sunday before. But, somehow, it went out of my mind.' She takes a quick look up the stairs and then whispers, 'Actually I think it went out of my mind because I don't really like these work get-togethers.'

I go into the front room. I hear them talking in the hall. Simon comes in.

'How are you?'

'I'm fine.'

'The paper's in the rack and the telly programmes.'

'Brought a book.' I hold it up.

'Read the one that won the Booker.'

'Life and times.'

'of Michael K.'

'What did you think?'

'Grey. That's the word that comes to mind.'

Rachel calls from the hall. 'Taxi's here.'

I follow Simon into the hall.

'William's asleep. Jack's reading. I said you'd go up.'

'I will.'

'I've put some things out in the kitchen. Help yourself to wine or beer.'

'Thanks.'

'You are going to stop over?'

'Yes.'

'William will want to see you.'

'Right,' says Simon.

'We'll be no later than twelve. Thanks Dad.'

'Be as late as you like. I'll probably be in bed.'

I wait until I am certain they've gone before I go upstairs treading as quietly as I can. The boys have separate rooms. I'll be sleeping on the folding bed in the bedroom that is used as a study. William is asleep. His eyelids are smooth over his eyes, the long lashes resting gently on his cheek. I watch him until I have seen his chest rise and fall a few times. I pull the door until it is not quite closed and gently open Jack's door.

'Grandad.' He is sitting up in bed. He puts his book down without closing it. 'Story.'

I raise my eyebrows.

'Please.'

'Which one do you want?'

I've forgotten most of what happened when the kids were small. Specific incidents stand out, but the day-to-day detail of cajoling, persuading, commanding, cuddling, praising, loving, consoling, laughing and crying has faded among the jumble of sounds, images, smells that lie at the bottom of memory awaiting concerted recollection. Occasionally something rises up to be given a short consideration with insufficient context and too few links to other memories for me to be sure of when and sometimes where the events it echoes occurred. I retain the certainty that what we were doing as Ben and Rachel grew older was important, even significant, but whether what we did, what we thought, what we hoped and planned was right or good I cannot say. Parenting is a project doomed to failure. Whatever principles are agreed it is unlikely, so it seems to me, that both parents will follow them to the letter. Interpretation, latitude, flexibility are all part of the deal. Don't be so hard. I thought we'd agreed. You always give in. He's didn't mean it. She only trying to be helpful. But there's got to be boundaries. There are boundaries. Yes, there were boundaries, elastic boundaries, subject to the pull of reasoning, of justification, of

exceptions, and special cases. But did we achieve the goals that seemed clear when our children were born? Of course not.

I was born into a generation that had far more opportunities than its parents. My academic achievements were far beyond what my parents could have imagined, so far beyond as to be almost meaningless to them. And I expected that the next generation would go further than I had.

I mark my place and put my book down then climb the stairs without a sound and spend a minute or so in each room studying each one, wondering about their dreams, their hopes as yet unformed, the futures that I will almost certainly not know or, if I do, understand.

Downstairs I finish the wine in my glass. A big Australian red that's too easy to drink. In the kitchen I refill the glass. I'm finding the book difficult. His style is almost clinical. I don't feel with him. I can't read his characters. I ought more often to read in the mornings when I'm less tired. I am tired. I close my eyes.

A distant cry yanks me up out of my doze. It is a second or two before the echo of the cry in my head is recognised as the cry of a child. A cry followed by silence. I listen. The silence continues. I weigh the options. Go or stay. Look or listen. Check or worry. I decide to go, look and check. I open William's door first. A soft glow from the small lamp. He is still. As I watch he moves his head. I open Jack's door. The light from the landing cuts across the foot of the bed. I step inside and peer into the darker part of the room.

'No!'

The shout startles me and I step forward. Jack is sitting up in bed, eyes wide.

'S'all right,' I say, my voice low.

'No. Go away.'

'Sh.'

'Let me go.' He twists his body. 'Get. Off.' There is determined authority in his voice.

I move closer. 'It's all right, Jack. You're dreaming. That's all.'

'You're hurting me.' He thrusts a hand in my direction and his fingers touch my arm.

'Who's hurting you?'

'You are.'

'I'm Grandad.'

'Not you. Her.'

'Her. Who?'

'I don't know.' He shuffles backwards, towards the bed head. 'Stop pulling.'

'Who's pulling.'

'She is.'

'Shall I make her go away?'

'I don't like her.'

'Why?'

'She's black.'

'Black?'

'With curly hair.'

'Go away black woman.' My voice is stern. 'Now.'

Jack stares over my shoulder.

'Is she still there?'

'No. She's gone.'

'Wriggle down.'

He lowers his body and wriggles under the bedclothes. His eyes focus on me.
'Grandad.'

'You were having a dream.'

He closes his eyes. I stroke his head until he is breathing regularly and deeply.

- Babies.
- What about them?
- Innocent. Trusting. Vulnerable.
- At risk.
- I know. You hear such awful stories.

- Best not to think about them.
- Babies?
- No. The stories. They happen. They've always happened.
- It must hurt so. Not just the physical abuse. The betrayal.
- Did you enjoy being responsible for a baby? A human being that, but for you, might suffer and die?
- Not at first. But when you realise.
- Realise what?
- That a baby loves you without question.
- Do they? Or are they manipulative, selfish creatures evolved to exploit their mothers and maybe their fathers in order to ensure survival.
- And I am programmed to respond?
- Yes.
- You can tell you're not a parent.
- Are you suggesting that I become one?
- No, but.
- But what?
- I don't think I want to answer that question. Not in words.

'They were fine.'

'Good.'

'I had to go up to Jack. He was talking in his sleep.'

'He does that sometimes.'

'He thought some black woman was trying to take him away.'

Simon comes in. 'He was rabbiting on about some girl he's seen outside school at lunch-time. He said she had dark skin. No, he said brown. I said black. And then - another day - standing across the road.'

'Outside here?'

'Apparently. He said girl. School uniform.'

'Did you see her?'

'No.' Simon goes over to the television which I had turned on earlier to watch the news and stands in front of it watching the highlights of a football match.

'He said something to me as well.' Rachel sits down and kicks off her high-heeled shoes. 'You don't see many around here. Coloured? Black? Or whatever we're supposed to call them these days.'

'I'm going up.' I pick up my book. 'Good night'.

'Good night.'

I go into the hall and up the stairs.

Sunday morning is bright. As the sun strikes it, the frost melts into dark wetness. Elsewhere it remains a thin sugary coating. Not quite white. I put on a woollen hat as well as my winter coat. I take a pair of gloves and leave the house. The air is sharp and I pull the hat down so that it insulates my ears before setting off across the park. I need the gloves, but after twenty minutes or so I remove my hat, fold it in half and slip it into a coat pocket. My route is serendipitous, my mind is occupied by Debbie. If I go tomorrow will I appear keen. Too keen. Does too keen matter? How soon will friendship become commitment? Do I want commitment? Or merely friendship? Who is in control?

Beyond the edge of the park in an estate of seemingly identical houses, big panes of glass and white-painted window frames, I reach a high point where, through a gap between two of the houses, there is a vista of the city. In the centre, the tall buildings that were not there thirty years ago have been pushed up by some indefinable underground force. A light haze hangs over the city. Above me the zenith is a hard blue.

Walking downhill I pass a man washing his car. The bucket of water is steaming. The street is steep, and the used water, streaked with suds, runs quickly down the gutter. In a few days the paintwork will be as dirty as it was before he started. It seems like a parable. Fragments of some verses in the Bible come to me. Like grass. And tomorrow is cast into. And the place. Shall know it no more.

Another hundred yards and I stop and stand while an old woman is helped out of a small car into a wheelchair. I think about offering to assist, but the man and the woman doing the helping are clearly practised. The car is parked outside a church. As I wait other people, mainly middle-aged and older, arrive at the gate and cheerfully greet each other as they go up the three or four stone steps that rise to the main door of the church. The man pushes the wheelchair towards the steps and then turns the wheelchair round so that he can pull it backwards up the steps.

Another man helps by taking the front of the wheelchair and lifting it. Between them they carry the wheelchair and the woman to the top and then she is steered into the church.

- Good morning.
- Mr Banstead. Nice to see you.
- Russell, please.
- And how are you Mrs Dow?
- Jo. Please call me Jo. [Pause] At the moment I don't feel like Mrs Dow.
- Where's Rachel?
- She gone to sit with. Our little girl. Talk to her for a change. She's spent too much time in this room.
- And how are you feeling today?
- Responsible. Guilty. Torn. Lost.

In the way that words catch the eye and are perceived but not seen, and half read without any deliberate effort, the name Russell registers. I search around. On the noticeboard I read Minister: Russell J. Banstead B.A., B.D.

Inside the church there is a woman standing by a pile of hymn books. She says, 'Good morning' and offers me one. I take the book and say, 'Thank you.' The straight parallel pews are split by a central aisle. The worshippers already present have elected to leave the front pews vacant and are sitting close to the aisle as though it was important to the limit distance to the door and maintain a comfortable contact with the outside world. I stand for a moment, before turning left and going down the gap between the pews and the left-hand wall. I sit at the left-hand end of the first completely empty pew. I am an outlier in an otherwise clustered distribution. The organist is playing.

The building is late-Victorian, dark beams, cream walls with a large central pulpit rising above a small railed area in which there is a table. In the centre of the table stands a small brass cross on a stepped base. Behind the pulpit rise the pipes of the organ. Russell appears in the pulpit and the organist stops playing as soon as is musically acceptable. The conversations have already ended.

Russell makes a statement in a tone intended to capture the attention of his congregation, and then announces a hymn. I find the hymn. Everyone else stands,

so I stand. I don't sing. I don't even pretend to sing. The congregation sits for the prayer. I think they close their eyes. Some rest their bowed heads on their hands, their elbows on their knees. They echo the amens like unsynchronised automatons. I sit with my hands on my knees, my back slightly curved.

I always liked the idea of prayer - the idea that we, on our own or in concert with others, can, by thinking about something remote or near, affect a situation, and the people in that situation, and change things that are by other means beyond our influence. A no-cost altruism. But I have no idea how it could work and yet it is a daily activity of many, a common activity of the desperate.

After the prayer, another hymn. As they sing, I read the words, occasionally familiar words, and struggle to extract coherent meaning from them. I no longer have the vocabulary and I wonder whether I ever did. Three extracts from the Bible are read by three members of the congregation. One of them is a teenage girl. She is black with her hair tied up on the top of her head. Her speech is heavily accented, which I don't expect. The reading is one I have heard before. Some of the words are well known. The voice of one crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord make his path straight. And I recall other words. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain. It makes me think of a motorway. A motorway, perhaps, described by someone who didn't know what it was for. Russell in his sermon picks up the word 'prepare' and talks about preparing for Christmas. About being prepared for the time when Christ returns in glory. When he comes as a thief in the night. It doesn't quite hang together, but is remarkably short for which I am grateful.

After the sermon there are more prayers, another hymn. O come, O come Emmanuel. It doesn't make a lot of sense. Then the blessing. Within what seems a very short time as the organist renders another tune that I do not know, the congregation, no longer in unison, begin to move about the church, and gather in conversational knots. I feel isolated. I stand up and make my way to the back. Russell is standing in the porch having a few words with each person as they leave.

'Good to see you, Neville.'

'I was just passing. I saw your name.'

'Drop in on Wednesday.'

'Morning?'

'As it suits you.'

'I'll see.' It's not mere politeness. He seems to want me to call.

I ring Debbie on Monday morning. The phone rings for a long time. I listen for ten more rings and during the eleventh I put the phone down. It's ten o'clock. At eleven, after I've had a coffee and read most of the paper, I ring again. I begin to count, she answers on the third ring.

'Debbie. It's Neville.'

'Neville. You are coming?'

'I'm sorry. I can't come till Wednesday.' I take a breath and then lie. 'I've got someone coming to look at the central heating boiler. It's been playing up for a while and I'd forgotten about him coming. Wouldn't say morning or afternoon.'

'Neville. I thought you promised.'

'I didn't promise.'

I breathe.

'No. Perhaps you didn't.'

'Definitely Wednesday. I'll ring when I'm about to leave.'

'It's not very nice being on your own.'

'I know.'

'I suppose you do.'

'You fill the time. Somehow.'

'I miss you.'

'I'm beginning to miss you.' This time I am not lying.

- It would be nice to get away.
- To spend some time together.
- More than an evening, more than a day.
- Not to have to.
- Be watching the time.
- Yes.
- I've been thinking.
- What?
- He's off to a conference at the end of March.
- How long for?
- Goes Sunday. Back Wednesday.
- Could you get time off?
- First week of the vacation. Should be no problem. It's not school holidays. Is it?
- No idea.
- I'll check. What about you?
- I'll see. I'll ring you.

15

'I was quite taken aback when I noticed you on Sunday.'

'Sorry.'

'No. No. It was a pleasant surprise.' He relaxes in his chair. 'No, not pleasant. Well not unpleasant either. More puzzling. I couldn't understand why you were there. For a moment. For a moment I felt as if I was being inspected and that at the end you would take me on one side and ask me difficult questions.'

'It was no more than an impulse. I can't explain it.'

'The nudge of God.'

I am at a loss as how to respond. I reach forward and take a choc-chip cookie from the round blue-edged plate. I take a careful bite but the biscuit breaks unevenly and I move my left hand quickly to catch the falling fragments. Those that do not fall into my hand land on my right knee. I lift my left hand to my mouth and contrive to suck in the pieces of biscuit. I then pick up each crumb from my knee and transfer it to my mouth. When I have eaten all the bits I look at Russell.

'You don't believe in God. Do you?' he says.

'God? I don't think I know what believing in God means. I used to. A sort of super parent. The kind that makes you do things that you don't want to do. Things you know that you should do even though you know that you have the freedom to do as you please.'

'Why super?'

'Because he - if he is a he - knows what you decide to do. And why?'

'Omniscient.'

'Omniscience. I think that's what finally put paid to him. Billions of people. Billions of planets. The idea of knowing everything seemed impossible, outrageously impossible, bordering on silly.'

'The word that is translated as "believe" has a meaning that is closer to "trust".'

'So you're asking me if I trust God?'

'Maybe.'

'If he exists.' I hesitate. 'I must believe - believe in the ordinary sense - that God exists before I can trust him.'

'Do you believe he exists?'

'No.'

'Certain?'

'Yes.'

'OK so what do you believe in? What do you trust?'

'The physical world, the universe. Science. The laws of physics. Discovered and undiscovered.'

'Nothing more?'

'Nothing more.'

'What was it then? Which physical law prompted you to come into church on Sunday?'

'Curiosity.'

'There's a physical law of curiosity?'

'Possibly. The brain is complex and not much of what it does can be explained by current science. There are ways on determining which areas of the brain are active during certain activities, even thinking about certain things, but the relationship between the physical and the mental is a mystery. And will probably remain a mystery.'

'It's not all mechanical then?'

'I didn't say that. I can't see us being able to work out what the principles are, what rules there are, what the mechanisms are.'

'Isn't that a bit defeatist?'

'Does a human brain have the capacity to understand how it works? Might it not need something that is not only more powerful, but different in nature to understand it.'

'Like a computer. Your artificial intelligence?'

'Perhaps.'

'A little bit of doubt.'

'Ignorance.'

'Why?'

'I can't get away from the reality of self-awareness and the apparent ability to make free choices.'

'And as we cannot go back and take the other path we can never be sure the choice was free, can we?'

'No.'

Russell studied the ceiling for moment, closed his eyes and then recited: 'Said a philosopher - suddenly - "Damn! I've just decided I am an engine that moves in predestinate grooves. I'm not even a bus but a tram".'

I used to believe there was a God. A nice fellow. Formless. But definitely a chap. I knew it was not right to think of him in human form. That was Jesus. God was there. Up there? Sort of, but also all around. He wanted me to be good and if I was good he promised that things would turn out all right for me. Being good was the problem. Not that I was bad. But deciding what was good and what was bad was a problem. There were really bad things. Like murder, stealing. But if I hurt my cousin Irene I was wrong. If a teacher hurt me by slapping my legs, it was because I was wrong. If I did what my mother wanted me to do that was good. If I did what I wanted to do it could so easily be wrong. And God wasn't much help. Neither was Jesus with all those stories that seemed to be self-contradictory. The first shall be last and the last first. He who would save his life must lose it. I thought it was admirable to be a good Samaritan but I thought I was more of a Levite. And as for the prodigal son, I was on the side of his brother. As I grew older the boundary between good and bad, as I discerned it in the behaviour and exhortations of others, became less susceptible to analysis, lacking coherence, ineffably beyond grasping. I started to think for myself. I warmed to the ideas of do-unto-others-as-

you-would-be-done-by and love-your-neighbour-as-yourself as long as loving oneself meant doing what I wanted to do at least some of the time. But neither proved easy to apply with any consistency. By this time God had faded away. Jesus was still there. After all in the last three years of his thirty-three he had laid the foundations of a religion that was still around almost two thousand years later.

‘If everything is predetermined, like the tram, rather than merely our ultimate fate being predestined, then why do we feel guilty?’

‘So you think guilt, the existence of guilt, is evidence for free will.’ He smiles at me. ‘You’re being argumentative for its own sake.’

‘Well, perhaps.’

He smiles again.

I take a breath. ‘If our sense of being free to choose among available alternatives is some kind of epiphenomenon of brain activity then the fact that it is real to us, even if it doesn’t exist, could lead to something like guilt.’

‘Only if there were events, for which we felt responsible, that were bad, in our morality, and we feel that we should have anticipated the outcome and chosen differently.’

‘Isn’t that the nature of life? We get things wrong. We do things we wish we hadn’t. If we got everything right and could look back with equanimity. Wouldn’t life be a bit.’

‘Boring.’

‘Featureless.’

‘So what do you regret?’

For a second or two I don’t know whether I want to answer his question and if I did where would I start? I search for something that I do regret but don’t feel guilty about. Something that has only affected me. ‘I wish I’d travelled more when I was young. Taken risks and set off for Asia or South America or even somewhere fairly comfortable like the States or Australia.’

‘But you don’t feel guilty about it?’

‘No. I’m the one who’s less of a person because of it.’

‘But you might have been a better son, a better husband, a better father.’

'I might.'

'But you don't think so.'

'There are bigger things I got wrong as a son, as a husband and as a father. And as a colleague, a friend, a passer-by.'

'Haven't we all.'

I wanted to be married. I thought it would solve the sex problem. Everybody found someone either while they were at university or soon after, someone to marry. In those days, living together was almost unheard of. However developed your relationship, you maintained separate addresses. I'd had sex with a few girls before I met Jo. Never quite satisfactory. No pill. Contraceptives? Awkward before. Messy afterwards. There was, of course, no such thing as HIV or AIDS. And the clap? Well you didn't get the clap from nice girls. The only drawback to what these days is called unprotected sex was pregnancy. One girl missed shortly after we had let ourselves go and she was fretful for a few of weeks. If a girl got pregnant - as though she had managed it all by herself - then it could be dealt with at a distance, either abortion that was technically illegal or adoption. Men could just deny it. Ditch the girl. She'd probably had a string of boyfriends. Blame was difficult to attach.

In my first year there were rules about men 'being entertained' in women's halls. At school we had been boys and girls and suddenly we had become men and women. As boys we rarely got any further than walking a girl home and a goodnight kiss. And those lads who said they did were almost certainly making it up. The possibility that it was true fed our fantasies. As men and women we needed be restricted whereas as boys and girls there were few opportunities and insufficient daring. Men were allowed in women's halls between two in the afternoon and six in the evening. As if nothing untoward could occur between those hours. On the other side of the Atlantic, so we heard, if a girl entertained a boy in her room then the door could not be fully closed. Something like an exercise book had to be placed on the floor to keep the door open. The girl's head had always to be above the back of the sofa or whatever and her feet on the floor. By the time I had graduated the rules in Britain had relaxed. Men were allowed in women's halls all day until until ten or even later.

Jo was clear. No sex before marriage. The limit was what the American's called heavy petting and the occasional ejaculation.

Marriage would eliminate all these restrictions and taboos. I loved Jo. Or I loved the idea of being married to her. Of our being together. I assumed she loved me. It all seems so vague now. I think it was the belief that I was the special person in her life and she was in mine and that we, as a couple, had a life that was separate from the world at large and private. Secret. Intimate. Mysterious. Exclusive. And enviable. Marriage made it for ever. Till death us do part. I should have been terrified.

I feel the emptiness as I unlock the door and step into the gloomy hall. Empty rooms closed off from a teeming world at my back. The only people in my life for a few long years have been Rachel, Jack, William and to a certain extent Simon, though he hovers discreetly at a distance, the people I worked alongside, and some of my students. Ben is there, remote and shadowy. Now I have to cope with two people who are beginning to matter and both seem to need me. I'm not sure I like being needed.

Upstairs I pull out a large suitcase from under the bed in the smallest bedroom. It is coated with a thin layer of dust. The dust is reluctant to disperse when I brush it lightly with the edge of my hand. The dust must be old. No one has slept in this room since Rachel got married. Old dead skin. I wipe the case with a damp towel. I pack carefully. Enough for a week without recourse to laundering. But for a few weeks if underwear, shirts and socks were washed and dried.

Before I leave I check round the house for open windows. I know there are no open windows but I check all the same. As I go round I close all the curtains in rooms at the back. I switch the central heating so that it is on all the time and turn the thermostat in the hall down to six degrees. Most of the time it will be off but if we have a very cold spell the house will get warmed up. I turn off the water, just in case. After I have put the case and my anorak and my winter coat, scarf and gloves in the car I stand in the hall and dial Debbie's number.

'Hello.' The same neutral tone.

'It's Neville,' I say.

'Are you coming?'

'Just about to set off.'

'They came this morning?'

'Who?'

'The gas man or whoever.'

'Oh the boiler.'

'Yes.'

'Just gone.'

'Everything OK?'

'Fine. Fitted a new heat-exchanger.'

'Oh,' she says.

'I'll see you in an hour and half.'

'Drive carefully.'

'I will.'

'See you soon.'

'Bye.'

Lying. Lying's much easier without an omniscient god, but you still have to be careful. The truth has an enormous advantage: it is fundamentally and unalterably consistent. A lie is obviously inconsistent with the truth, but if a lie is to be believed, to hold up under interrogation, or hang together in the context of competing truths with a coherence that is not questioned, then the lie needs the substantial support of a penumbra of other lies, less precise perhaps, together with partial truths dressed in vagueness, masquerading as probable truths, and merging with the brightness of real truth. The construction of such a penumbra requires forethought, spur-of-the-moment invention, confident production of unverifiable corroborating evidence, and sheer braggadocio. When I lie, I lie simply, and assure myself that the evidence against the lie is highly unlikely to come to the notice of the person who hears it. And I never tell the same lie to more than one person.

I am driving through a village with a steepled church on a sharp left-hand bend. The clock on the church has a circular blue face, the numerals are Roman. They,

and the hands, are gold-coloured. The time is five past two. Lunch. I didn't have any lunch. I could stop for a snack. That would take time. Better to keep driving.

- Michael. You're late.
- Am I?
- Visiting finishes at nine. It's nearly twenty-five past.
They've let me wait.
- Sorry. How is he?
- No change.
- We can still go and see. [Pause] I wish we could agree on
a name.
- I'm sorry.
- Why?
- Don't push. I know it's silly, but naming her seems like
labelling her, as a thing.
- She's not a thing. Never will be.
- But if she.
- She won't. She's doing very well.
- So they say.
- Don't be so pessimistic.
- A name. A name would be something to put on a gravestone.
And I don't want to think about that.

It is ten past three when Debbie lets me in. I have the case in one hand and my overcoat over my other arm. The scarf is around my neck. I catch the case on a newel post as I turn the last corner of the staircase jarring my knee. I am breathing hard. I stop and haul in air several times until my breathing has settled into its normal rhythm. I take the steps of the last flight slowly so that I will be able to speak easily when see her. I put down my case and tap the door with one knuckle.

A second later the door opens wide and Debbie in a pink tee-shirt throws her arms around my neck. I feel her weight and I have to stoop a little. She kisses me firmly on the lips and then pulls back, her eyes wide, lashes startled. She kisses me again, longer, softer. For a moment it strikes me that if I had not been wearing a sweater she might have started unbuttoning my shirt. She removes her hands and moves away. I pick up my case and walk in. She closes the door.

In the living room I sit down in the armchair. Debbie stands at the window, staring through the glass. She spins suddenly to face me. 'Tea? Coffee?'

'Tea.'

She puts water in the kettle and switches it on. She opens a cupboard and takes out two mugs. She places them near the kettle. From the fridge she lifts a carton of milk. Still holding the milk she turns so that I can see her in profile. 'Do you want to be here?' Her head turns: three-quarter profile. The way the light falls takes the detail out of her expression.

'I think so.'

'You're not sure.'

'No. I'm not sure.' I let my shoulders drop. I puff out a little air. 'No. I thought I was. But now?'

'What?'

'I don't feel I'm making decisions.'

'Sorry.'

'I didn't want to say no.'

'Why?'

'Because. Because.' Again I breathe out. 'You represent something I want, want to say yes to.'

'Represent?' She opens another cupboard and reaches up. Her pink tee-shirt, held into the top of her jeans, tightens over her breast.

'Yes. Something you might call companionship.'

She puts the packet on the worktop and then brings the white teapot from the other side of the sink. 'A bit wishy-washy.'

'I know.'

'It's a start.'

'But I don't know where it might lead.'

She takes two round teabags from the packet and drops them in the teapot.

'Worry about that when you get there.'

The kettle is beginning to boil.

I watch.

The kettle boils and switches itself off. She pours boiling water into the teapot and replaces the lid.

'Milk?'

'Please.'

She pours a little milk into each mug, takes a spoon from a drawer and stirs the tea. She waits. She pours the tea. She brings the two mugs over and sets each on one of the round cork coasters positioned at each corner of the low table in front of the sofa. The mugs can only be reached from the sofa. She sits down on the sofa. 'Come sit here.'

I move.

'Companionship it is then.'

I force a smile.

'Doesn't mean we can't have the occasional cuddle.' She pushes against the arm of the sofa sliding over the leather till I can feel her body pressing. 'Or kiss.' She hooks an arm around the back of my head pulls so that she can stretch her neck and press her lips against my cheek.

'I'm glad I came.'

'I'm glad you're glad.'

'I'm glad you're glad I'm glad.'

'I'm glad you're glad I'm glad you're glad.' She giggles.

Without thinking I loose my arm from where her weight is trapping it between us and lift it up over her head and curl it round her shoulders.

16

'More coffee?'

'Please,' I say, folding yesterday's *Guardian* so that only the crossword is showing. She comes round the sofa and sits down while she fills my mug. Her thin dressing gown falls open. Her nightdress is short and the frilly edge rests across her thighs. I feel almost naked under my own dressing gown.

'I think we went beyond companionship last night.' Her face is soft and sympathetic.

'You could say that.'

She looks directly at me, then raises her chin. Her eyes close. 'It was all so gentle. Natural.'

'I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure I.' She touches my arm. 'It's been such a long time. I thought I might not.'

'But you did.' She touches my cheek. 'We did.'

'We did.'

In one sudden smooth movement she twists away from me and somehow manages to half roll over the arm of the sofa and come to a standing position with one arm on the back of the sofa. 'And what shall we do today. The first day of our ultracompanionship?'

'There nothing better than a neologism.'

'A what?'

'A new word.'

'Like neologism.'

'It's been around a while.'

'But it's new to me.'

'We could stay in. Or we could go out.'

'If we go out then we can look forward to coming in.'

'But if we stay in then.' I stop, unsure of how to continue.

'Then we could look backward to going out.'

'Somehow, going out seems a better option.'

The telephone on the wall rings.

Debbie shrugs and pulls a face. She goes to answer the telephone. 'Hello.' Her voice lacks warmth. 'Ye-es.' She crinkles her forehead at me. She listens for a several seconds. 'Just a moment.' Debbie puts her palm firmly over the mouthpiece and in a stage whisper says, 'It's your daughter.'

'My daughter.' My voice is loud.

'Shh.'

I speak quietly. 'How's she got this number?'

Debbie shrugs again.

I take the phone from her. 'Rachel?' I say, not really expecting it to be Rachel.

'Dad. Am I pleased to hear your voice.'

'Why? What's the problem?'

'You weren't answering the telephone. I left messages on the answering machine but you didn't get back to me. I was worried. I'm at home - at your house. I used the spare keys. And it doesn't look as though you've been here for days. A pile of post. Where are you?'

'Staying with a friend. That's all.'

'I wish you'd said.'

'How did you get this number?'

'Does it matter?'

'I'd like to know.'

'OK.'

I hear her take a breath.

'I couldn't imagine where you were. I began worrying about what might have happened. And. I don't quite know why. I lifted your phone and pressed the redial button. And your lady friend answered.'

'You don't have to disapprove.'

'I don't. I think. Oh it doesn't matter what I think. But. Next time. Next time. Let me know.'

'This sounds to me like role reversal.'

'I'm sorry. But you could have fallen. Had a heart attack. Been lying half dead at the bottom of the stairs. You don't know what went through my head.'

'I'm sorry.'

'When will you be back?'

'I don't know. I'll ring you when I know something definite.'

'OK.'

'But I'd rather you didn't ring here.'

'I won't. Anyway I don't know the number, do I?' I hear her little laugh. 'I suppose I could keep coming round here and keep pressing redial.'

'You could.'

'I hope you're having a pleasant stay wherever you are. Whoever she is.'

'That's better.'

'I'm sorry I rang. But.'

'I know. I know.'

'Bye then.'

'Bye Rachel.'

Rachel is unnerved by uncertainty. Always has been. Jo was a bit the same way. The immediate future had to be planned. When the days were programmed by the demands of school and work then the times of our comings and goings were fixed. Each day had its variations but they were, in the main, predetermined. Each of us was expected to know the framework within which we each lived. It was not acceptable to ask where Ben was if it was the day and the time that he stayed back

at school playing chess. And if I said - and it was almost always me that had the looser grip on the schedule - that he had been home at this time last week I would be informed with disdain that last week was half-term or that was the day the school closed early because of the heavy snow. The fact that the effect of the snow had not been in the plan did not prevent it being inserted retrospectively as though it had been there all the time.

Of course, I was the odd one out. I would be the one late home for meals or the one who forgot it was parents' evening, or hadn't called into the bank about the cheque that hadn't cleared when I had promised, in front of all three, that I would do it. Later I had an ally.

The hormones of puberty gave Ben the strength to resist. He rose at times that weren't so late that he arrived at school long enough after the first bell to be in trouble. At the end of the school day he hung around - so he said - with friends, sometimes going to their houses to work with them on some tricky piece of homework. Or merely to gossip about girls and sex and girls. And exchange mildly pornographic magazines. He had a box-file marked BIOLOGY where he kept them.

Looking back, Ben wasn't much of an ally. Generally the sallies of Jo and Rachel, who were becoming a formidable team, were ignored by both of us. On those occasions when they weren't then *zugzwang*. If I took his part then I was just like him or he was just like me, equally to be scorned. A consequence of being a team was that Rachel came between Jo and me if there was the slightest hint of contention between us. She constructed a defensive shield around her mother out of a growing, if fragmented, feminism that had become an uncertain stance ever since her first menstruation.

- Mum?
- Yes.
- It's nice now you're at home. Someone to talk to in the morning.
- I don't like hospitals. They've said I can stay over with. The baby.
- Still no name.
- No.
- Will you stay over.
- They make me feel I ought.
- But you don't want to.

- No. I'll do it tonight and then I'll see. I like my own bed.
- As I say, it's nice having you at home, but what's going to happen?
- Happen? What kind of thing?
- Well.
- Say it.
- Mum.
- You're already seeing problems where there probably won't be any.
- I'm not. I only want to understand where I fit in.
- You?
- Yes.
- I don't see what's bothering you.
- I'll be blunt then.
- If it'll make you feel better.
- Is it that you can't see it or you won't face up to it.
- Face up to what?
- That you've got to choose.
- Choose what?
- Between him [Pause] and Michael.
- I don't have to choose. I don't have to choose either of them. But if I'm made to choose one or the other then I will. Whatever you think. And you'll either fit in or you won't.
- I see. You first, everyone else last.
- I've got a baby to put first.
- But will you?
- Rachel, that's unkind.

Once Ben was at university I was unequal to the struggle, and took to spending any time I could justify at my work. A couple of years later, when Rachel was deep into A-levels and focused on her future, what was left of the relationship between Jo and me had become little more than an exchange of grumbles, not about each other, but about other people. We stayed together because there was no reason to be apart. We socialised together because to not do so would be to admit that we were, in truth, no longer married, hardly living together, merely sharing a house, and a bed, out of years of habit.

This threadbare companionship provided a clear framework of certainties for Jo, and scope for me to be what I thought I wanted to be without having to explain or underpin what I chose to do with pale reasons or transparent excuses.

We walk along the promenade. The wind is off the sea and Debbie, on my lee, hugs my right arm more tightly. She is wearing knitted hat with ear flaps tied firmly under her chin. Her coat collar is up. I forgot to bring a hat with me so I have my anorak hood over my head. It is approaching high tide and the stronger gusts of wind bring an icy wave of fret over the rail. The cold is beginning to penetrate the hood reaching my skull.

On what remains of the beach, as the tide encroaches, a woman in a long coat, hatless with her hair tied back, repeatedly throws a ball for her dog. The dog runs so enthusiastically that it overshoots the ball that has stopped dead in the soft sand and leaps and twists to turn and pick it up. I watch as the woman throws again. Her arm action is awkward and the ball curves towards the edge of the water. It hits the wet sand as the shallow remnant of a wave is receding and the ball is pulled towards the sea. The dog rushes for the ball. The dog skitters into water and pecks at the ball a couple of times before gripping in its jaw and circling round. Debbie pulls at my arm and she steers me across the road and along path between two tall Victorian houses both advertising themselves as holiday flats. Beyond the houses, the path brings us into a grassy valley with a meandering beck that must reach the sea a little further along the front. The valley is quiet, sheltered from the wind. Gulls sit on roof ridges and chimney pots, calling. Upstream we walk in front of a row of tidy cottages, each with a well-tended front garden.

Debbie loosens her grip on my arm. 'Estate cottages.'

'Whose estate?' I ask.

'Lord somebody-or-other. I forget.'

We cross a wooden footbridge and continue away from the sea. The asphalt path ends and we are walking on trodden gravel. Under the trees the gravel fades into bare earth patterned with tangles of exposed roots. As we walk the cloud breaks and sunlight stripes the leafless branches of the trees ahead. It is quiet. Debbie's lets go of my arm. And takes my hand. We swing our linked arms backwards and forwards. I push my hood back and breathe the air scented with odour of decaying leaves.

'How do you get on with Rachel?'

'All right.'

'That all?'

'We talk on the phone. I go to their house for meals, occasionally. Sunday. Or perhaps a Friday or Saturday. When they want me to babysit. She drops in at my place sometimes. I went with them to their cottage for a couple of days at half-term, down the coast from here.'

'You're not close.'

'Not really. She's Jo's daughter.'

'But she cares.'

'She worries. She worries about a lot of things. She worries most about the things she ought to do, things she doesn't really have time to do, and ends up trying to fit more than is possible into each day. And failing.'

'She works?'

'A medical lab. Suits her as they let her choose her hours to some extent. Means she can pick up Jack. From school.'

'What about William?'

'Spends all day at a nursery. I think Simon takes him in the morning and Rachel picks him up. Or perhaps Simon's mother helps out. I don't really know.'

'How did she cope with losing her mum?'

'I'm not sure.'

'You must have talked.'

'It's a long time ago.'

'You men.'

'I was in hospital for a long time. When I could make sense of things she seemed distant, as though she didn't want to have anything to do with me.'

'Did she blame you?'

'Blame me? Perhaps. It's all a bit vague.'

'Sorry.'

'No.' I stop walking. 'I need to think about this.'

'Why?'

'I thought it was all clear in my mind. Now I'm uncertain.'

'The memory can play tricks.'

'There was something.' I shut my eyes. 'There was. There was. I don't know.'

'It'll come to you. Think about something else.'

'A baby. There was a baby.'

'A baby. Rachel had a baby.'

'No. Not Rachel. She looked after a baby. I think.'

'That's what girls do.'

'I know. I know. But it was. Important.'

'What was important?'

'The baby.'

'As you said. It was a long time ago.'

The path in front of us forks. A finger-post pointing up the right hand fork bears the word Castle.

'Which way?'

'If we go to the castle - it's a ruin - we can circle round and come back along the cliff path.'

We take the right-hand path.

- Michael.

- Yes.

- One day I'm going to have to tell him.

- Do we have to discuss it? Now?

- No. But.

- We've had such a nice day.

- I know.

- He'll be angry.

- I thought there was nothing left.

- Of what?

- Of your marriage, your relationship. An empty shell.
- Easily said.
- Doesn't make it any the less true.
- The shell is still there. The outline of a family. The bonds of knowing. Knowing each other well. Too well.
- I can't see what you're getting at.
- The marriage may be over, but we're still husband and wife, still parents. Living together. Reading each other in the silences.
- You still have feelings for him?
- Of course. How could I not. As I said, I know him too well.
- He must realise that something like this might happen.
- Perhaps. But perhaps not. [Silence] He'll be hurt. He's hurting now. Like I am. But telling him. About us. Will intensify the hurt, focus it to a point, like the sun through a magnifying glass.

I climb on to the nearest stretch of dilapidated wall and help Debbie as she climbs over. The castle is not much more than a large crumbling rectangle enclosing a grassy rise with a square of stones roughly marking what was probably the keep. In the far corner are two ragged walls of a narrow tower. What's left is about twelve or fifteen feet high, but there's no clue as to the original height. We walk up the slope towards the keep. From beyond the tower come excited voices, young voices, a girl, a boy, two girls. I can't tell.

A short squeal. Or scream.

An exchange of questions, words of concern.

A sharp yell of pain.

'I'm going to see.' The ground dips more sharply as I hurry towards the ruined tower and then steeply to the foot of the wall in front of me. When I get to the juncture of tower and wall I find that I can't see over the wall. There are some stones in the wall that protrude and I endeavour to use these footholds. I find one at the right height to give me sufficient leverage with my right leg that together with the my left hand stretching to grip the top of the wall I can lift my body up and look over.

Sitting on the grass a few feet below me, leaning against the base of the tower is a girl in a green anorak over thick yellow sweater and denim jeans. She has a mop of black frizzy hair.

'You all right?'

She looks up. Her face is brown, her eyes large. 'I think I've done something to my ankle. I was climbing.' She lifts her left arm to point and winces. 'And my arm.'

'Where's your friend.'

'Gone. Gone to get help. 'She raises her right arm to indicate a path that after fifty yards disappears into the wood. It's not the path we came along.

'Can you stand?'

'I tried and it hurts too much.'

'I'll come round.' I lower myself to the ground.

'What happened?'

Debbie is standing on the bank of grass behind me.

'A girl has fallen. She's hurt her ankle and can't put any weight on it. Her friend has gone to get help.'

'Is there anything we can do?'

'I'm going to see.'

We walk across the bailey to where the wall has collapsed to almost nothing and can be stepped over. Beyond this line of stones is a steep drop. The ground around the castle is nowhere near level. There are rocky outcrops and frequent irregular changes in height. We go back to where we entered the castle and follow a narrow footpath - a bit like a moorland sheep track - that winds through the bracken. It keeps close to the wall rising and falling with the terrain and skirting the rock buttresses.

The girl is crying when we reach her. The numbing of the initial surge of adrenaline is wearing off.

Debbie sits down next to her and puts an arm round her shoulders. 'Where do you hurt?'

'It's my right ankle.'

'Anywhere else?'

The girl shows her left hand. The ball of the thumb is badly grazed. A little blood is seeping out of one of the deeper scratches.

Debbie continues. 'Did you hit your head?'

'Don't think so.' She touches her head with the fingers of her right hand. 'No. Nothing.'

'How far will your friend have to go?'

'Half a mile. No more like a mile.'

I say, 'Half an hour. There and back. At least.'

'We'll wait with you.'

The girl makes herself smile. A child's smile. Polite.

Debbie takes hold of the girl's right hand and smiles back. A shallow smile intended to reassure, to emphasise presence, togetherness. It has no warmth. A formality required by the occasion.

I pull the back of my anorak down over my backside and lower myself on to a relatively flat area. There is a space of about four feet between me and the girl. Debbie sits close on the side away from me. I am near enough to talk.

We sit in silence. From time to time I glance in the direction from which I expect the friend to come. I know I shall not see her. Not enough time has passed.

Suddenly the girl speaks. 'Perhaps she won't come back.'

'She will', says Debbie.

'She could have had an accident.'

Debbie shakes her head.

'It's unlikely,' I say.

'But not impossible.'

The girl is looking at me and Debbie gives me a smile that tells me to humour the girl.

'Let's wait half an hour.' I make a show of looking at my watch. 'About ten minutes since you fell.'

'More. It's more.'

'Well let's say ten minutes.'

'Why?'

'Because if we say fifteen minutes then we'll be expecting your friend to turn up in fifteen minutes. But. But, if we say only ten minutes then we'll be expecting your friend in twenty minutes and we'll be surprised when she turns up in fifteen, but we won't be disappointed if she turns up in twenty.'

'But what if she doesn't turn up.'

'In another half hour I'll go to meet her.'

'But you don't know her.'

'She won't be on her own.'

'You won't know the people she's with, will you?'

'No.' I think for a moment. 'If we meet a few people coming and one of them is someone about your age. A girl. I'll ask.'

'You think you're clever, don't you?'

'I'm sorry.'

'You think you have an answer for everything.'

'No. I'm only trying to be sensible.'

'Clever. Too clever by half.'

The girl give me a long stare that projects animosity. Debbie shakes her head.

I say nothing. I gaze into the distance.

'Really clever people don't sound as if they're clever. They make things seem easy. Lucid.' She stops. 'Lucid. A beautiful word. 'Lu-cid.'

Moving my head slightly I look at her.

She lifts her head and studies the sky for a moment. Overhead there is a large area of blue. 'Lucid.' She closes her lids over her brown eyes. Long lashes. The skin of her eyelids is soft, matt, light brown. Dusted with cocoa powder. Her cheeks are the same. Her nose lifts at the end and the nostrils have a slight permanent flare. Her lips are wide without being full. Her head jerks towards me. Her eyes fly open. Her lips draw back. She seems to smile. What I think is a smile becomes a grin. She snarls and her neck pushes her chin towards me. A growl rises up from her belly and issues into the air through parted teeth.

I flinch. I press my hands to the ground and shift back.

She snatches her hand from Debbie and using Debbie's shoulder as support thrusts herself up to the sky. She hobbles awkwardly down the grassy bank to the

narrow path. Along the path she moves spasmodically, limiting the time that her injured ankle has to bear any weight, her right arm swinging wildly to keep her balance. After twenty yards her gait is easier. After thirty her limp is light. After forty she is striding smoothly. Before the path bends into the wood she stops, turns and waves, stretching up on tiptoe.

Debbie has her mouth open. Her eyes are full of incomprehension.

- Yes.
- Michael. It's me.
- Yes.
- Is something the matter?
- Family.
- Family?
- I can't really explain now.
- Why?
- Can we just leave things for a week or so.
- Things.
- You know.
- Do I?
- Don't make it any worse than need be.
- I don't want to.
- I know.
- I'll worry.
- Don't. There's no need.
- I know. But.
- Ring me at work. A week on Monday. Everything should be sorted by then.
- If I can help.
- No. But thanks. I'll have to go.
- Bye.

While Debbie is putting the crockery and cutlery into the dishwasher I share what remains of the Côtes du Rhône between our two glasses and put them on the low table in front of the sofa. My inclination is to sit in the chair but I know she will invite me to sit next to her. Sitting in a row when there's another chair at an angle is an odd configuration. Sitting opposite one another, which we do at the table, is

thought to be confrontational. In certain circumstances such as an an interview, that is. But nothing wrong with it when eating. Some would advise that chairs at right angles make for a better interview. I'm not interviewing Debbie. Nor is she interviewing me. Should that be a question, not a statement? What's does sitting side-by-side signal? That we are on the same side. Collaborators, not competitors. Two people working on the same project, studying it from the same angle, wanting to agree, wanting to find a way forward that is acceptable to both. I still would rather sit in the chair. At least to begin with. Perhaps that's it. Perhaps providing the opportunity for her to make the invitation to sit by her is what matters. My glass of wine will be out of reach if I sit in the chair. I sit down on the sofa.

'Have you been in touch with the police?'

Debbie lifts her glass of wine from the table. She remains standing. 'What about?'

'The two who came to the house. Threatening.'

'Not my house.'

'But they did threaten you.'

'But I'm here now. We're here. I don't see why.'

'I think you should.'

'Should what?'

'Talk to the police.'

'What are they going to do?'

'I don't know. But they should be told.'

'I'd rather not talk about it.' Holding her glass with both hands, she walks round the table and sits in the chair. She rests her elbows on her knees, her forearms, horizontal, her hands enclosing the wine glass. She stares across the top of the glass.

I lean against the back of the sofa. The tension persists. A tightness in the air that discourages speech, denies conversation. I look at my glass of wine on the table. Reaching forward would be an intrusion. I wait. I breathe. I watch.

She raises her head a few degrees. As if she has made a decision she tilts her chin. Her eyes look upward, the pupils tight under her brows. She lowers her gaze and swings her face towards me. 'That's the past.' Her voice is quietly sibilant. 'This is where I will live.'

'Can you do that?'

'Yes.'

'I mean simply forget about it all.'

'I can.'

'And what will you do for money?'

'That's my business.'

I spread my hands in front of me, signalling an apology.

'It's sorted,' she says, indicating there's nothing more to say.

I recall her anguish on the telephone. All the talk of mortgage repayments and what money she had and how was she going to manage. Something has changed. I slide my glass along the table and move to the other half of the sofa. I pat the place where I have been sitting. She smiles for a second then comes and sits next to me.

- Jo?

- Michael. Just a minute.

*

- Sorry. Dealing with a query.

- S'OK.

- What did you want?

- You said to ring today. Monday.

- Did I? Why?

- You had something to sort out. Family.

- Rachel?

- You didn't say. You were a bit.

- What?

- Reluctant.

- Reluctant?

- As though you didn't want to explain.

- I was worried?

- And?

- I'm no longer worried.

- Good.

- Yes.

- Are you sure?

- About what?
- That you're not worried?
- I'm at work. The problem is - was - at home. If I'm going to be worried I'll be worried at home. Where I can do something about it.
- I didn't mean to.
- What were you going to tell me?
- Nothing?
- Why did you ring?
- Because you asked me to.
- I can't talk now. Ring me tomorrow.
- What's a good time?
- Before nine.
- In the morning?
- Yes.

17

'You'll be coming over for Christmas Day?' Rachel is crawling around the floor putting Lego pieces into a large cardboard box.

I lift my feet as she reaches under the sofa. 'Why wouldn't I?'

'I thought you might want a quieter day. Without the kids.'

Simon comes into the room. 'William's asleep. Jack's reading.' He picks up a red block as he closes the door. 'Well, looking at a book.' He tosses the Lego block into the box. It clatters.

'No. I'll be here.'

'What about your lady friend?'

'Her name is Debbie.'

'Debbie. What about Debbie, then?'

'What about her?'

'Don't be obtuse. What is she doing for Christmas Day? I wouldn't like to find out afterwards that she'd spent it on her own.'

Simon sits down and extracts the news section of the Sunday paper from the untidy heap next to his chair. He shuffles the sheets and tries to align them so that paper will fold neatly.

'We haven't discussed it.'

'She could come.'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know what?'

'I don't know how she would react to the suggestion. I don't know if she usually spends Christmas Day with anyone. I don't know. I don't know her that well.'

'Well enough to *stay* with her.'

The emphasis in the word *stay* is a complex of suspicion, doubt, implication, elaboration, extrapolation and amusement.

'Discuss it with her.' Rachel puts the lid on the box.

'I'll see.'

It's almost a week since I saw Debbie. I told her I needed to check the house and check the mail. I wanted some space.

'Why don't you stay over?' She hesitates. 'That's if you come by yourself.'

'No. I'll walk home.'

'Why?'

'Sleep in my own bed.'

'It's a long way and you aren't.' She stands up holding the box with one arm.

'As young as I was.'

'You know what I mean.'

'I ought to walk more.'

'Of course, if you do bring' - an instant of silence - 'Debbie I'm not sure we could manage appropriate sleeping arrangements.' Rachel leaves the room before I can think of a riposte.

'Turkey again? Or something different this year?'

Simon closes the newspaper and holds it to one side. 'Turkey. Jack likes his turkey.'

'Can you pass me the bit with the crossword.'

Simon drapes his section over the arm of his chair and ferrets among the remainder of the heap. 'The review?'

'I think so.'

Simon brings me the review section. I take it from him and he sits down again, immediately picking up and opening his newspaper.

I turn to the inside back page and fold it back and then in half and in half again so that little more than the crossword and its clues are visible. I see there is a

ballpoint pen by the television. I put the crossword down and get up for the pen. The crossword in my left hand, the pen in my right, I settle in my chair, a little askew. I am unable to think without a pen in my hand.

Christmas was never easy. Not for me anyway. The business of getting ready. Writing Christmas cards to people we had not seen for years, struggling to remember how many children they had, and not a clue about what they were called. Working out what to buy the kids. Always more than was necessary. Trying to avoid being suckered by the television adverts into buying something that was what every child of a certain age wanted but you knew would only entertain them for twenty minutes. Each day more cards to find a place for. I refused to have them hanging sideways on strings, and stapling them to coloured ribbon which was Jo's solution struck me as mutilation. The tree that had to be selected for height, and symmetry, carried home on a damp day and set, perfectly vertical, in a wrought iron stand where it would gradually release its needles, a bare skeleton by Twelfth Night.

The focus on that one day.

Don't forget to order the turkey. Arrange to pick it up on Christmas Eve. If you can. If it's earlier then it will have to stay in the garage. There'll be no room in the fridge. When to buy the food. What to buy - just in case. We could afford to spend more than was sensible and I was envious of those families who appeared to be able to control their spending without diminishing the enjoyment of the day, that long day without turning on the television not even for the Queen's Speech, merely eating, drinking, playing games, deflating tantrums, coping with missing batteries or trying to help in the construction of something that ought to be given hours rather than minutes. Toys left on the floor waiting to be trodden on. Piles of crumpled coloured paper. Not-quite-empty glasses knocked over. It was, nevertheless, the one day when we pretended to be a family and often succeeded in being one for a few hours.

My parents always came and stayed over. Jo's parents went to each of their children in turn, year by year, and when they came to us only came for the day, despite the distance. At one o'clock we squeezed around the extended table sitting on chairs gathered from all over the house. The table arrayed with wine glasses and cutlery and a small Christmas centrepiece of tinsel and holly which would be moved when the vegetables were brought in. I refused to carve the turkey in front of everyone. A quick viewing and then back to the kitchen where I could slice it up

without criticism or comment. As Ben and Rachel grew up the pattern changed a bit. My mother died of what had for some time seemed the inevitable heart failure and not long afterwards my father began to deteriorate, physically and mentally, and he had to be moved into a nursing home. We went to see him on Christmas afternoon. It was an excuse for the four of us to get out of the house. It was about half an hour's walk. He didn't know who we were and in his more lucid moments called Ben Neville. Perhaps that'll be my fate. Back at home we played games. Mainly general knowledge quiz games in teams of two, the women versus the men. Jo and I would drink wine and Rachel could have the normally forbidden Coke. Ben was allowed a couple of glasses of beer.

After a futile effort to eat the chunks of pork pie and the fat sausage rolls and the ham sandwiches and the pickles that Jo laid out mid-evening we would relapse into the kind of conversation that rambled around our personal lives, friends and colleagues, work and school, even politics and social questions. Rachel, on the basis of rudimentary sex lessons and rigid respect for all life argued vehemently against abortion, killing animals (except for food), war and murder. Ben, in his phase of being controversial and contradictory simply to provoke, could see nothing wrong with killing a person, as when they were dead they didn't know they were dead and they no longer had any memory of what it had been like to be alive and therefore dying had not caused them any real problems whereas half-killing them did. Jo and I acted as generally ineffective moderators, umpires and referees. But it was good to be four human beings in a family. At the end of Christmas day I knew why I had married Jo. And regretted that our paths were diverging.

'Hello.'

'Neville. Jack. Jack Bathurst.'

'Jack. How are you?'

'Not so bad. And you?'

'I'm OK.'

'The walking group.'

'I thought.'

'No. Not a walk. Not at this time of the year. Not till after Christmas.'

'You said.'

'No. It's something else. We usually go out for a meal. Christmas and all that. Would you like to join us?'

'Are you sure?'

'One walk and you're a member for life.'

'Well. In that case.'

'Tuesday before Christmas at the Metropole.'

'Look forward to it.'

'We'll be taking partners. Bring a friend. Man or woman.'

'I'll see.'

'Let me know. They need the numbers a week beforehand.'

'I will.'

He doesn't say anything for a second or two. I open my mouth to close the conversation, but before I can speak he asks a question.

'Seen anything of Debbie Netherby?'

'Why?'

'Just wondered. The grapevine is not providing any information.'

I say nothing.

He continues. 'She seems to have gone to ground. You did say you'd spoken to her?'

'Yes. On the telephone.'

'You didn't pick up anything?'

'Like what?'

'Her planning to move?'

'No.'

'I did hear something about the police.'

I take a careful breath before replying. 'I think they're looking into her husband's affairs.'

'Not surprised.'

'You're not?'

'Sailed close to the wind.'

'How do you mean?'

'Illegal activities. Not that it was ever clear that he was directly involved. Kept company with an ex-con or two. And putting two and two together.'

'Did you have any dealings with him?'

'Not directly. But a company that owed me money disappeared. When I made enquiries his name came up and I was warned off.'

'Warned off?'

'A big fellow with a tattoo on his neck advised me that I ought to let the matter rest.'

'I see.'

'I wondered. Long shot. But it seems what with the police. And Debbie unavailable. Well. Anyway I'd already written it off. Mentally.'

'Much?'

'Well into five figures.'

'Not a fortune.'

'No. Not a fortune. But if things had worked out the way they'd promised then it could have been a lot more.'

'An informal agreement?'

'Off the books you might say.'

'But not illegal?'

'Not strictly illegal.'

'But.'

'One has to be careful in business to ensure that the letter of the law is followed, if not the spirit.'

'And you did?'

'I did, but don't ask me about the others.'

'I won't.'

'Nice talking.'

'Yes.'

'Let me know about the dinner. One or two?'

'I will.'

The line goes dead. It is a few seconds before I put the phone down.

- Hello? Medical library.
- Jo?
- Michael. Meet me for coffee. Eleven.
- I'll try. Got a committee. Could go on.
- Leave.
- I'll see.
- All right.
- Sorry.
- Bye. And don't keep saying sorry.
- I won't. Bye.

*

- I'm sorry I was so. Tetchy. Yesterday.
- It's OK.
- We had a call from Rachel. Line went dead after the first few words. She sounded. Not distressed. But.
- Anxious?
- Something like that. Anyway.
- Yes.
- She rang again last night. Before I got home. Neville spoke to her. She's moving to a new location and won't be able to ring for some time. She didn't want us to worry and she'd tried several times to call us. Without any success.
- Where's she moving to?
- She mentioned a place. Neville wrote it down, but it's not on any map we've got.

I ring Debbie to tell her I'm setting off. She doesn't answer the phone. I decide to wait and ring her again, later. I walk to Mr Patel's and buy *The Guardian*. On my way back a few flakes of snow drift down from the pale grey sky. Not the day to be driving seventy miles to the coast. The flakes that have come to rest on the

shoulders of my coat melt into dark spots as I hang it up. I ring again. Still no answer. She is expecting me by lunch-time and I want to go, but I would be reassured to know that she is there and that I am not setting off on a futile journey. Not that I can imagine anything other than she has slipped out to the shops or gone for a walk. I look out of the front room window. The flakes are bigger. The sooner I leave the sooner I'll be there. I leave without ringing again.

The streets are wet and the snow that lands on the windscreen melts immediately and the soft splodges are swept away by the wipers. After ten minutes or so the wipers begin to squeak and I switch them off. I drive quickly.

It was quite a surprise when Rachel came up with this notion of spending a year abroad before university. We assumed Australia or the States or perhaps Europe, InterRailing. The she told us Africa. Africa's a big place, where in Africa? She didn't come up with anywhere specifically. Not at first. Then she mentioned an organisation. Not one of the big charities. She'd be working in schools. Gradually she filled in the details. They'd had a talk at school and it didn't seem long before she was filling in forms that had to be countersigned by a parent. Jo did that. She was more positive about the idea than me. I was apprehensive, particularly when I learned that the country was Malawi.

Halfway there the sky darkens and with surprising suddenness I drive into a curtain of thick snow. I flick the wiper switch and notch them up to double speed. Each sweep of the blades clears the glass and I can see into the falling snow, but only so far. I slow down. The verges are white and there is thick grey wetness on the road. The straight dual-carriageway climbs steadily and the greyness passing under the car becomes lighter until it is an even white defaced by the black tracks of earlier vehicles. I follow the tracks. Over the summit of the hill I am faced with a broad whiteness broken by hedges and trees. The tracks on the road are no longer black but are almost invisible depressions, vaguely shadowed by the soft light. I glance at the speedometer. Forty miles per hour. I ease off the accelerator. A large tanker on the other carriageway, headlights on, tunnels through the full sky. I switch on my headlamps and after a second the rear fog-light. The dual carriageway ends. Intermittently vehicles approach and pass. Their speeds are moderate and their separation safe. I concentrate. The curves and bends are

unfamiliar and the edge of the road is hidden beneath a careful blanket. Ahead I see the rear of a vehicle, a small van, its red lights are dots of apparent warmth. The van is not moving and I brake. The back end of the car twitches and the front end veers. I turn the wheels to follow the veer and brake again. The car slows and I easily bring it to a controlled halt behind the stationary van. My shoulders are tense. I reduce the speed of the wipers. The van begins to move. I press the accelerator pedal gently, an instant of wheel spin before the car creeps forward. As I follow the van in front I see that I am at the tail-end of long queue. After a quarter of a minute or so the van stops and I stop. The lights of another vehicle come up behind me. I turn on the car radio. A man is grumbling about school-leavers' lack of skills and how they are not prepared for the working world. The queue moves again and I follow the van around a steep upward left-hand bend. I turn off the wipers. The dashboard clock tells me it is eleven thirty-five. I hear different voice on the radio but I do not notice the words. The snow has thinned, only a few flakes can be seen. A run of vehicles comes in the other direction. I had not marked their absence. They continue to pass in discrete groups and my side of the road moves and stops as though with a common cause. It is just after quarter to twelve when I see, further up the hill, an angled large black van with its front wheels in the opposite ditch and its rear wheels in the centre of the road. A quarter of a mile nearer and I can see a figure standing at the back of the van. He stops the oncoming traffic and waves us through. We pick up speed. The next right-hand bend is not so steep and the car sticks to the road as I steer round it in third gear. I make steady progress for a few miles. The same van is comfortably ahead of me and the visibility is better. I hear the twelve o'clock pips and prepare to listen to the headline news. I glimpse a movement to my right. A small car waltzes out of a side road. For an instant I think I can get past before it spins on to my side of the road. I change my mind in the next instant and brake. Heavily. I feel the rear of the car twisting towards the small car. My rear wing collides with the front of the other car. Despite the momentum of my car, the small car pushes me across the verge and then rotates as though performing a planned handbrake turn and ends up parked neatly behind me. Silence. The engine has stalled.

I lift myself over the gear lever and open the passenger door and get out into the gap between the car and a bare hawthorn hedge. The snow is deeper than I had thought and my shoes sink three or four inches into it. The road is sufficiently wide that the two cars are not causing an obstruction. The wind across the open fields is icy and my jacket offers little protection. I take a couple of large careful paces towards the back of my car and then another until I am along side the small car. I

peer in through the passenger window. The driver is alone. A woman, a young woman, not more than a girl. I pull open the door. 'Are you all right?'

She nods. 'I'm sorry.' She is crying. 'I've never. Never driven. In snow. Before.'

'It's not easy.'

'I said I'd. Be home. For lunch.' She sobs. 'I should. Have waited.'

'No one's hurt. That's the main thing.'

'I don't know what to do.'

'Will the car start?'

'I don't know.'

'Try it.'

She turns the key and the car gives a little leap.

'Put it into neutral.'

She does.

'Try again.'

The engine fires and keeps running.

'See if you can reverse.'

'I daren't.'

'Get out. I'll have a go.'

I close the door and edge round the back of her car until I can open the driver's door. The snow is not so deep. Keeping an eye on the traffic, I hold the door while she gets out. I notice a small scar about an inch below her right eye. 'When did you do that?'

'What?'

'On your face. The scar.'

'When I was little.'

'I don't remember it.'

She puts her chin to one side and narrows her brown eyes.

'I hadn't noticed it,' I say, 'not before.' Her skin is darker in the snowlight.

'Do you know me?'

'Sorry. For a moment.' I step back. 'Go round the other side away from the road.'

I climb in. The engine is still running. I fumble for the seat release and push back. I press the clutch and press the gear lever down, then pull it towards me and back. I let the clutch in gently, resting my foot on the accelerator. The car moves. I press the accelerator, the engine revs, the wheels spin and then the car jerks backwards and I brake and push down the clutch pedal. The car is on the road. I put it into neutral and engage the handbrake. I leave the engine running.

'How far have you to go?'

'A couple of miles.' She raises her arm in the direction her car is pointing. 'Next village.'

'The front is only dented. You should be OK.'

She gets back in the car.

'You'll need to adjust the seat.'

She hitches it forward.

'Careful with the accelerator.'

She closes the door. I check to see if there's anything coming then give her a wave through the window. The car moves off. I watch until it has disappeared round next bend.

- You take that chair, I'll look for another.

*

- He seems paler today, and more peaceful. Yesterday he was agitated. Pulse all over the place.

- His pulse rate is low, I think, and so is his oxygen level.

- I hope they don't have to put him back on a ventilator.

- They might just give him oxygen.

- His hands feel cold. You feel.

- A little. Let me feel yours. [Pause] Yours are quite warm, almost hot. We should have come up in the lift.

- I'm not ill.

- But you shouldn't push yourself too much.

- I can't just sit around.
- It's still early days. How is?
- She's.
- I'm sorry.
- She's not progressing as well as they had hoped.
- She was very tiny.
- Still is.
- Yes.

The offside rear wing of my car has a large dent that appears, to me, to be superficial. The angle of the car is steeper than I first thought. The engine starts and I try to drive up towards the road. The front wheel drive loses traction after a few inches and the tyres whine. I turn the steering hard to the right and put it into second gear. I let the clutch in and press the accelerator hard. The car rushes, but it baulks before it reaches the road and slides back twisting until both nearside wheels are in the ditch. 'Shit.' I switch off the engine and get out of the car. My coat is in the boot. I press the catch of the boot lid but it fails to open. 'Bugger.' I try again. It moves but the right hand edge is jammed. I work my fingers into the gap between the lid and the wing and pull upwards, pressing the catch and lifting at the same time. It gives a little but does not open. I lock the car, button my jacket and set off towards the village.

A hundred slippery yards along the road the snow is falling again. My shoes have smooth soles and as I reach forward with one foot the other skids backwards. No vehicle has passed me. Nothing has gone the other way. The wind is against me. The snow thickens and my jacket and my trousers are coated with sticky flakes. Two miles. Forty minutes. An hour at this rate. I stand still and turn my face from the wind. My head is cold. I push my hands into my jacket pockets and press them against the warmth of my body. The air I suck in is hard. I start walking again. I blink as the large flakes swirl in my face. Another hundred yards and the yielding snow-covered grass of the verge becomes a snow-covered solid surface. Slightly easier. I stop again and look back. I can no longer see my car.

I face the wind again and despite the slipperiness under my feet maintain a steady pace. Every step I take is nearer the village. Nearer a destination that has become a goal and little more. The warmth is leaking out of my body. Somewhere in the centre of my being the glow persists, but the periphery is without sensation,

neither cold nor warm. Below me I know my feet are moving. In front of me the snow falls. Beyond that there is nothing. I hear a faint voice. A voice without words.

18

A jolting brings me back to consciousness. My mind backtracks. The snow. The collision. The girl. The walking. The cold. The cold.

The irregular movement stops. I open my eyes. Shadows move across my vision. Rectangles of white float in front of my eyes. I am sitting. A person is leaning across me. My legs are pulled around and I am pulled forward. My feet drop.

'Have you got him?'

Have I got who?

My feet feel the ground. I make an effort to stand, but my knees bend. There is upward pressure under my arms and my body does not fall.

'Can you walk?'

Can who walk? Me? Can I walk?

I put my right foot forward and feel the ground. I press down and straighten my knee. I put my left foot forward.

'That's it. Well done. It's not far.'

Two miles to the village.

'Keep going. Nearly there.'

A bright rectangle.

'This way.'

Brightness, all round.

'Turn round. That's it. Sit down.'

My body is lowered on to softness. My feet are lifted and I am looking upward, dazzled. I close my eyes.

*

Whatever I heard in Sunday School, whatever I told myself about the possibilities, I knew, I have always known, that as everything has a beginning, so everything has an end, and I was no exception. Over the years the question of what is it like to die became more demanding. Not what is it like to be dead. That's an idiotic question because the essence of being dead is not knowing. The transition, that is what is intriguing. Is it possible to be aware that the moment of death is the next moment? That there is now but not then? I have no answer, but I can't ignore the question. And there is the familiar statement: he died instantly. It's usually said of someone who is involved in a catastrophic incident. Someone who turned the ignition key in his car and set off a bomb under the driver's seat. He died instantly. Or hit in the head by a high velocity sniper's bullet. Did he know, even for an instant, that he was dying? Or was awareness switched off like a light. Not even aware long enough to recognise the instant of death. No time to puzzle over what was happening or wonder why. He wouldn't have known anything about it. That's what they say. But what do they know? I think I want a slow death, I want to appreciate it. To know it is happening and have time to think about it. To even experience the chaotic thoughts of a deteriorating brain as it uses up the last few molecules of oxygen. The mind dissipating, seeping like water into dry sand. It is possible that instant death is for the dying person not instant. The severed head is conscious for a time, can see out of its eyes, even though there is no fresh blood being pumped through the carotid artery and oxygen supplies are diminishing by the second. Or is that a myth? It can be no more than an hypothesis, a hypothesis beyond testing. Or, more accurately, beyond reporting. But what about those that have survived near-death experiences, who have been revived after minutes during which it was clear to the medical people around them that death was approaching, who report, when asked, that there was a long, white tunnel of light and that they were moving towards the brightness at the end. Is that an effect - the effect - of a brain dying? I quite like that.

I open my eyes. The brightness above me has gone. A warmer light surrounds me. I feel the distributed weight of a blanket. My legs are bare. I have no shoes on. Or socks. I rub my feet together. My hands are resting on my chest. My jacket has

gone. I turn my head and see the back of a sofa. I turn the other way and I see an open coal fire, bright with strong yellow flames. I hear it crackle and spit.

'You're awake.'

The voice is behind my head. Female. She comes into view. Long greying hair tied at the back of her neck, heavy sweater and thick skirt.

'Yes,' I say and the sound comes out with difficulty, fragmented.

She brings a straight backed chair and places it to one side of my feet at a friendly angle and sits down. 'I'm Christine.'

'Neville.' My voice is stronger.

'How do you feel?'

'I don't know. Weak. Stupid.'

'We've sent for a doctor.'

'I think I'll be all right.'

'Let's see.'

'What happened? I remember walking. In the snow.'

'With no hat or coat.'

'In the car. In the boot of the car. couldn't get it open.'

'It is your car in the ditch then?'

'Yes.' I try to push myself into a sitting position. She stands up and puts one arm under my armpit and lifts. I relax settling into the corner of the sofa. 'Pushed off the road by a car coming out of the lane. Poor girl couldn't handle it.'

'Was she all right?'

'Yes. And her car. Except for a dented front. Sent her on her way.'

'We were driving along. Coming home. And we saw you fall. You still hadn't got up when we reached you. Brought you here. Removed your wet clothes and rang for the doctor.'

'How long?'

'About an hour.'

'That all? Seems longer.' I glance at my watch. It's not there.

She stands up and walks over to the fire. 'He didn't know how long it would be before he got here. It's stopped snowing but the roads are treacherous.' She comes back. 'Here. We took it off earlier.'

I take my watch from her and fasten it round my wrist. The time is almost three o'clock. 'On my way to a friend. She'll be worried.'

'I can ring her. If you want.'

'Please. But don't alarm her. Her name's Debbie.'

'I won't.'

I give her Debbie's number.

She goes out of the room and comes back with a little notebook and a ballpoint pen. 'Tell me again. I've no head for numbers.'

I repeat the number.

- Hello.
- Jo?
- Yes.
- Michael.
- I told you not to ring here.
- I know. I tried at the library but you'd gone. Is he there?
- Yes. In the front room.
- About our plan.
- Plan?
- To have a few days away.
- Yes. I think so.
- Shall I book somewhere?
- I need to think. If I talk much longer he'll get suspicious.
- OK. I'll make a few enquiries.
- Give me your number and I'll ring when he's out. Tomorrow. Or the day after.
- Haven't I given you it?
- No.
- I thought I had.
- You haven't.
- OK [Pause] Are you ready?

- Yes.

The doctor checks me over. Temperature. Heart rate and blood pressure. Light in the eyes. Stethoscope front and back. 'Aches and pains?' he asks.

'No more than usual?'

'Head? Did you hit your head?'

'No.'

'Good.' He leaves the room.

Christine comes back. 'Doctor says rest. You can sleep in our spare room. And, come morning, Alan'll do something about your car.'

'I can't.'

'What?'

'Impose on you.'

'Where are you going to go? Your car's in a ditch. It's getting dark. There's no bus till tomorrow - if it can get through. And there'll be more snow. Though with a bit of luck we'll get a snowplough along the main road.'

'Thank you. Thank you very much.'

'Hungry? I've got some beef stew. Dumplings. I can warm it up in a jiffy.'

'Sounds good.'

- I see they've put him back on a ventilator.

- Yes.

- Not a good sign.

- He had some kind of do in the night.

- What? Heart attack? Fit? Didn't they say?

- He stopped breathing. So.

- I see.

[Silence]

- Nearly three weeks.

- Tomorrow.

- Have they said anything?

- About?

- Prognosis.
- No. It seems ages. Ages since. [Pause] I don't know what to think.
- You've got to keep on hoping.
- But. What's stopping him coming round?
- Who knows? Sometimes the body has to shut down to protect the brain.
- You mean he might have brain damage. Don't say that.
- I'm not saying that.

Christine persuades me to go to bed early. I sleep fitfully and wake suddenly. The bedside lamp is still on. I lie there. Listening. A strange house has strange sounds. I hear doors open and close. Water running. A wordless shout outside. A dog yaps. A diesel-engined tractor starts up and its clatter echoes between walls. The tractor moves away from the house and its noise fades. I look at my watch. Ten past seven.

A knock on the door brings me back to complete wakefulness.

'Yes,' I call.

'Can I come in?'

I sit up in bed. 'Yes.'

She comes in. She has my jacket on a hanger, my trousers over her arm, and my shoes in one hand. 'Your things. Dried nicely. I've run an iron over your trousers.'

'You needn't have.'

'Had it out. The ironing board.'

'I'm very grateful.'

'If you feel up to it, you can get properly dressed then come down for some breakfast.'

- Hello.
- It's me.
- Jo.
- He's gone out. Back to the university.
- Managed to get a room in that little hotel I told you about.

- In the Yorkshire Dales?
- Yes. Three nights. He's not back till the Wednesday, is he?
- That's right.
- Less than a month away.
- Yes.
- You sound uncertain.
- It's a big step.
- The Rubicon.
- The what?
- Something to do with Caesar. Julius Caesar.
- Oh.
- An irrevocable decision.
- Now I'm even less certain.
- Jo.
- Michael. Don't.
- What about this weekend?
- I told you. Ben's coming on one of his rare visits.
- You did. Sorry. Lunch? Monday?
- Perhaps.

I am part way through the fried eggs and bacon when Alan opens the door into the kitchen from the yard. He stands there keeping his boots on the step. His grey woollen sweater and faded brown trousers are marked with a variety of stains. 'Young Simon and I have rescued your car. There isn't much wrong with it. Drives OK. We found the keys in your jacket pocket.' He hold out my keys and puts them down on the edge of the worktop. 'The dent's quite bad and the paint's split so it'll need seein' to, but with a bit of pushing and shoving we got it so's you can open and shut the boot.'

'I don't know what to say.' I leave a second of speechlessness. 'Except, of course, to say thank you. Thank you very much.'

'If you can't 'elp someone in need, what can you do?'

'Admirable philosophy.'

'The main road's been cleared and I've done me best with the lane so you should be able to get on your way. If you're up to it, that is.'

'I feel fine. Good food and a good night's sleep does wonders.'

'Well, I'll say cheerio. I've work t' be doin'. You'll 'ave gone no doubt by the time I get back.'

I stand up. 'Thanks, again.' I go towards him and hold out my hand and he takes it with a rough firm grip.

'Good luck.'

'Thanks.'

Alan turns and strides off. I close the door and sit down to finish my breakfast.

Before I leave I force a twenty pound note on Christine. She refuses. 'Treat yourself, put it in the church collection, give to a charity, do whatever you want, but please take it.' She does.

The yard is concrete and already the snow is well trodden in places. My car is at the far side, alongside a barn. It has been parked so that it is facing the short track which leads to lane. Christine said I should turn left along the lane to get to the main road. The car starts immediately, I put it into gear and set off. Half the lane is clear, the other half rutted snow. The car swings a bit when I pick up speed. I take it easy along the quarter mile to the main road. One edge of the main road has snow heaped along it where a snowplough has pushed it aside. The road itself is patterned with irregular grey slush strung with temporary tyre tracks across glistening wetness. I wait at the junction uncertain as to whether I should turn left or right. There is duality in my uncertainty. I am geographically disoriented and don't know which way to turn to continue the journey I started yesterday. I am emotionally torn as to whether I want to continue to Debbie's and suffer her overwhelming concern for my welfare or whether I should go back for a bit of peace and quiet. I decide to gamble. I decide to turn left and keep going. Whatever.

- Michael.

- Yes?

- [Pause] Promise you won't be cross.

- Cross. What makes you think I'll be cross?

- I don't know. I don't know how you'll take it.

- Take what?

- What I have to tell you.

- Only one way to find out.
- I know.
- Go on then. I'm all ears.
- [Silence]
- I'm [Pause] pregnant.

It is a little after eleven o'clock when I park the car outside Debbie's flat. I turn off the engine. I sit in the car. The last ten miles were free of snow. The ground is wet, but it isn't raining. I get out and go to open the boot. I study the dented wing. The damage hurts. It is wrong. I tense. I wish it hadn't happened. I wish. I wish it was straightforward to put it right. To make it go away. To rewind the sequence of events back to a point where I could have made a different decision and it would not have happened. My struggle to pull open the boot increases the tightness in my gut, around my chest, in my head. The boot opens with the muted twang of strained metal relaxing. I take out my case and coat. I try to shut the boot with one hand. It bounces up. Damn! I repeat myself. Aloud. 'Damn! Damn! Damn!' I put down the case and fold my coat over it and then with two hands on the boot lid I press. I see where it is catching and I press and twist it clockwise. I feel the metal give and buckle slightly. Something catches. I lean on the boot and something clicks. I straighten up and the lid remains closed. I lock the car and go along the path and up the steps and push the button. The lock on the door is released as soon as I speak.

Inside the flat she takes my coat and my case. 'Go and sit down.'

I go into the living room and sit in the armchair.

'Coffee?'

I nod.

'You look whacked.'

'Do I? I don't feel.'

'It must have been awful.'

'Not so bad.'

'But you could have frozen to death.'

'I don't think so.'

'If you hadn't been spotted.'

'I suppose if you're spotted then you stand out against the snow.'

'Funny.'

'I must have tripped.'

'You could've lain there all night. Hypothermia. That's what you would have got.'

'I'd have got up soon enough and continued walking.'

'They said.' The kettle comes to the boil. 'They said you were unconscious.'

'For a bit.'

'That's what they say.' She pours hot water into two mugs. 'That when you get cold. Like that. You want to lie down and go to sleep.'

'I tripped. Or slipped.'

'I think you were very lucky.'

'Perhaps.'

She brings the coffee over. 'You'll need to take it easy for a day or two. It's a good job you've got me to look after you.'

'There's nothing wrong with me.'

'You don't walk a mile or more in driving snow with no coat, fall down, lose consciousness without it having some effect. You're not as young.'

'I know. I know. That's what Rachel says.'

'And you had a car accident.'

'That wasn't much.'

'Tell me. They said you'd skidded off the road into ditch.'

'I was pushed off. By a young woman who wasn't able to stop as she came out of a side road.'

'Was she OK?'

'Seemed fine. Just a bit shaken up. I had to manoeuvre her car back on to the road and then she went on her way.'

'Left you.'

'Yes. Yes. She was in a hurry.'

'Young people are always in a hurry.'

I drink my coffee.

'She could've offered you a lift.'

'She could have, but I would have probably refused. I didn't realise that the car would be a problem and that the boot was jammed. That's why I hadn't a coat on. It was in the boot.'

'You don't have to be so sharp.'

'Leave it. It's over. I'll have to get the damned car repaired.'

'We could get that done here. There's a little place on the next street.'

'We? I'll decide what to do with my car.'

'Neville.'

'Sorry. But it.'

'It's catching up with you.'

'What?'

'Shock, sort of.'

'Debbie. Please. There's nothing wrong with me.'

'If you say so.'

'I had half a mind not to come.'

'Oh, Neville.'

'I thought I might find it easier at my house.'

'You shouldn't be on your own. Not after something like this.'

'But that's me. On my own. That's how it's been. For years.'

She puts her mug down on the table and walks over to the kitchen cupboards. She comes back with a square tin commemorating the coronation. The colouring has worn through along the edges. She takes the lid off. 'Biscuit?'

After a light lunch, she suggests we go for a walk. I agree and as we watch the sea I put my arm around her shoulders and she gives me a half-hearted grin. I squeeze her shoulders. 'I'm sorry I was a bit.' I leave the rest unsaid. I am not quite sure what I am apologising for, but I am aware an apology is due.

- Pregnant?
- That's what I said.
- Sure? At your.
- Age. Not unheard of.
- But I thought.
- So did I. So did I.
- Is everything?
- Everything is fine.
- Good. That's good.
- There are risks.
- Risks?
- You know. Down's.
- There are tests.
- I know, but they have risks as well.
- I know.
- Let's see how things.
- Go.
- [Silence]
- I think I'm pleased.
- That's a relief.

19

I put on my coat and go back into the bedroom. Debbie is still in bed, her head turned away from the door. I go round the bed. Her eyes are closed. I lean over and press my lips into her hair. 'Just going for a paper.' She makes a sound in her throat which I take for acknowledgement.

The streets are dry and the air is blowing up from the sea. I turn up my collar and cross to the other side where my back is into the wind.

- He's very still.
- Peaceful. Now he's breathing on his own again.
- You do wonder, don't you?
- About what?
- If there's anything going on. In his head.
- Dreaming?
- I was thinking about whether he's thinking. He's not asleep. Not in the normal way of being asleep. Is he?
- I don't know. How could we know?
- Do you get any signs?
- Such as?
- Well. Like people who are dreaming. Movements? Eye movements? Words?
- No words. Sometimes he. [Pause] Fits.
- Like epilepsy?
- Not quite. More like a struggle.
- Dreaming.

On my way back I remember Jack's invitation. At breakfast as we are drinking our coffee I decide to mention it. 'Did I tell you I've joined a walking group. Well. Not exactly joined, but I've been out with them once and I think I'll go again. When they resume. After Christmas.'

Debbie glances up from reading the paper.

'One of the chaps. They're all men. Used to live in our street. It was him that suggested I go along.'

She eyes me.

'Well?' I say to provoke a response.

Her chin moves a little. The newspaper is still where she can read it. The skin near her eyes crinkles, deepening the crows feet.

'The other day. He rang. He said that the walking group are going out for a Christmas meal. Tuesday before Christmas. He said I could bring a friend.'

'And you thought I might like to go along as your friend.'

I raise my eyebrows and give a little nod.

'I'm not sure. I won't know anyone. Will I?'

'Don't know. I only know a couple of their names. Jack is the only one I really know. But there's Russell. He's a Methodist minister.'

'You're not exactly selling it.'

'I know.'

'I'll think about it.'

'You might know Jack's wife. I think she knows a cousin of yours. Or a cousin of hers knows you. Can't recall which.'

'What she called?'

'Who?'

'This wife.'

'Julia. Julia Bathurst.'

'Jack, did you say? Jack Bathurst. The name's familiar. One of Don's associates. I'm not certain.'

'I think he had some business with your husband. Not sure what?'

'Who was.'

'What?'

'Sure of what Don was up to.' She folds the newspaper. 'I'll think about it. I don't know how I'd feel mixing with people who knew Don.'

'OK.' I sense I am on the edge of a forbidden region.

It doesn't matter how much time you spend with someone, how close you feel to them, how much you trust or love someone, there's always a bit about them you don't know. And that's the bit that you know you don't know. What about that part of them that you don't even know you don't know? Jo and I were married for twenty-four years. And we'd been going out together for two years before we got married. At first, in the months after we met, we learned a great deal about each other because we talked. We talked about our homes, our parents, our relatives, our likes and dislikes, our schools, our jobs. We argued and debated about the rights and wrongs of the world. We disagreed in order to come to an agreement. We debated in order to understand. We argued when we failed to understand, and made love when the misunderstanding had been banished.

In later years there were times when I kept something back, something that would be difficult to tell, or might be difficult to hear. I put it off. Later I convinced myself that there had never been a correct time to tell Jo and now it was so out of date that to tell her would only prompt her to ask why I had not said something earlier. Eventually I recognised that I would always have secrets from her. Most of what I did not reveal was trivial, or embarrassing, or demonstrated how I had failed to live up to my own standards, or worse, to her standards. Now and then, circumstances reminded me of something in the cache and it would leap forth reinvigorated and unsettling. Something that could neither be forgotten nor eliminated. This cache of untold events became a denial of the giving that brought us together. It emphasised that there was part of my life that was mine, and not ours.

It was even longer before I surprised myself with thought that the situation was reciprocal.

I pack the few things that necessarily travel to and fro between my house and Debbie's flat. Debbie is looking out of the window across the rooftops to the sea.

The morning frost holds out in the shadows that the creeping sun has not yet reached. 'I'll be off.'

'Do you have to go?' She sets her back to the window.

'No, I don't but if I stay for any length of time I'll be more than just visiting.'

'You'll have moved in.'

'I'm not ready for that.'

'Not sure I am.'

'We'll see.' I put my bag on the floor and walk over to her and kiss her lightly on the lips. 'I'll ring you about the Christmas meal.'

'I've decided.'

'And.'

'I'm not coming. You go by yourself.'

'Why?'

'It's complicated.'

'Seems simple to me. Yes. Or no.'

'I'm sorry.' She returns to looking out of the window. 'There are things that I'm not ready to tell you. Things that it's better for you not to know. Things that might have to be explained if. If certain people were there.'

'I can find out exactly who's going to be there.'

'Don't make it hard for me.'

'I'm not. I'm trying to make it easy for you.'

She shakes her head. 'I can't explain. I can't explain. Not yet.'

'Won't explain.'

'Yes. I won't.'

'I don't understand.'

'Don't press me.'

'I'm not. I want to know. I want to understand, I want to be on your side.'

'But you're not.'

'Not what?'

'Not on my side. You don't know what it would mean to be on my side.'

'Have it your way then.'

'Don't be cross.'

'I'm not cross. I'm hurt. Don't you trust me?'

'It's not you I don't trust. But what you don't know.'

'Can't hurt me.'

'Not exactly.'

'How do you think it sounds. It knots me up inside. Trying to work out what it might be.'

'That's why you can't know.'

'Ever?'

'Maybe. Maybe never.'

'I'm not sure I like this. This unspeakable thing between us.'

She spins round and I step back. She frowns, looks down at the floor and says, 'I don't want it to come between us.'

'But it is,' I say.

She steps forward and tries to take hold of each of my hands.

I snatch them away. 'No. Don't.'

'Don't what?'

'Don't try to make me. I don't know. I'm going.' I turn towards the open door. I pick up my bag.

'Ring me when you get home.'

'I'll see.'

'Please.'

I stride down the hall and out of the flat. I shut the door behind me with too much force. It bangs. I go rapidly down the staircase, tripping at one point and stumbling down two or three stairs, almost falling.

Deliberately ignoring the damaged boot I pull open a rear door and throw my bag on to the back seat. Sitting in the car I slam the door and twist the key viciously. The engine fires. I shove the clutch pedal down, force it into gear and

then lift my foot off the clutch pedal as I stamp on the accelerator. The car leaps forward. A wheel squeals and the car swerves into the road. I yank the steering wheel and the car swerves back on to the correct side. I straighten up, change up to second, accelerate, third, fourth. I brake hard for the next corner, down to third, accelerate, up to fourth. The traffic lights at the next junction change to amber and then to red as I approach. I brake. The car judders to a halt halfway over the stop line. The engine is silent.

I can't remember exactly when I became suspicious. Well, not suspicious, it was more a wondering. I used to look at her when she was asleep, or when she was watching the television. Sometimes while I was wondering and she was following whatever programme was on, her concentration would suddenly switch from the television screen to me. What's the matter? She would say. Nothing, I would say, nothing. I was just thinking. What about? It's gone. You didn't seem very happy about what you were thinking. Didn't I? Must have been work. But it's gone now.

She'd changed. I'd changed. We'd both changed. Over twenty years we were bound to change. More than twenty years. It was almost half a life-time. Then.

The suspicions irritated. Not in a way that angered me, it was more curiosity, a need to know. If I knew then I could handle it. While I did not know, all I could do was fret.

I wanted there to be evidence. Evidence that I was wrong or evidence that I was right. As the weeks and months went by nothing changed. The frequency of her late nights varied but there was no increasing or decreasing trend. Her justifications for her lateness were always plausible, neither elaborate nor banal. The trigger for action was her unconcern about me and what I was doing and my problems. She rarely asked and she never listened. She appeared to be listening but her mind was elsewhere.

I took to walking down to the medical school around the time she normally finished, and discreetly observing the entrance that led to the library. I didn't do it every evening. It was about three weeks after the first time that I obtained a little piece of evidence. Instead of hurrying off to the bus, she waited in the entrance. I was about fifty yards away. Almost immediately a car drew up, BMW, white. She

got in and it drove off. I repeated the registration to myself and when I got back to my office I wrote it down.

The way she got into the car seemed awkward. She'd put on weight. She'd been putting on weight for years, but at that moment she struck me as middle-aged. We were middle-aged.

Later that evening I used the phone in the departmental office to call Don Netherby and asked him if he could trace a car registration for me. He said he knew someone who could, but it would cost me. I agreed and a couple of days later there was a knock on my office door and a young lad in a sleeveless quilted jacket held out an envelope and said it was from his boss. I let him in, closed the door and give him the hundred quid. He gave me the envelope and went.

African name, I thought, West African. I looked up the name in the university calendar. An honorary clinical lecturer in the School of Medicine. Almost certainly he had a post at the hospital. The address took me to a small development of flats that I judged to have been built in the sixties. A cuboidal brick-and-concrete travesty in among Victorian stone houses. There were separate entrances to each staircase. The arrangement of the numbered nameplates indicated that his flat was on the second - the top - floor.

One night after she had gone to bed I opened her hand bag and carefully searched for her keys. There was a Yale-type key that was new. The teeth were rough under my thumb. The following day I had a copy made of an old key of a similar type and exchanged it for the new key on her ring. I had a copy made of the key I had borrowed. Later I removed the bogus key from her ring and replaced it with the one I had taken.

I moderate my driving. My perception of the road ahead, the vehicles coming, going, waiting, stopping is sharp. I judge, estimate, calculate, prepare, brake, accelerate, swerve, turn with preternatural precision. The undertow of questions, hypotheses, arguments and counterarguments is subdued beneath the concentration required to negotiate the kaleidoscopic onrush of the torrent of images. I am detached yet intricately connected. My dexterity ensures my invulnerability. I am superhuman.

The distant rounded hills are marked with patches of snow. In the bottoms of north-facing hedges untidy heaps of black-edged snow that has thawed and

refrozen lie in ragged lines. Today, the sky is clear. The sun is still low providing light but little heat. Everything is clearly delineated, pen-and-ink and watercolour.

I drive faster on the dual carriageway. I pull out into the outside lane to overtake a tractor. The central reservation is narrow and I see a small bird swoop in front of a car coming in the other direction. The movement is quick and indistinct but the sudden change in the trajectory of the bird is obvious. The wing mirror of a car has caught the bird mid-flight and thrown it upwards in quick parabola. The bird drops on to the bonnet of my car and the rush of air pushes it towards the windscreen its wings fluttering. I slow down and pull over into the inside lane. The fluttering bird slides to the right a little. I notice that there is a parking bay ahead and slow down further then pull in and stop. The bird flutters again, its tiny eyes wide. I get out of the car. The air is still. The bird flutters. Not dead, but dying. In the hedge between the parking bay and the ploughed field I find a large cardboard box, flattened and damp. I rip off a flap and return to the car. The bird has closed its eyes. I slide the piece of card towards it. As the edge touches its little body its wings flutter again, and shutting my eyes I thrust the cardboard at it and scoop it up and windmill my arm towards the ploughed field. The bird takes its final flight. I peer over the hedge into the ploughed field. I cannot see the bird. A movement, a fluttering catches my gaze. I stare hard. The breeze moves a dead leaf.

- I'm beginning to think this'll last for ever.
- Nothing lasts for ever.
- An eternal limbo. Neither life nor death.
- If it does?
- What?
- Seem as if its going to go on. And on.
- Yes?
- I think.
- Don't. Michael don't.
- You haven't heard what I'm going ...
- Michael. I know.
- ... to say. [Pause] Tell me.
- You want me to forget about him. Carry one as if he were dead.
- Not exactly.
- [Silence]
- I was going to say.

- Don't.
- It doesn't matter.
- Oh it does. Say it.
- I've forgotten what I was going to say. It was all there in my head and now it's gone. [Silence] I was going to say. The way I see it is. This is going to come out wrong. You didn't want to be with him. You came to my flat intending to stay. Didn't you. You were leaving him. Isn't it better?
- Better?
- Better leaving him here. Unaware of your absence. Rather than leaving him in the house knowing you're gone which is the way it would have been.
- I wanted him to know I'd gone. That I couldn't continue. Not with him. He needed to know.
- You make it seem one-sided.
- It is one-sided. From my point of view.
- And now.
- He might fade away without me being aware of it or him knowing that I had left him.
- So you're going to stay?
- In a way.

I swing the car off a roundabout and slow down as I approach the end of a queue of traffic. The stop-start of the intermittently moving queue occupies my attention and deadens my mind. Debbie is a long way behind me. Escape is a long way in front. After twenty minutes I can see ahead the red of temporary traffic lights. A minute later I drive past the green and around a large irregular hole in the right-hand side of the road. A small diesel-engined pump is forcing water from the depth of the hole out on to the road where it runs away down the imperceptible slope. There are no workmen in sight. I imagine that flow of underground water has hollowed out a cavern into which the road has collapsed. It does not seem that a vehicle was passing over it at the instant of collapse. Only a few days ago I drove over the same spot. Why did it not collapse then?

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I had flown to Brussels for a conference followed by a two-day meeting with consortium partners about a new collaborative project that had recently been approved. The conference had been OK, but the meeting had not gone all that well. We argued about the interdependencies of the deliverables and there were accusations of reinterpretation of the agreed workplan that effectively moved responsibilities from the commercial to the academic partners. I'd fought my corner but experience told me that in the end the academics would plug any gaps that appeared while the commercial partners conveniently moved their more able to staff to more profitable projects. I wasn't pleased. Nevertheless we finished on schedule and after quick cup of coffee I took the Metro round to Rogier. From there I walked to Bruxelles-Nord and caught the train to the airport. I checked in and went through security. When I'd booked the flight I had allowed for the meeting over-running so I had a good half-hour to kill. As always, I had a book to read. I wandered around the duty-free shop checking the prices of the malt whiskies. Occasionally there was a very good bargain, mostly the prices for a litre were roughly the price of seventy centilitres in England, which was a saving but not a great incentive to buy. The only seats in the area were at the bars and I didn't feel like a drink. I set off towards the gate for my flight where I would easily get a seat and could read until departure time. I was mistaken. All the seats at the gate were occupied. The display over the gate was not showing my flight, but an earlier one that should have departed a few minutes earlier and appeared not to have been called. I put my case down and leaned against a pillar. I thought about ringing Jo. It was ten minutes before the delayed flight was called and the passengers began to form a queue. I sat down in a vacated seat. It was now only a few minutes to the scheduled boarding time of my own flight. I could see we were going to be delayed and the unexpected waiting was getting to me. I took my book out of my case and opened it at the place I had bookmarked with the stub of my outward boarding

card. I didn't read. I couldn't read. Instead I watched the queue for the earlier flight moving slowly forward as documentation was checked. As usual there were passengers who took longer to complete this simple formality. I was irritated by their unreadiness, searching bags or pockets, asking questions, dropping things, holding things that weren't needed. Passport, boarding card. It was simple.

Like an irritating tune that keeps demanding attention and blocking productive thinking a succession of questions kept asking to be answered. When would my flight be called? When would it take off? When would I get back?

I forced my eyes to look at the page. I read half a paragraph and then turned back a page to reread what I had read previously so that what I was now reading made sense. I read a page. A page and a half. A voice over the PA asked for the last remaining passenger for flight whatever it was to come to the gate as the flight was now closing. I glanced across at the two uniformed women at the desk alongside the gate. A minute passed then one of them picked up the telephone. A moment after she had put it down the call for the missing passenger was repeated. There's always one, I thought. I looked down at my open book. A quick movement distracted me. A short man in a long coat, flapping open, belt dangling, hurried towards the gate. He leaned his folded suit-carrier against the desk as he searched his pockets for his boarding card and passport. Jacket pockets inside and out, coat pockets. He became agitated, speaking, patting his coat and reaching inside to places he had already searched. Suddenly the passport was in his hand and the boarding card floated out of it as he opened it. He picked up his boarding card and presented it. The returned passport and the stub of the boarding card were pushed into an outer coat pocket and he grabbed for his suit-carrier which unfolded as he lifted it. He tried again and managed to get the handles together so that he could grip them in one hand. He hurried off to board his plane. It was thirty-five minutes after the scheduled flight time.

My flight was called almost immediately and I joined a queue that eventually reached a door where a bus was waiting. Within a reassuring few minutes all passengers were aboard our flight and the cabin crew had made their welcoming noises. The aircraft, as usual, was a small thirty-seater with twin turboprops. The port engine fired up and the propeller was soon a transparent disc. I was sitting in a single seat on that side of the plane but I could see through a starboard window that the propeller of the starboard engine was stationary. I had watched the same sequence of events several times. I waited for the starboard engine to fire. The propeller did not move. One of the flight crew addressed us over the plane's PA system. Apparently we had a slight technical problem and an engineer had been

requested. The port engine was silenced and the propeller slowed until it was visibly rotating. A sharp backward movement before it finally stopped. I sighed and in the absence of a someone to grumble to, grumbled to myself.

The orange-overalled man came in through the passenger door and was allowed on to the flight deck. The flight deck door remained open allowing the conversation to be heard if not understood. The conversation sounded, to me, matter-of-fact. Some instructions were given and no doubt followed. Further instruction. The port engine was restarted and after some obvious activity as switches were flicked and dials read a short instruction was given. The starboard propeller did not move. The engineer shook his head. He shook his head again, adding a shrug. A short exchange among the crew was interrupted by the engineer. His voice had a different tone. Puzzled. Serious. Contemplating the escalation of the situation. The port engine was closed down again and then restarted. The conversation on the flight deck continued until the sound of the starboard engine firing broke in. Soon the starboard propeller was turning at the usual speed. The engineer shrugged his shoulders once more and after a short exchange of light-hearted banter he left the plane. I glanced at my watch we were now almost an hour late. The captain informed us that the technical fault had been dealt with and that we would be on our way as soon as we were allocated a new slot. More delay. And had that fault been cured or had it merely gone away? On top of my irritation which was now approaching annoyance there was a ripple of anxiety, ameliorated eventually by a successful take off, but all through the slow climb to thirty-five thousand feet I tortured myself with the possibility of an engine failure. The fact that modern planes can fly on one engine was only minimally reassuring.

I had red wine with the in-flight meal and a miniature of whisky with my coffee.

I open my front door. The empty silence of the house drains from me the slight satisfaction of the morning's events, leaving me disconnected and motiveless. An hour ago there had been a logical justification for my actions, for what I had said, and what I had felt. Now, I felt I was wrong while knowing that I am right. I bang the wall with the base of my fist. Again and again. When I stop I feel no pain.

- To have and to hold from this day forwards, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and health as long as you both shall live.
- What brought that up?
- Not sure. It was just words. Then. [Pause] I knew what I was saying. But it didn't seem to be a big deal. We wanted to be together. To have a house. A family. A life together. I think I even had a picture of old age together.
- Unrealistic. That kind of promise.
- How do you mean?
- When those words were first written a marriage might last ten years perhaps fifteen, or even twenty. Sickness killed. Life expectancy was low. Childbirth was positively dangerous. Pregnancy after forty was a death sentence. Till death us do part wasn't much of a commitment. Not like these days.
- That's reassuring. [Silence] A death sentence. That's what this is, is it?
- Not these days. Not for you.
- Are you sure?
- Of course.
- Do you think I should have 'If in doubt, save me' tattooed below my navel.

The door bell rings.

I stand still. I hold my breath. I wait. The edge of my hand is no longer numb. The flesh is filling up with the dullness of bruising. I rub the diffuse ache with my other hand.

The bell rings again.

I breathe.

Whoever is on the other side of the door knocks on the glass. Impatiently. Authoritatively.

I go to the door and turn back the latch and open the door slowly.

'Dr Dow. Good morning.'

'Inspector Dawlish.' The inspector is unaccompanied.

'Can I?'

'Of course.' I open the door wide and the inspector steps in. I wave him towards the front room. 'Can I get you a drink? Tea? Coffee?'

'Coffee.'

'It'll have to be black I've been away. No milk.'

'Sugar?'

'Yes. There's sugar.'

'Black with sugar then.'

'Go in. Sit down. I won't be a minute.'

I return with two mugs of coffee and a sugar basin and spoon on a tray. Dawlish has opened his coat and lounges in the armchair nearest the window. 'I'm sorry the house is cold. The heating has only been on low while I've been away. Enough to stop the pipes freezing up.' I put down the tray and put the spoon into sugar basin. I take him his coffee carrying the sugar basin in the other hand. He puts a single heaped teaspoon of sugar into his coffee and stirs it. I take the spoon from him. I put the spoon and the sugar basin on to the tray separately and sit down.

'This is not exactly an official visit.'

I nod.

'I now know exactly what your relationship with Netherby was.'

I wait.

'I know about your affair with his wife. And that you paid him to get you the name and address of the owner of a car. The first is not a criminal offence and the second is more a problem for us than for you, though it could be considered conspiracy.'

'I see.'

'In the circumstances I don't think we will be charging you.'

'Circumstances?'

'Yes.' He pulls himself to his feet. 'Do you mind if I take my coat off?'

'No. Go ahead.'

He folds his coat and places it on the floor. 'When did you last see Mrs Netherby?'

'Why is that of interest?'

'Look, this is informal. I'm trying to get some background. Let me put it this way. How well did you know Debra Netherby?'

The word 'did' hits me. I rehearse the question in my head. 'You said "did"?''

'Yes.' His shoulders sag. 'You don't know. Do you?'

'What?' I struggle with the conflicting pieces of information that are jumping about in my mind.

'I'm sorry. Debra Netherby was found dead.'

'Dead?'

'Last week.'

'Last *week*.'

'Drug overdose.'

'But.'

'Been addicted for some years. She seems to have got as much as she wanted from him. Of course after he died her supply dried up. Someone persuaded her to get treatment. She discharged herself about ten days ago. Three days later she was dead.'

'Dead.'

'We found an open safe in the garage floor. God knows how our boys missed it last time. We assume that there was heroin in the safe.'

'She was injecting then?'

'Hypodermic still in her hand.'

'This is all quite confusing.' I try to make sense of what I have heard. I cover my mouth with my left hand. I'm looking for an answer to a question that I don't know how to ask.

'I've some questions I'd like to ask.'

I shake my head, but say, 'Ask away. Ask away.'

'When did you last see Debra Netherby?'

'I haven't seen her in years.'

'I had the impression you were in touch with her.'

'I gave her a call when I heard about her husband.'

'When was that?'

I count back the weeks and say, 'Over a month ago. Almost two.' I'm no longer sure. Of anything.

'But you didn't meet up?'

'No.'

'Was there just the one phone call?'

'She rang me. At least.'

He waited.

'Someone rang me and it sounded like her.'

'Did you give her your number?'

'Can't remember. I'm in the telephone directory.'

He reaches inside his jacket and draws out a photograph. He stands up and holds out the photograph. 'Do you recognise this woman?'

The photograph shows a man and a woman. She is wearing an unbuttoned man's shirt over a bikini. The man is in flowered shorts. He has his arm around her shoulders. They are leaning against the safety rail of a balcony. Behind and below them there is the curve of a long beach, blue sea and unmarked sky. The woman is Debbie. The woman who calls herself Debbie. The man is Jack. 'It could be Debbie. It's a long time.'

'I suppose there is a similarity.' He sits down and puts the photograph back into his pocket. 'You know Jack Bathurst of course.'

I nod quickly. 'But who is she?'

'Debra Netherby's sister. Jenny Allinson. Married to. Was married to Jack Bathurst's cousin. David.'

'Don't know him.'

'Davy is doing ten years for armed robbery. She divorced him and reverted to her maiden name. Though, she could be using Bathurst again.'

'Why are you interested?'

'Jenny Allinson. Or Bathurst. Was Netherby's PA.'

I judge that the less I say the better.

'It's her we'd like to speak to.'

I look at him as nonchalantly as I can.

'But she seems to have disappeared.'

'What does Jack say.'

'Mr Bathurst says he rarely sees her. Not since Davy was sent down.'

'I'm not sure what I can do.'

'If you have any contact with Jack Bathurst and you pick up anything you think we might find useful, let me know.' He lifts his coat from the floor, stands up and shakes it out to full length. 'If you do by any chance run into Mrs or Miss or Ms Allinson'. The rest of the implication is left unsaid. He puts his coat on. 'Thanks for the coffee.'

After the uncertainty of waiting by the carousel for my case, I hurried through Nothing to Declare and went to queue for a taxi. I hate taxis and taxi drivers, especially if they talk. I hate the tension between the cash I have and what to give on top of the displayed fare. Finally, the taximeter showed £8.20. I handed the driver a ten-pound note and requested a pound change. The house was in darkness, not a window illuminated. The car was in the drive. I unlocked the front door and switched on the hall light, put down my case and dropped my coat over it. The house felt chilly. I put a hand on the radiator. It was cold. I went through to the kitchen and switched on the central heating. There was no note on the fridge door. I picked up an empty glass standing next to the sink and hurled it at the floor. It hit the quarry tiles and shattered. A piece of glass flew up and stung my cheek.

I stand at the door watching Dawlish drive away. I close the door on the world and return to the front room. I sit down slowly and allow my body to settle into the chair. My arms hang over the side, my hands neither clenched nor unclenched. My mind chases the fragments of what I have been told and what I have experienced. The pieces of truth, possible truths, falsehoods, lies, half-truths, and evasions compete for recognition, acceptance, rejection or confirmation. They pit themselves against each other, whispering, then insisting, then contradicting, then shouting, louder and louder. I jump to my feet and march across the room. The room is too

small. I storm into the hall. I open the front door. I stride outside and force myself to pull the door shut. The door shudders and the glass in the door rattles. I march down the drive and out on to the street. I keep stretching my pace, stretching reluctant tendons, striving for the pain that numbs the mind, denying thought. I need the rhythm. I need to feel the ground hitting my feet. I need the swing of my arms, the clenching and unclenching of my fists. The coarse air sucked in and forced out, harsh in my throat, acid in my lungs.

- Do you think he knows?
- About what?
- About us? About you?
- I've no idea what he knows and what he doesn't. We rarely talk.
- But you share a house. A bed.
- We pretend.
- I don't see how.
- You can tell you've never been married.
- Sorry.
- Don't take it like that.
- Like what?
- I'm not getting at you. Really I'm not.
- I can't imagine.
- When you live with someone. When you've lived with someone for years you find yourself - how shall I put it? - playing a part. Playing the part that's in your contract. That's expected of you. And in doing that you also accept the part your spouse, partner, whatever is playing. It's a way of getting by, of managing the extra knowledge, the extra knowledge about each other that doesn't quite fit with what you expected when you started out. You ignore obvious changes. In appearance. In behaviour. He may have noticed that I'm big, but he won't think I'm pregnant because that's not part of the arrangement. And I don't act as if I'm pregnant. Loose dresses. I pretend it's middle-aged spread and he sees middle-aged spread. He doesn't want me to be pregnant. That would be hard to cope with. A fat wife is a disappointment. And only one of many disappointments.

Russell opens the door. 'Neville.'

I feel the heat of my body reddening my face, pressing against the skin. I open my mouth. I clench my fists. I take a half-breath that fills my mouth and then escapes. My lungs are inflating and deflating rapidly. My body spasms as though I am about to sneeze. My eyes close as I struggle for control. Then there is neither up nor down.

- What's he doing?
- He's done this before.
- Keep out of his reach. I'll get a nurse.

*

- He's pulled that tube out.
- The doctor'll be here in a minute.
- What'll they do?
- Give him something to calm him down.
- Is he often like this?
- No. But it's getting worse. And more often.

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- God. What are you doing? In your condition.
- I couldn't face him.
- Let's get you inside. Why the hell didn't you let yourself in? That's what you've got a key for.
- I didn't want to. I didn't want to presume.
- Presume?
- I thought.
- Come on.
- I wanted you to ask me to stay. I didn't want you to feel you had no choice.
- Of course you can stay.
- I mean stay. I mean not go back. To him. To that house.
- I'll carry those.
- How did you get here?
- Taxi. Left him the car. It's his really.
- Steady. You all right?
- I feel a bit faint.
- Sit down. On the stairs. I'll take these up to the flat. You wait here. Take some deep breaths.

The directionless space in which I am tumbling settles into stasis. Up and down return. My body is supported. I am reclining. I am thinking. I hear voices. I listen.

'His temperature is OK. His blood pressure is elevated but the diastolic is acceptable. And he has been exercising. His heart rate is high but falling and he's now breathing normally. I don't think there's much wrong with him. Just overdone it.'

'So not a heart attack.'

'I don't think so.'

'Stroke?'

'Certainly not.'

'Right. I'm glad you were here Sally. Otherwise I might have dialled nine-nine-nine.'

'I'll wait till he comes round.'

'Are you sure?'

'I'd be happier when I've heard what he has to say.'

I open my eyes briefly.

'Neville.'

I open my eyes again.

A woman is leaning over me. 'Neville.' she says. She has a round face, no make-up, and blue eyes, very pale blue eyes. 'I'm Sally. I'm a nurse. You fainted. Do you understand.'

I try to say yes. My mouth moves but I only manage to make a dry hiss. I swallow, but there is nothing in my mouth to swallow. I try to speak again. 'Drink.' My tongue is dry. 'Please.'

'I'll get you some water.'

She moves out of view. I can see a figure blurred against the light. I close my eyes again.

'Help me lift him.'

I am lifted into a more upright position. Sitting. A glass of water is held against my lips. I move my right hand towards my face searching for the glass to hold it steady. My fingers touch the cold glass. It tips and I allow the water into my mouth. I swallow. I push at the glass with my fingers.

'Not too much, Neville.'

I swallow again. And again. I push the glass to one side. 'Thank you,' I say.

'How do you feel.'

'Weary.'

'When did you last eat?'

'Breakfast.'

'And what was that?'

'Toast and coffee.'

'And what have you done since then?'

'Driven seventy miles. Talked to a police officer for half an hour and then.' I hesitate. I scan the room. 'Russell.' I turn by attention back to the nurse. 'Sally?'

'Yes, Neville.'

'Then I.' I close my eyes. I think. I try to remember.

'Neville?'

'Came here. I must have come here.'

'How did you get here?'

'I. I. I walked. Yes. I walked.'

'You don't seem very sure.'

'I walked.'

'You had no coat on and it's cold out there.'

'I walked. I remember setting off. I walked. I walked. I walked.'

'Don't upset yourself.'

'I walked.'

'All right. Try to be calm. If you get upset again you'll make yourself poorly again.'

'Am I ill?'

'No. Not really. I think you've got yourself into a state and started hyperventilating. You fainted almost as soon as Russell opened the door.'

'Russell.' I lie back and close my eyes.

- He's much calmer now.

- Yes. He is.

I wake. There is no one in the room. I close my eyes.

- How do you feel?
- I'm all right.
- You sure.
- Yes. Yes. Don't fuss.
- Why?
- Why what?
- Lots of whys. Why didn't you ring? Why did you come? Today? Without warning? In a panic?
- I wasn't in a panic. Everything was clear. It should have been clear months ago.
- What?
- That it was over. Me. And Neville. [Silence] I was used to living with him. We shared a house. He was part of my life. I suppose I began to feel differently when Rachel went away. [Pause] Then you. You came along. Don't look so smug. I didn't trust you. But. But, I felt like a lovesick girl. Silly, I know. But it was a nice feeling to have someone who seemed to care. So I told myself I was in love. And I was. Even then. In a way. But he was always there and you weren't. And then. I wanted you to be there. But.
- But?
- I thought. I thought if I said I was leaving him. You might.
- I wouldn't. I won't.
- That's what became clear. Today.
- Today?
- He's been away.
- You said.
- And he'll be back tonight. [Pause] I knew. I knew I didn't want to be there when he came back. I didn't want to see him. Again.

'How do you feel now?'

'Better. Much better for having had something to eat.' Russell follows me into his sitting room. 'Coffee? Tea?'

'Tea, please.' The clock on the mantelpiece tells me it is half-past six. I try to marshal the events of the day, to organise them into a complete picture. The pieces do not tessellate. The gaps are small, but they are there. I wonder whether I have the right pieces.

Russell brings in a tray and sets it down on the table. 'Milk?'

'Please.'

He puts milk into the two china cups standing on saucers, and then fills them with tea from a stainless steel teapot. He holds out one cup and saucer to me. I take it. He sits down holding his cup and saucer with both hands.

'Would it help to tell me about it?'

I take a sip of the hot tea. 'About what?'

'Whatever it is that got you into the state you were in when you arrived on my doorstep.'

'It's complicated.'

'Life is.'

I put my cup and saucer down. I breathe in through my nose and then exhale. 'A long time ago I had an affair with a married woman. Her husband found out and it came to an end. Recently I learned that her husband had died and I contacted her again. We are now in a relationship, but I know, I know she is hiding something from me that - it seems so silly talking about it.'

'That's why talking helps. It gives perspective.'

I sigh.

'Go on.'

'I found out today that she isn't who I thought she was. The woman I had the affair with is dead. According to the police the woman I have been seeing is her sister. And the police would like to talk to her because of the supposedly criminal activities of the husband of the woman I had the affair with.'

'Let me get this straight. There are two sisters. The first you had an affair with a long time ago. She is dead, as is her husband. You entered into a relationship with the second sister thinking she was the first sister. And this second sister is wanted by the police.'

'They'd like to talk to her. She worked for her brother-in-law and the police are investigating his affairs, his business affairs. He may have been dealing in drugs. Among other things.'

'And how do you feel?'

'I was angry. I am angry. But earlier I was destructively angry. Now I'm merely angry. And confused. And hurt. And I'm sad because of. Because the woman I thought I was seeing is dead.'

I drink more of my tea.

'And I think Jack is involved.'

'Jack Bathurst?'

'The second sister used to be married to a cousin of his.'

'Doesn't mean to say he's got any part in whatever is going on.'

'He keeps ringing me up and asking how things are with the first sister.'

'Why do you think he does that?'

'I don't know. I don't know why she pretended to be her sister. I don't know why she has. Why she wants to be. I'm damn near ten years older than her. What does she want? What does she get out of it? What have I got involved with? I don't. Know. What. To do.'

'And that makes you angry?'

'Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.'

He looks at me. His face is relaxed. His mind is at ease. My shoulders sink into my body. He drops his gaze, thinking what to say. He looks at me. 'Can I offer some advice?' he says.

'Offer away.'

'You don't have to take it.'

'That's the nature of advice.'

'You have to ask. What's her name?'

'Debbie. I mean Jenny. Jenny's her real name. Debbie's dead.'

'You need to put these questions to Jenny. You're spending too much effort guessing. You need to know.'

'Do I?'

'I think so.'

I shake my head.

'Look. I'm sorry Neville. Put I said I pick up Sally at half-past. We're going to the cinema.'

'I'll be going.' I drain my cup and set it back on the saucer. I stand up.

'I'll give you a lift. I've got time. You can't walk home. It's turned much colder.'

'Thanks. Thanks for everything.'

- If it wasn't for the movement of his chest, I'd think he was dead.
- Don't say that.
- His forehead is cold.
- It's your hand that's warm.

Russell drives off. I fiddle in my trouser pocket for my keys. I try the other pocket. Both back pockets. Damn. I peer into the darkness inside the car. My jacket lies on the back seat. I pull at the door. 'Shit.' I try all the doors. I return to the front door of the house and put my face close to the glass. I discern nothing. I put my nose against the glass. The glass moves. I feel myself leaning forward. The door drifts away from me. I push it wide. And step into the hall. I switch on the light. I close the door. It closes silently, no click, no resistance. The frame at the level of the lock is splintered. Spikes of raw, yellow wood point upwards and downwards.

I glance into the front room. It looks much as it always does. In the dining room, which I hardly use, the cupboards of the sideboard are wide open the drawers have been pulled out and emptied on to the floor. Cutlery. Table mats. Table cloths. Napkins. In the kitchen the drawers have been pulled out. The doors of the units are open and the fridge gapes. In the bedrooms everything that is stored has been taken from drawers and wardrobes and heaped on to the beds. In the smallest bedroom - the one I call my study - the shallow desk drawers hang open and the all four drawers of the filing cabinet are partly open. The mechanism that prevents more than one drawer being opened at a time must have been broken.

I feel that I have been personally attacked, injured. I hurt. My chest is tight. My breathing is wrong. I try to breathe evenly, deeply.

This is my space, my domain. Invaded. Violated. Disregarded. I return to the kitchen. I unhook the cutlery drawer and put it on the work top. I pull it through ninety degrees and tear the adhesive tape from the back of the drawer. The spare house and car keys clatter. I snatch them and go to the front door. I return to the kitchen and carry a chair to the front door. I push the door shut and force the back of the chair under the handle. I pull at the handle. The door seems firm. I leave the house by the kitchen door, locking it, before rounding the house to the car. I unlock the car and start the engine.

I slammed the front door and unlocked the car. I threw Ben's baseball bat on to the passenger seat. I wriggled into the seat. She had been driving it. I reached under the seat and pushed it back. I shoved the key into the ignition lock and started the engine. There were blood spots on the sleeve of my jacket. The reverse gear whined as I backed on to the street. Out of habit I fastened my seatbelt before accelerating towards the main road.

The dashboard display told me it was 8.07. I drove around an unlit stretch of the ring road. The traffic was intermittent. A dazzle of brightness, dipped, and then empty darkness sweeping away from the rushing brightness of the headlamps. I concentrated on driving. Keeping the car to the left of the dotted line down the middle of the road as it curved and swayed and dropped and rose. Beyond the hedges and fences at the side of the road there was nothing but black. Unknown. I slowed down when I came to the street lamps, then traffic lights at red. I stopped. There were a few moments while I waited during which I contemplated going back. Back through the empty night, to an empty house, and an empty life. The lights changed and I drove on.

I queue again at the temporary traffic lights where the large hole in the road is being repaired. After that I make good time along a route that has become remarkably familiar during the last few weeks. Even when it begins to rain and there is a strong cross-wind I drive with a confidence and certainty that is fired by an insidious and pernicious need for explanation and understanding. I want answers. I am uncertain of the questions, but I am desperate for answers that reveal a clear picture, a picture that tells me where I stand. I plan my attack. I rehearse different scenarios. When should I reveal my knowledge about her real

identity? How should I justify my unexpected return? How will I know whether she is telling the truth or fabricating new lies, new deceits? The windscreen wipers punctuate my thoughts. What do I want? Innocence? Guilt? Guilt and remorse? Will she deny any fondness for me? And claim that as far as she is concerned our relationship is a convenient sham? Convenient for what? And how should I react? My anger has subsided, but it has not vanished. Is there a key to this puzzle that will make sense of everything? Allow me to take her side in whatever difficulty besets her? Can I forget Debbie and take up with Jenny? A speeding minibus passes in the other direction and a hail of spray obliterates my view. The wipers wipe. The headlights illuminate the slashing rain. I see a curve to the left. I steer. The curve becomes a bend and approaching headlights make the wet road gleam. I brake and hold the steering wheel hard with both hands. The car takes the bend wide, touching the central white line. I hear the horn of the other vehicle. The road darkens and straightens. I allow the car to drop its speed. Perhaps I should be calm, reasonable, allow her to talk, to explain? Perhaps I should go home. Call the police. Sort out the mess. Find a quiet way of living out my retirement.

I parked in the one of the spaces reserved for visitors. I carried the baseball bat at my side so that it was not obvious. The duplicate key did not slip easily into the lock. I wiggled it and pressed. It went in. I had to jiggle it a bit more before the barrel of the lock turned. I opened the door slowly. I had to pull with some force to extract the key from the lock. I made myself close the door quietly. As I went up the stairs I realised that my anger had faded.

On the half landing between the first and second floors I stopped. Tight-lipped I inhaled and exhaled. I could face her at home. Have it out with her there.

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The rain is relentless. The road changes direction and the rain sweeps in scintillating waves through the brightness of full beam. I struggle to see any detail outside the reach of the headlights. The edge of the road is grass and then a low hedge. Movement. I focus. A figure forty yards ahead. Waving. I slow the car. Someone is standing on a short stretch of paving. A bus stop. I slow down again. The person is hooded. I stop. The person looks in through the rain-streaked window. The face is indistinct behind an irregular film of water. I lean across and pull the door handle so that the door unlatches. The person pulls back the door.

‘Would you mind giving me a lift. I’ve been waiting ages.’

The voice is female, young. I hesitate.

‘Please.’

It seems like a good thing to do. Despite the risks. It can only be her word against mine. If, if anything. I blank out the thought. Can’t do anyone a good turn. Not without.

‘OK.’ I say. ‘Get in.’

‘Thanks.’ She gets in and pulls at the door till it shuts. She thrusts her hood back and her curly black hair expands.

‘Hello,’ I say.

‘Do I know you?’

‘Didn’t I help you with your car. In the snow?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I don’t have a car. I’m only sixteen.’

'Sorry. You must have a double.' I put the car in gear. 'Seatbelt, please.'

She pulls the seatbelt across her chest and wangles the buckle into its slot.

I drive off. 'How far?'

'Village after the next. The one at the bottom of the steep hill.'

'I know.' I don't really know, but the steep hill is familiar. A sharp bend part way down. When I'm back into the rhythm of driving I make myself speak. 'Filthy night to be out.' I notice a thirty-mile-per-hour sign and allow the car's speed to drop.

'At a friend's. They live on a farm.'

I brake for the narrow stretch in the middle of the village. 'You were waiting for a bus?'

'Should've come twenty minutes ago.'

'Couldn't someone have give you a lift home?'

'Car wouldn't start. So I said I'd get the bus. There's one every hour and I had time to get to the bus stop before the next one.'

I went quickly up the remaining flight. Too quickly. My chest was heaving when I reached the top. I waited until I was breathing more easily. Number five was on the right. A grey-painted door. I rang the bell. I waited. I moved closer as the door was unlocked. It opened a couple of inches. His dark face peered round the edge. He said nothing and pushed the door shut. The latch caught before I could put my weight against it. I did not ring the bell again. Beyond the door, voices were raised. The sounds made no sense to me. It wasn't an argument, more a discussion. That cold rationality that she was capable of when it suited her. Something rattled at the back of the door. The latch was turned back and the door opened. This time a chain restricted the aperture. This time it was Jo who looked at me. I'm not coming. Neville. I'm staying here. With Michael.

I threw my body at the door. Something gave. The door flew back and then rebounded hitting my left temple. I pushed at the door. The door went back wide. Jo was scrabbling to her feet in the long hallway. He was trying to help her up while staring at me. You, I said, holding the baseball bat in front of me. You get her coat. He backed away, his hands half raised in acquiescence, half as protection. He reached into an alcove. The other hand was still raised. He took the coat in both hands and held it as though about to help her on with it. Michael, she said, I'm not

going. She fixed me with one of her inflexible stares. I'm not, she said. He suggested that we sit down and talk. She made as if to go into the room to the left. I told her to stay where she was. You won't use that on me. I'm going to sit down. I feel a bit faint. She held the palm of her hand against her belly. You're fucking pregnant. You've noticed. At last. Doesn't take much effort to keep something from you. You're so bound up with what you're doing that you don't even see other people. I followed her into the room where she sat down on the sofa. I caught sight of my reflection in a mirror. A drying trickle of blood had run down my cheek. The television was on, the volume low. He came in behind me. I turned quickly, thinking he might hit me, or worse, hit me with something. He was still holding her coat. I told him to turn off the television. He draped the coat over his left arm and walked over to the set. He pressed a button on the top. The sound cut and the screen blanked. He remained standing.

- He's getting agitated again.
- Don't get too close. He'll start waving his arms about.

I grabbed her coat and threw it at her. Put it on. I'm not coming. I'm staying. I lifted the baseball bat. Put it on, I said. She glared at me. I'll hit him, I said, I will. She did not move. I lifted the bat over my right shoulder and stood as if I was preparing a swing. I stepped towards him and swung. He took a jumping step back almost to the wall and the bat missed him and took a tall glass vase off the top of the bookcase. The vase hit the carpet but did not break.

I pointed at the coat. Put it on. He told me I was mad or an idiot or something. I waited as she struggled into her coat. I moved between them. I wanted her to come home. I wanted to make her come home. I wanted to be in control. Even if she was pregnant with his bastard. Go. Wait for me at the car. Jo mouthed something at him and then deliberately supported herself on each piece of furniture as she walked to the door. She did not close the door after her. He shouted for her to be careful. She needs help down the stairs. She can manage, I said. It's not long before she's due. Shut up and stay out of it. He stared at me as though rays from his white eyes could slice me into pieces. I smiled. What's so funny? I was just thinking that you're giving me a black look and then I thought that every look you give is black. His face relaxed and he told me that he would be calling the police as soon as I had left the

flat. I encouraged him explaining that I was doing no more than collecting my heavily pregnant wife who had been visiting a friend. He pointed out that I had threatened him with a baseball bat. That's your word against mine. She'll be on my side. We'll see. I moved to the door keeping him in view and then turned quickly and left the flat. Jo was on the ground floor. I grabbed her arm and hurried her towards the door. She protested that she could only walk slowly. Holding open the door I waited for her. I didn't get into the car until she was sitting in the front seat and the passenger door closed. She was crying silently when I got in the car. I slammed the door and told her to stop blubbing as it was no one's fault but her own.

I accelerate as we leave the village.

'Do you often do this?'

'What?'

'Flag down strangers?'

'I've done it before.'

'Aren't you taking a risk?'

'Maybe. Most people are OK.'

'You don't go for this stranger-danger notion?'

'You can't spend your life not talking to strangers.'

'Suppose not.'

'Most people are murdered by someone they know. Someone they live with.'

'I wasn't thinking of murder.'

'I hope you weren't.'

'I was thinking of.'

She said nothing and, angry as I was, I couldn't think of anything worth saying. I was waiting at traffic lights when she made a odd sound. I looked at her. Her face was empty. I think I'm going to. I said nothing and when the lights changed I drove on. I closed my eyes for a second. Now what do you want me to do? She didn't

know. Neither did I. I hadn't made any plans. I sense her go tense and make another noise. I took a quick look. Her eyes were screwed up. I feel awful. I swore. I heard her unlatch her seat belt. Is that a good idea? I need to be able to move. All right.

Neville, she said, take me to the hospital. I swore again. Please, she said and put her hand on my arm. I turned at the next junction. She squirmed again. I was struggling to work out the best route. The last thing I wanted was to have deliver a premature little black bastard at the side of the road. The van I had been following for a while slowed down. There was an empty lane to my right. I pulled out and accelerated.

I pass the warning for the steep hill. The car picks speed. I rest my foot on the brake pedal ready to take the sharp bend. I am sweating.

- Look at the sweat. Pass me a tissue.

The traffic lights were already at red and I was still accelerating. I braked hard. I shot over the white line and I saw something coming from my left. I swerved away from it only to see a heavy lorry coming towards me. I had time to think, but no time to do anything.

- Look at him. He can't breathe.

- What's he doing?

- I don't know.

At the point where the bend begins she grabs the wheel and pulls hard towards her. 'What the hell are you doing?'

She fixes me with her brown eyes.

- He opened his eyes.
- Did he?
- I think so.
- Careful he's trying to get hold of you.
- What? Aah! He's got a grip like steel.

I take her wrist with my left hand trying to break her hold on the wheel. Her right hand takes hold of my arm and her grip is hard, vicious. Pain cuts through the flesh and I release her wrist. I resist her drag on the wheel, but it turns and the car swerves to the left. I brake. Too harshly. The rear of the car swings round and the car is sliding sideways towards the low barrier that curves around the bend. The car hits the barrier and rolls over. I am hanging in my seat belt head down. I need to breathe. The car slips and rolls again and upright it steers itself down the slope which seems to be nearly vertical.

- That's better.
- He's relaxing.
- A little.

I heard the crunch as the lorry squashed the front of the car and the bang as whatever I had tried to avoid collided with the back of the car. I was thrown forward on to the steering wheel and then backwards.

- I'll get another tissue.
- Bring the box.

I am the right way up. Sweat runs down my face. I can see nothing through the windscreen. Suddenly the windscreen shatters and through it comes the broken branch of a tree, snapped-off and spear-like. It is pointing at my chest.

- Here you are.
- Thanks.
- He's calming down.

The windscreen shattered and fell away and through the vacancy I saw a twisted piece of metal coming towards me. I watched it as it touched and then began to press against my arm. I swivelled my head towards Jo. She was lying half in and half out of the car. The metal moved again and I felt the bones in my arm crunch under the pressure.

- What's the matter now?
- He seems in pain.
- I'll get some help.

The car keeps moving and the rough point of the branch enters my chest. The pain spreads across my ribs, pressing. I try to breathe. I cannot lift my ribs. My lungs cannot expand. I am incapable of drawing a breath.

- I think it's a heart attack.
- Do something.

The girl? I move my eyes to the left. The passenger seat is empty. The passenger door is closed. The pain in my arm intensifies.

- Keep trying.

After the scraping and tearing there was only silence.

- I think you should stop.

Everything is far away.

- Why have you stopped?

- There's nothing we can do.

- There must be something.

[Silence]

- I'm sorry.

- Neville.

- Leave him Jo, he's gone.

- Michael.

This is the moment. The last moment. Now.